

**Communities of Practice and Cultural Historical Activity Theory as Theoretical
Frameworks for the Analysis of Civic Engagement and Service Learning**

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Abstract:

Democratic societies require engaged citizens who have a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable their participation in civic life. Scholars of civic engagement have relied on abstracted measures of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to investigate civic engagement and its development through education. As inadequacies in these measures have become apparent, scholars have suggested sociocultural learning theories as possible foundations for theoretical frameworks allowing the direct investigation of civic engagement. This paper develops a framework based on cultural historical activity theory and practice theory and applies this framework to empirical data from a qualitative study of a service learning class. The paper will demonstrate the usefulness of frameworks constructed out of sociocultural theory for the investigation of civic engagement and its development in education.

Introduction

Democratic societies require that citizens have the capacity to be civically engaged through involvement in activities like voting, deliberating, and volunteering (among many others). To be able to engage in these activities citizens must develop a set of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Research that investigates the impact of education on civic engagement has typically focused on examining changes in civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. While these are critical elements of civic engagement they are abstracted from the actual practices that make up civic engagement. Examining the development of civic practices directly allows for an analysis of the ways that civic knowledge, skill, and dispositions are put to use in real situations rather than measuring these components in the abstract.

A growing number of scholars have called for the development of theoretical frameworks that enable the direct investigation of civic practices (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Andolina, 2010). In this paper I argue that *cultural historical activity theory* (CHAT) and *communities of practice* are two sociocultural theories that can be used by civic engagement scholars to directly investigate civic practices and the way that education can shape these practices. I will also demonstrate the utility of this framework by analyzing a small set of data from a larger research project that is employing CHAT to examine civic development in a service learning class.

Sociocultural theories of learning

In order to study civic practices, scholars of civic engagement have suggested building frameworks using sociocultural theories of learning (Levine & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2010; Torney-Purta et al., 2010). I extend these suggestions by explicating how two main fields in sociocultural theory can deepen studies of civic engagement generally and service learning specifically. Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT or activity theory) (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987) and practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) have similar foundations which rest at the intersection of Marx's dialectical materialism, German idealism, and Russian psychology (Roth & Lee, 2007)¹.

Activity and practice², culturally and historically shaped patterns of behavior, are the focus of sociocultural theories because they are the intersection of agents and society (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). This focus appears because sociocultural theorists build on the ideas of dialectics in Marx and Hegel, arguing that individual development cannot be considered separately from the social situations in which individuals exist (Engeström, 2001). Other theories that have been used to build theoretical frameworks to understand civic engagement do acknowledge the importance of society in the development of the individual, but the

¹ While sociocultural theories of learning are often associated with a critical normative political philosophy, they can be used strictly as a learning theory as they will be used here (Roth & Lee, 2007).

² While there are some distinctions between activity and practice, they are sufficiently similar that much that is true about one can be said about the other. Some even argue that the distinction is unnecessary – both ideas can be traced to Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* where he uses both words to refer to the appropriate focus for his dialectical materialism (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 3). For consistency, I will mainly use the word "activity" in this document, but "practice" will be used when discussing theories that explicitly focus on practice. Still, these concepts should be considered essentially interchangeable unless explicitly stated.

unit of analysis remains individual development (e.g. Erikson, 1950, 1968, who's work was used in Rhoads, 1997 & Youniss & Yates, 1997). This necessarily inhibits the possibility of analyzing civic practices directly and forces analysis of abstractions like knowledge or identity. Sociocultural theories seek to solve this problem by making activity or practice the basic unit of analysis.

All human action must be thought of as activity that has been shaped through culture and history and learned through participation in social life. Roth and Lee (2007) caution that “activity is not to be equated with relatively brief events with definite beginning and end points... but an evolving, complex structure of mediated and collective human agency” (p. 198). These activities are defined by a few important elements: mediation, the structure of activity systems, and learning through boundary crossing. In the following sections I will describe these elements of activity theory and illustrate how these concepts can be used to examine civic engagement and civic education.

Mediation

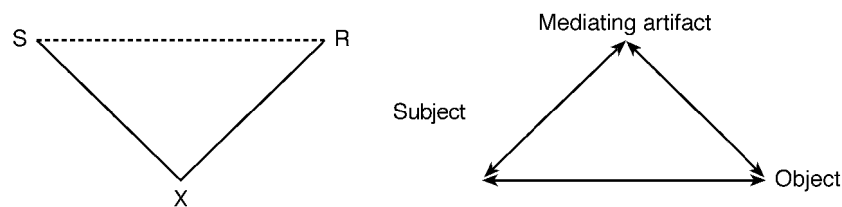


Figure 1: Engeström 2001, p. 134.

Mediation is the central concept in sociocultural theory and its origins in this context are traced to the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978). The idea was further developed by Leont'ev (1981) and Luria (1981). Vygotsky and his

intellectual progeny posit that human agents cannot act directly on objects. Rather, all human actions take place through the use of culturally and historically constructed tools or artifacts.³ This basic relationship is frequently displayed in the “activity triangle” (fig. 1), which links the agent to the object of their action through mediation by a culturally and historically constructed tool (Cole, 1996). This concept continues to be central to theories of activity and practice. In this context, learning occurs when communities begin to use new tools or when they develop new ways of using old tools. Examining learning in these systems requires paying attention to changes in the ways that communities use these mediational tools.

Tools can be signs (such as language) or physical objects (like a pole), but a main characteristic is their historical and cultural construction – the fact that these tools have been shaped by the historical and cultural processes of which they are a part. Wertsch (1995) uses pole-vaulting as an example. In this case the pole is the culturally and historically constructed mediational tool. Over the history of pole vaulting, poles have been used in different ways and made of different materials. These changes in the tool altered the activity of pole-vaulting while at the same time were the result of the participation of culturally situated agents in the activity.

Symbols are also mediational tools. Wertsch (1995) demonstrates the use of language and ideology as mediational tools when he describes the way students use narratives to explain the founding of the United States of America. When students were asked to write an essay about why the US was founded, the majority of

³ The literature generally uses “tool” and “artifact” interchangeably. For the sake of consistency I will use the term “tool” or “mediational tool” throughout this document. Though I will not always say that the tool is culturally and historically constructed, it should be understood that all mediational tools are culturally and historically constructed.

students employed the same cultural tool: a narrative of freedom. These students told stories that involved persecuted individuals who sought to live in a land where all were free. In their essays they employed the idea of freedom to make meaning out of the historical events surrounding the creation of the United States of America. As with the pole, the narrative of freedom has developed through its use across the history of the US. Cultural and historical processes shaped the freedom narrative employed by these students and their current use of the narrative contributes to the continuing dialectical construction of both the students and the narrative. As well, these students learned this narrative over many years in school, and have shaped it as a group through their in-class discussions and engagement with texts and videos that also rely on this narrative.

Civic engagement also requires the use of mediational tools. These might include newspapers, voting machines, ideologies, donations, and language. Examining civic engagement requires that close attention be paid to how citizens use these tools and how and when they change how they use these tools. When citizens use civic tools they are putting their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions into action in order to achieve a goal.

It is important to note here that while these tools create possibilities by facilitating action in the world, they also limit those activities (Wertsch, 1998). Wooden polls limited the height a pole-vaulter could vault. The freedom narrative limits students because they are unable to use it to explain slavery or massacres of Native Americans. In terms of civic engagement, poor access to newspapers (either direct access to the physical or virtual paper or due to low levels of literacy) limits

the ways that citizens can engage. Not having knowledge or a common language with which to discuss public issues in deliberation can limit a citizen's ability to participate in discussions around that topic.

Learning is a process of adopting and beginning to use mediational tools while at the same time playing a role in modifying these tools. Engeström (1999) describes this as a cycle of internalization (learning to use and beginning to use the tools) and externalization (searching for ways to change tools to address contradictions that have arisen). Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of internalization: where individuals come to know how to use the tools available to them. Leont'ev (1981) elaborated this idea using the concept of appropriation, which is a further step where the individual becomes able to use the tool in novel ways. Cultural tools are constantly in flux through processes of internalization, appropriation, and externalization as they are used in activity. The tools of civic engagement flow through similar cycles. Citizens learn to use tools of political discourse through internalization, find contradictions when they feel that their voice is not heard, and appropriate new tools (like Twitter) to achieve their aims.

In service learning specifically, students use tools to carry out every aspect of their service as well as to understand their experiences doing service. All of these tools are modified as students use them in the service setting and apply them in reflection activities and discussions in class. For example, when tutoring younger students they might rely on techniques that worked for them – like sounding out words – to help these younger students learn to read and write, but find that these tools are not always adequate to serve the needs of these students. The failure of

these learning tools leads them to raise questions in class where they might rely on narratives of poverty to explain the bad condition of the public school in which they are working and understand the poor academic performance of their students. This further informs their ideas as they consider and discuss the policy tools necessary to address the public problem of failing public schools.

From a sociocultural perspective, all activity involving tool use occurs in activity systems where communities of individuals use similar tools to work towards shared goals. The next section will describe these systems that provide the structure for tool use and for learning.

Activity systems

While the concept of mediation has remained central, activity theory has built significantly from its foundations in Vygotsky's original activity triangle (fig 1). Among other things, theorists have expanded on the original activity triangle to more clearly define the factors that influence the use of mediational tools (as well as how they are learned). The theory has evolved across at least three distinct generations (Roth & Lee, 2007). Engeström (1987) illustrated Leont'ev's (1981) expansions on Vygotsky's (1978) original activity triangle by adding three elements to its base: rules, community, and division of labor (Fig. 2) (Engeström, 2001). These elements identify aspects of the social situation that contextualize and shape the use of mediational tools.

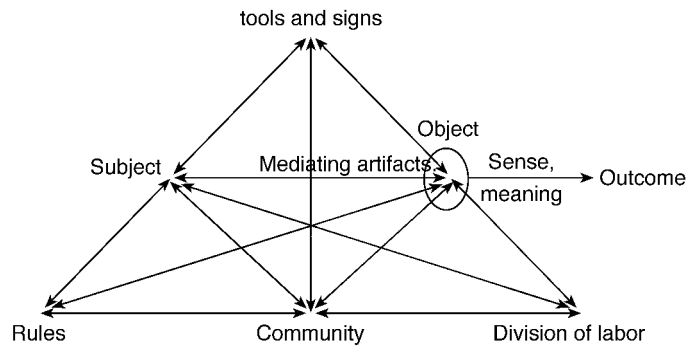


Figure 2: Engeström 2001, p. 135.

Engeström (1993) describes these components:

The *community* comprises multiple individuals and/or subgroups who share the same general object. The *division of labor* refers to both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of the community and to the vertical division of power and status. Finally, the *rules* refer to the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity system. Between the components of an activity system, continuous construction is going on. (Engeström, 1993, p. 67)

Analysis of activity systems, then, not only involves the identification of mediational tools, but also a description of the rules, community, and division of labor that contextualize the use of the tool. This refined activity triangle represents an activity system where tool use is influenced by (and simultaneously influences) the rules, divisions of labor, and community that define the activity. The addition of these elements was an essential step in moving beyond a focus on the individual and

provides an avenue for evaluating the societal and collaborative aspects of tool use (Engeström, 1999).

This focus on the context in which activity occurs is reflected in practice theory. According to Wenger (1998) communities of practice are characterized by engagement in joint enterprise, maintenance of mutual relationships, and the use of a well-honed repertoire of ways of reasoning with tools and artifacts. Novice members of communities are expected to play a simple but important role in the division of labor while they learn the rules that govern tool use by observing experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning in communities of practice is mainly theorized to occur along a unidirectional path, where novices learn to use tools from experts. Though Lave and Wenger (1991) acknowledge the role that new members of a community play in shaping mediational tools and that experts can learn from others in the community, their focus is on the process that allows novices to gain mastery in the community. This is a limitation of practice theory that can be addressed by activity theory. Where practice theory is mainly unidirectional, activity theory considers all elements of the activity systems to be interdependent. Therefore any member of the community has the potential to create change within the system (though some members might be more likely to do so than others due to rules and division of labor). This change – learning – occurs as contradictions develop within the system, which often presents itself as “trouble” (Roth & Lee, 2007).

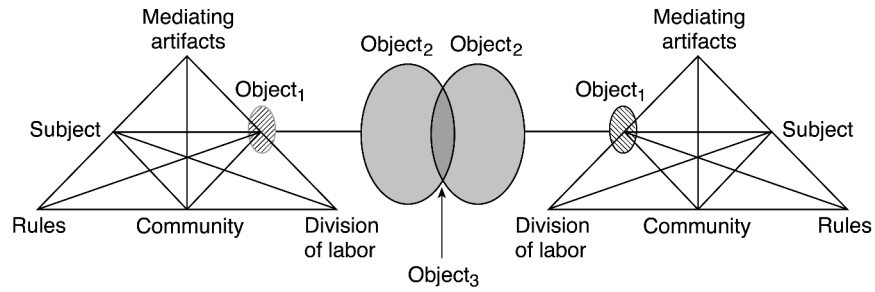


Figure 3: Engeström 2001, p. 136

More recent developments in activity theory have emphasized the need to expand analysis beyond single activity systems. Engeström (2001) suggests that the minimal model must now include two interacting activity systems (see figure 3). The appropriate unit of analysis then becomes “a collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). Though theorists who focus on communities of practice have placed less emphasis on examining the interactions between communities, some scholars have begun moving in this direction (DePalma, 2009). This newest model that emphasizes interaction between systems illustrates the usefulness of the theory for understanding civic engagement because it so frequently involves the interaction of different communities working towards a shared object. This interaction does not need to be collaborative, but might involve different interest groups interacting in the development of a new law. In service learning, the primary object is the service activity, which involves at least two distinct communities coming together to work towards a shared object. These communities might use different mediational tools in this process and be guided by different rules and divisions of labor. The work of the analysis then becomes

defining the network of activity systems in which students perform their work and how this network shapes tool use within these systems. The next section will expand further on one way of thinking about these networks of interaction systems: boundary crossing.

Boundary crossing

The idea of networks of activity systems is developed in literature that focuses on boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). This literature draws on both theories of practice and activity theory to emphasize the ways that potential for learning occurs when two communities that use tools in different ways come together for a common purpose. Boundary crossing “involves going into unfamiliar territory and requires cognitive retooling” (Tsui & Law, 2007, p.1290) and therefore represents a significant opportunity for learning because “[c]rossing boundaries forces participants to take a fresh look at their longstanding practices and assumptions” (Tsui, 2007, p. 1290). This can also involve creating boundary objects, which result from “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). Evaluating these boundary crossing experiences requires analyzing all of the activity systems or communities of practice that are a part of the broader system (Engeström, Engeström, & Vahaaho, 1999).

Service provides significant opportunity for boundary crossing and the creation of boundary objects because it involves the interaction of a variety of activity systems. A high school student who is tutoring in an elementary school has

an opportunity to cross boundaries and interact with students, teachers, and administrators who are a part of activity systems that differ from their own. For instance, students who volunteer as tutors in a school might have ideas about how to tutor that are based in their own experiences of what works for them a student. Tutoring in a school provides an opportunity to observe a teacher who might demonstrate a larger variety of ways of tutoring which are tailored to the learning styles of individual students. Through these observations, the volunteer has an opportunity to appropriate new mediational tools or modify existing ones around the object of tutoring.

Even within a service learning class there is the possibility of boundary crossing between members of the class who think about service in different ways. Perhaps one student has significant experience with service because of her family's involvement in a service-oriented religion. Another student might think about service in a completely different way because they have been on the receiving end of service work, perhaps their family benefitted from a project by Habitat for Humanity. Both of these students would then bring different mediational tools into the service learning class and the students would have the opportunity to cross boundaries and see a different way of thinking about service. While the service work itself could serve as a boundary object, perhaps they would create additional boundary objects that facilitate learning by working on a joint class assignment, project, or engaging in class discussions. This idea of boundary crossings can also highlight some of the challenges in service-learning. Though service learning often involves interacting with a different other, it is rare that this other participates in

the classroom discussions that make up a significant portion of the experience. Rather than being a participant in these discussions (as might be ideal in a democratic deliberation concerning the public problem at issue) the other becomes an object in the discussion. This is then a lost opportunity for further boundary crossing and development of the democratic skill of deliberation across difference.

Implications for studying civic engagement and service learning

Looking at civic engagement and service learning through a lens of sociocultural theory requires a focus on activity mediated by the use of culturally and historically constructed tools. It requires identifying the mediational tools that are used in the activity and understanding the cultural and historical significance of those tools. This requires paying explicit attention to the rules, community, and division of labor that contextualize the activity and tool use. The ways that particular activities are situated within and connected to other activities must also be given significant attention.

The analysis must also involve the identification of opportunities for boundary crossing that are afforded and a description of what mechanisms facilitate or inhibit those boundary crossings. As with the description of the activity itself, there would need to be a recognition that activity systems do not exist in isolation. Individuals are simultaneously members of multiple communities of practice that exists at multiple levels and vary in their degree of legitimacy. Individuals can pull cultural tools across communities because communities of practice are not always rigidly defined entities. The researcher must paint a detailed picture of the activity

systems that contextualize tool use and the ways that activity systems and communities of practice interact with one another, generating contradictions and creating boundary crossing opportunities. It must be recognized that the existence of opportunities for learning will not necessarily lead to learning.

Engeström and Miettinen (1999) suggest that using “Activity system as a unit of analysis calls for complementarity of the system view and the subject’s view. The analyst constructs the activity system as if looking at it from above. At the same time, the analyst must select a subject, a member (or better yet, multiple different members) of the local activity, through whose eyes and interpretations the activity is constructed” (p.10). In the next section, I will illustrate the use of sociocultural theories to examine student experiences in a service-learning class.

Civic learning in service: The role of parents in public education

Sociocultural analysis allows for a description of how citizens engage in civic practices – how they put knowledge, skills, and dispositions into action in civic settings. In what follows I examine one way in which students in a service learning class think about the role of parents in the problem of failing public schools. I hope to show how a single, particular event spurs the development of a tool that students can use to make sense of the broader issue.

The data and analysis reported in this section are part of a larger qualitative examination of a service learning class at an independent Quaker school in a large eastern American city. The course described in this data is required of all sophomores at this school and examines Quaker values, one of which is service,

through the lens of the public school system. As a part of the class, these 10th grade students tutored 1st graders in a nearby public school. The 10th graders observed that many of the 1st graders were struggling with reading and writing while other students seemed to read and write well. Student reflections and discussion in the class centered on understanding this phenomenon. In this section I will present data from written reflections, videos of the class, and interviews describing how students used one mediational tool to explain their experiences of poorly performing students in the service setting. This idea was that parents wouldn't help students with homework, which was part of a larger narrative about parents not caring about their children.

The civic importance of this tool centers on the way it positions and identifies others (the parents of kids attending an urban public school) in regards to a public issue of civic importance (concerns about public education). In the data we see students putting their civic knowledge of a public issue into action using skills for dialogue about that issue. The way these students position others plays a role in how they define the issue of public education. This is illustrated in the larger data set by the way that students initially define the issue of public education as being a problem of bad parenting. This orientation shifts over the course of the class, especially when the students are presented with a different tool when they watch the movie "Waiting for Superman." This new tool is the narrative that teachers in public schools are lazy. Students redefine the issue to a degree. While they do not completely switch their view of parents, they do begin pointing to teachers the defining problem in public education rather than parents. While I will not be able to

show this larger shift due to space restrictions, it is important to remember this context as we examine the development of the idea that the parents do not help with homework from a sociocultural perspective.

This mediational tool was introduced in the class when the teacher led a discussion about the students' impressions of their first trip to the service site. It is important to remember, however, that this tool has a particular cultural and historical trajectory that was in existence before the tool was brought into this class. The tool was shaped in the activity system of an academically focused Quaker school. During interviews the 10th graders frequently mentioned the role that their parents played in making sure they did well in school. Parents emphasized the importance of getting an education, going to college, and made sure the students completed their homework. There clearly existed a prior narrative about the role of parents in the educational lives of children. However, when the students went on their first service trip they were presented with evidence that created trouble for the application of this narrative in the school where they were tutoring. Neil⁴ started the discussion that led to the presentation of this tool:

9.14.2011 - 20:10 – Class video

Neil: Um, like, when they gave the kids breakfast, I noticed that the teacher asked them if any of them had had breakfast before they came to school and none of them said they had breakfast.

Scott (the teacher): I wanted to talk about breakfast for a second and, um, what was going on there? Why are they serving breakfast...at the school? Any thoughts? ... Go ahead.

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

Rae: Um, maybe they are not sure if their parents are feeding them and they want them to be able to participate and do well in school and the little kids are not going to be able to concentrate if they haven't had breakfast or some food.

Jessie: Even with that, um, some of them, you can tell that their home lives and that their parents aren't all there, so they might not even be getting all the food that they actually need just on a daily basis, not just to concentrate in school, but, to survive with.

Noemi: Getting on the family part, Jessie and I noticed yesterday that there was this little girl, her name was [girl's name] and the teacher asked if she had done her homework and she said, she said she had it, but her mom wouldn't help her do it, so I just took note of that and Jessie and I were talking about it yesterday.

This exchange was the introduction of a concept that became a tool used by students to identify and describe the parents of the students with whom they were working. At first this tool was just used to identify the parents, but grew into something that was used to explain why some 1st graders were not performing well academically and had the potential to be extended to explain troubles in the public school system as a whole. This tool must be considered in relation to the activity system in which it was situated – an academically focused Quaker school. The rules and division of labor in this system set parents up as individuals who push their children to excel academically and make themselves available to help their children whenever needed (or pay for a tutor). The story of a child saying that their parent would not help with homework was a contradiction to the role of parents in the eyes of many of the 10th graders. It should be noted that this story could have been interpreted in other ways – as the child making an excuse for not doing their homework or that a parent was not able to help because he or she had to work. However, the students mainly interpreted this event as an indication that the

parents (or some of the parents) of the 1st graders did not care about their child's academic success.

In interviews conducted after the first classroom discussion where Noemi told the story about the student saying that her mom wouldn't help with homework, other 10th grade students echoed Noemi's story. It is unclear if this was the result of a focusing effect, where her story highlighted and brought to the surface similar stories, or, more cynically, if these echoes were truly that – students repeating what they had heard in class from Noemi, though they themselves did not actually see it. There are indications that it could have been both. For instance, after describing how she was surprised that the kids were well behaved, Serena explains:

9.16.2011 - 23:16 - Interview

But then I guess there was stuff that was like, kids would come in late, and they would say "Hey, did you do your homework?" and the kid would say "No". "Why didn't you do your homework?" "My parents wouldn't help me with it" or, you know, "I left it here"

Interviewer: was that you... you asked one kid that, right? Is that... did you say that?

Serena: No, that was someone else, but I heard similar responses, I think, when kids were coming in, and kids would say, "oh, you know I didn't do it, you know, we didn't have this or that, so I just didn't do it" and I was like, okay, I mean maybe I was just really nerdy, but I always did my homework [laughter] and it only took, like, 5 minutes to do, so like, ...

Jessie provides another echo. In an interview, she talks about how surprising it was that the school was so nice, but that talking to the kids raised some questions and "opened up your eyes to how much I have". When pushed to provide some examples she says:

9.20.2011 - 27:16 – Interview

I mean, I know, like the one girl had said that she didn't have her homework because her mom wouldn't help her the night before, and that's kind of like, I would never think that my mom or any mom would kind of ignore and neglect that for homework, I mean, like, it's school, it's important, especially at a young age.

Guy also echoed the thoughts about homework in his written reflection focused on the first service experience:

9.15.2011 - 48:49 – Written Reflection

Some parents don't help their kids out with homework so it is hard for the kids to keep learning.

Guy relies on this same idea in an interview almost three weeks later:

10.3.2011 - 60:19 – Interview

... another problem with that school was that some parents didn't want to help out with their homework, so it is hard for the kids to learn. So, I mean, the parents send them to school, but they don't really care what they are doing in school, that is another problem that I have found.

Approximately 1 month after the initial discussion about parental help with homework in class, the idea of parental help again surfaces in class, this time Max directly links parental help to student performance – the first instance where a student uses the idea of parental help to explain the differences in academic ability he is observing in the classroom. He says:

10.12.2011 – 68:13 – Class Video

The second time I was there I worked with two boys. The one kid clearly either did the homework or practiced it or his parents helped him or something 'cause he was getting the sentences [snaps his fingers] quickly. The other kid had no clue. I kinda felt bad for him cause he didn't know what to do. He was trying to look at the other kid's board and the other kid was going like that [pretends to turn an imaginary board away from the person beside him] and it goes to

show, even a little bit of help makes that much of a difference, especially for these kids

Scott (the teacher): *“Help you mean at home? Or help that you are giving them? Just any of the above?”*

Max: *“anything, anything”*

Max draws on this tool again a week later. I ask him to tell me about the students’ progress with spelling and he says, “some of them are better at it than others, like a lot better, like significantly, almost like, tops... the extremes, but it seems to be that there are more at the lower extreme than the top extreme.” I ask him to explain this disparity and he says, “I think it probably has to do a lot with the parents. Parents probably help them with their homework and they actually understand it when they come to the school, so instead of trying to understand it during school, they already have some large amount of knowledge to work with.” (Interview - Oct 19, 83:2)

Not everyone in the class emphasized this idea about homework, - other students raised broader questions about how much the parents cared about their children based on other things they saw – but for some students this was a tool that was used across their experience. Watching *Waiting for Superman* marked a shift – though subtle – in the ways that students talked about the academic help and encouragement provided by parents. *Waiting for Superman* portrays parents as caring deeply about their children and working hard, doing “whatever it takes” to help their child get a better education. For example, showing a mother helping with homework and taking her son to tutoring for extra help in reading, and showing a

little girl reporting that her parents require that she reads at least 30 minutes every night before going out to play. The movie also shows parents talking about their aspirations for their child to go to college and shows them emphasizing this with their children. These visions of parents were much closer to the 10th graders' visions of their own parents – though they noted that their own parents had more resources for tutors and the capacity to send them to an expensive school. This complicated the students' thoughts about parents – it didn't change their minds, but gave them more to think about.

In a classroom discussion of their impressions at the conclusion of the movie, several students, including some who had talked about parents not helping with homework, noted that they were impressed with the dedication of the parents in the movie to their children. Rae, during a presentation about the movie, says,

10.27.2011 – 90:10 – Class Video

In Waiting for Superman, you see how much the parents love their children and how much they will do for them, how they will... like, Francisco's mother was taking him to reading specialists, trying to make sure he wasn't getting behind.

As well, Javier said,

10.27.2011 – 90:12 – Class Video

In the film I was just struck by how the parents, some of the parents really cared for their kids, like the one lady, I remember she said that she was doing a lot of jobs just to make enough money for her kid to go to [a catholic school] right across the street, but she still wanted to put the kid through college no matter what she would have to put up with.

Jessie also chimed in, saying,

10.27.2011 – 90:12 – Class Video

With what you guys said with the parents sending the kids to the reading specialist, at the [Public] School you can always tell the difference in the level of students and I think that connects with what the parents are doing at home.

These observations were met with comments that suggest that the parents shown in the movie might be more dedicated and provide more help than the parents of the students at their service site. For instance, Noemi agrees that some of the parents are helping their kids, but says: “there are a majority of kids in our class that have said “my mom hasn’t helped me with my homework, I wasn’t able to do it cause I didn’t understand, my parents wouldn’t help me, so family does play an important role in a child’s education and the sacrifices they would make, or, unfortunately wouldn’t make” (Oct 27, 90:12). It is interesting to note that Noemi has extended her own story – changing from one student saying that parents would not help and now saying that it was a majority. Perhaps this is a piece of rhetorical flourish, but it highlights how this story has become a tool used to identify the parents and explain an observed phenomenon.

Hugh also suggests that these parents might be atypical, saying “I think they specifically picked kids whose parents were really driven, like, I am not sure that, like, I work with other places, like, I have worked in other community things, and you feel like parents are not that driven and they really don’t care if their kids graduate or not” (Oct 19, 130:34). As in other locations, poverty is used as an explanatory tool – trying to offer an explanation other than that parents don’t care. Near the end of the discussion cited here, Guy suggests that parents might not have financial resources to help their kids, but that they still care, saying “even though some of the parents don’t have the money to send them to good schools, I saw a lot

of parents, when they walked their kids into the [Public] School, they gave them a kiss, and they still care about the kids a lot, they just might not have the financial resources to do something better for them (Oct 27, 90:12).

In the discussions of parents that followed this discussion, the idea that some parents don't help while others do was also highlighted. This was opposed to the original comments where more emphasis was placed on the idea that many parents did not help with homework (though it was never said that parents never help with homework). Students seemed to be wrestling with this idea – the idea that some students didn't help – they showed how this idea conflicted with the ideal conception of what parents should do (which was represented mainly through their own experience of their own parents).

The struggle to make sense of the parents continued through the end of the class and was employed by a number of these same students to explain the different levels of academic ability among the 1st graders. Still, some students did not demonstrate this shift. Guy is a prominent example. He was one of the students that echoed Noemi's report about parents not helping with homework and, at the end of the class, Guy applies this idea without much change, in this case to defend the students from a teacher who got mad at them for not completing their homework.

11.22.2011 - 145:3

Guy (describing some of the teachers who were in his classroom during a final check-in with the teacher): And there was a lady who checked homework, she would get really mad if someone didn't do the homework

Scott: Oh yeah?

Guy: I think Chris was in there one time and she got really mad or something when the kids didn't give their homework and stuff like that. Yeah. But I

explained that some of the parents might not want to help the kids and the kids don't usually do it by themselves in first grade.

This is an example of the original form of the idea persisting into the final reflection. However, the next three examples illustrate a change that complicated the simpler ideas shared in the original discussions of parents and homework. I ask Noemi about her impressions of parents and she says:

12.6.2011 – 157:9 – Interview

Noemi: Well, for one girl, she said that she didn't have her homework in and [teacher] said why don't you have your homework in, and she said "well I couldn't do it and my mom wouldn't help me". So that was interesting to hear because I know that if I ever have a question, I ask my mom and she'll help me right away. For [1st grade student], it was, was it the last day when she came in late with us?

Interviewer: Yes

Noemi: So on that day I said, oh, why were you late today? And she said "my dad forgot to set his alarm and then woke up late and him and my mom started screaming at each other and it prolonged the whole thing." And that was upsetting to hear, I mean you don't want to hear that from a little kid and to have her exposed to her parents fighting and to have him making her late because he didn't get up with his alarm, you know. But there were some kids that said, "oh yeah my mom helped me with my homework or my mom did this with me, my dad did this with me over the weekend, so yeah.

Interviewer: So what does that tell you about parents?

Noemi: It just seemed like not all of them were that supportive for their kids, and especially for the one's who were behind, you could really tell that their family wasn't helping them that much.

Rae expressed similar view when asked to explain the disparity in student ability that she observed:

12.12.2011 – 162:9 – Interview

I think that some kids might be getting more help from or more encouragement from other family members. I know that some of the kids who asked for help from their parents and didn't get help, those were definitely kids who were struggling more than other kids. And then there was this one really good reader... and she was so good... and she was like, I practice a lot with my mom.

Serena also used the tool in a similar way, identifying some parents as not helping with homework while pointing out a few counterexamples. When she was asked about her impressions of the children's parents she said:

2011.11.22 – 149:8 – Interview

I mean, it varied from kid to kid, but sometimes it seemed like, "where are your parents?" You're like... you're not getting all you work done after school and you are just, what, going home and watching tv? I mean I went home and watched tv too when I was that age, but not... like, I would do my homework first. You know, you don't just go home and watch TV for the whole day. And so I know that probably a lot of the parents in [area of the city], if they are working, that they are probably at work for long shifts, you know, like, long periods of time. So they are away. Which is, I mean, that would be horribly sad. I would have hated for my parents to work like that when I was little, but, and some of the kids, they would say "oh yeah, my mommy was reading me this story last night and this is our favorite story to read." And I was like, "oh, that is cute" you know that is more like my mom would read to me, you know, whatever my favorite story was at the time and that is more what I was used to so it seems like some of the parents really are putting their kids' education, really are putting effort into it and saying oh, yeah, I really am going to make sure that we read every night and get all of our homework done. And I was like, "ok, that is great." And then some of the kids... it was different.

Over the course of the class and idea that was shared in the class' initial conversation about service grew and was modified as it was put into practice in the class. This tool, which started as a tool used to understand their own parents, gained civic importance because it has the potential to play a role in how these students understand the issue of public education. It is even more important civically because of the way that it positions the parents of public school children – a group of people who are supposed to be civic equals. This tool sets the expectation that there are an

undefined number of parents who simply don't care enough about their children's education to help with homework. As I noted in the beginning, tools both enable and restrict action. As these students who employ this tool think about policy that might have an impact on failing schools, they are compelled to take uncaring parents into account as they weigh merits of policy. As well, students employing a tool that positions parents as uncaring might be less likely to consider the interests of public school parents as legitimate. I am not aiming to pass on the particular issue of the parental role in troubled public schools. Rather I seek to point out the fact that employing this particular tool limits or shapes the ways that these students can consider political solutions to the issue of public education.

I have here presented a very short analysis of the development of one tool for civic engagement. This tool could have been examined by measures of civic knowledge and tolerance towards others, however, a sociocultural framework has enabled a focus on the location where civic knowledge and skills are being practiced and developed. Such an analysis requires an ethnographicly oriented qualitative project that examines interacting of activity systems as well as the experiences of individual agents within those systems. While such work is demanding of resources and time, it is the best way to gain knowledge about civic engagement without abstraction to ideas like civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

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