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Cultural Historical Activity Theory to Illuminate Leadership Practices in a Group of Children's Centres

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Abstract

The context of leadership in children's centres is described as complex and high-pressured. One group of children's centres is introduced that are enacting high quality leadership despite these pressures. This paper uses cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to understand what comprises these practices in order to render them visible and to promote further organisational development. Further, the analysis of different levels of CHAT leadership practices enabled leaders to understand tacit lived-experiences.

Context

Heads of children's centres have a highly demanding role. The core purpose of children's centres is expressed simply as: child development & school readiness, parenting aspirations & parenting skills, and child & family health & life chances (Sure Start, 2014). This description belies a vast array of activities to undertake and stakeholders to manage. Indeed, it has been said that: "It is important to recognise that Children's Centre staff, and particularly leaders, are doing a difficult and complicated job which often requires a great deal of professional skill" (Policy Exchange, 2013). In addition to this, children's centres serve some of the most disadvantaged children and families in the country and are key to early help initiatives working with social care professionals at many levels to keep children safe.

The last decade has added additional difficulties to this context. On one hand, there is increased pressure to meet the needs of 'Troubled Families' (DCLG, 2012) placed at the centre of policy initiatives, entrenched levels of poverty through welfare reforms have led to increased demand from families, and repeated spending reviews and austerity measures have challenged the existence of Children's Centres (Hempsalls, 2016). Many have closed or amalgamated into groups in order to survive. Hertsmere Leisure, the focus of this paper, is one of such groups of Children's Centres, operating in this context.

Hertsmere Leisure is a registered charity, it manages a range of leisure facilities across Hertsmere, Three Rivers and Milton Keynes. Hertsmere Leisure has been a Children's Centre Lead Agency, commissioned by Hertfordshire County Council, since 2006. Over the past 10 years the number of Children's Centres it has managed has increased from three to 19 configured into eight Children's Centre Groups.

Hertsmere Leisure Children's Centre leadership structure is based on a distributed leadership model. The leadership team is made up of staff from a variety of professional backgrounds including education, health, social services, early years and the voluntary sector. Part of the team have a strategic focus and work across all the

centres, while the other team members have a more operational focus for a group of Children's Centres.

Introduction to CHAT

Activity theory comes from the cultural- historical activity paradigm. This perspective takes account of the history and culture of a given context, hence the name; cultural, historical activity system or (CHAT). The system places humans as agents of change who define the culture through their actions using tools, complying with or breaking rules (tacit and explicit), operating within a community that is directed to tasks through the explicit division of labour. This holistic system view takes account of all aspects of a given activity in the workplace, multiple realities and interacting systems. It sees human activity as constitutive of, and shaped by, work practices. It would therefore seem to be a useful tool by which to investigate leadership practices.

The first roots of activity theory arose from Vygotsky's (1978:40) object mediated learning ideas. Vygotsky's theory went beyond existing stimulus and response modules to posit first that mediating artefacts or tools have a role in learning behaviour and secondly that these tools are imbued with cultural meaning. These assumptions lie at the heart of the CHAT. The leadership practices in a children's centres would both create and express the culture of the centre, and organisational learning would come from the interplay of these culturally embedded leadership tasks (stimulus), leadership practices (responses) and leadership tools. This is retained in the cultural historical activity theory model as the top triangle of subject, object, and tools.

Leaders do not act in isolation their practices are situated within collectives of people and carried out collaboratively. The CHAT diagram drew on Leont'ev's (1978) ideas of collective activity as indicated by the two triangles that constitute the base of the overall system triangle shown in figure 1 below, Engeström's second generation activity theory model.

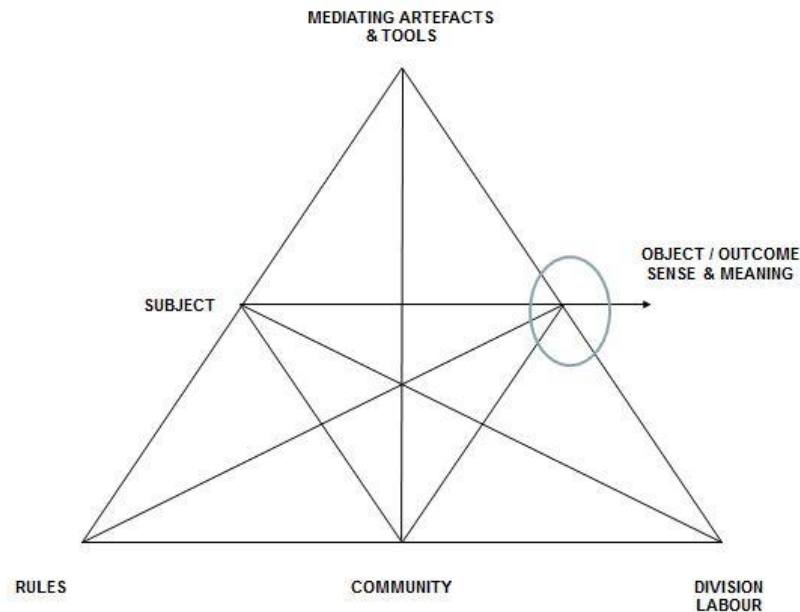


Figure 1: Engeström's (1996) Second generation CHAT.

The principles of CHAT systems reveal its suitability as a framework to analyse leadership. CHAT systems are collective, artefact-mediated and object oriented activity systems. As such, they should illustrate how people carry out the purposive and collective practice of leadership within a specific setting, with a given range of tools, for the benefit of children and families. The system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions and interests, with the division of labour creating different positions for the participants, each with their own histories. This means that the model would be able to account for the different participants enacting collective leadership within children's centres. The CHAT framework reveals contradictions and these are seen as having a central role as sources of change and development within CHAT and could therefore offer organisational development insights for leaders.

Both a strength and weakness of CHAT is its general, cross-disciplinary approach. Its strength lies in its applicability across fields as it is very generalizable. The weakness is the vagueness of its conceptual tools and methodological principles, which have to be concretised according to the specific nature of the object under scrutiny (Roth and Le Croix, 2012).

Literature review revealed that CHAT had been successfully applied in a range of contemporary children's workforce settings (Anning et al., 2007:83; Robinson and Anning, 2005:177; Edwards, 2005:170; Leadbetter et al., 2007:88). Two in particular are useful for discussion here. In 2001, Engeström used a third generation activity theory model to develop learning in the Children's Hospital in Helsinki. 60 physicians participated in developmental workshops (DWR's) where CHAT analysis revealed a contradiction between the increasingly important *object* of patients moving between primary care and hospital care and the *rule* of cost-efficiency implemented in both

(Engeström, 2001:144). Engeström (ibid) stated that the identification of these contradictions led to what he called 'expansive learning'. The potential of CHAT to both document a leadership practice and stimulate development and learning simultaneously was appealing.

Secondly, Edwards and Kinti (2010) used CHAT in the 'Learning in and for Interagency Working' project in the UK. The discursive practice of CHAT analysis enabled the practitioners to develop new identities within their newly integrated services. New expertise was also mediated by the analysis. This also pointed to the potential of CHAT to document and develop practices with children and families. Caution existed in some research however, where the analysis has led to conflict and struggle between professional views (Edwards and Kinti, 2010:137).

Personal experience of using CHAT had shown me the importance of using real practice examples rather than espoused practice to ensure meaningful rather than comfortable debate (Stuart, 2014; Labonte, Feather and Hills 1999:42) and of importance of capturing the dialogue that accompanied the analytical process as this is where the rich meanings lie (Stuart, 2014).

Methodology

This research arose from a chance conversation and alignment of interests. The manager of a group of four children's centres was interested in understanding how her team led so effectively, and I was interested in the phenomenon of leadership in children's centres. We agreed to work together on a voluntary basis in the interest of generating specific practice knowledge for the group, and general practice knowledge for the sector.

A developmental research workshop was convened and leaders the group of children's centres invited. There were 15 leaders who chose to attend the workshop.

The aims of the developmental research workshop were to develop a shared understanding of existing leadership practices and to understand if any tensions or contradictions existed that could be sources of learning and development. As such the CHAT analyses would comprise part of a case study of the leadership in this children's centre group. The case study was used in an endeavour to generate 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of leadership practices. This may serve as an example of practical knowledge that other leaders of children's centres may wish to consider within their own context (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Rather than researching 'on' the leaders the researcher was 'journeying with' the participants co-constructing learning about their practice. This journeying: "articulate[d] democratic norms and values; the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully, and heard with respect" (Gilligan 2011: 24) and resonated with Freire's (1970: 51) "co-intentional" learning through liberation education.

Preliminary activity had taken place with the leaders thinking through personal skills and challenges, and the opening stages of the workshop involved identification of the values that underpinned their shared leadership endeavour and their definitions of leadership. These activities developed a good working atmosphere, openness and trust, essential pre-requisites of a shared CHAT analysis.

The group of 15 leaders had subdivided into five groups of three each with a project in mind that they had co-led. The groups were simultaneously guided through the CHAT analysis with a series of tailored questions designed to elicit an understanding of their leadership practice. These were contextual and written in everyday language to make the abstract concepts of CHAT accessible (Leadbetter et al., 2008). The leaders discussed each question and annotated their answers on the CHAT frameworks. Once the questions for each outside point of the framework had been discussed, the participants were guided to review each of the lines of the framework to identify potential tensions and dilemmas.

Findings and Discussion

An example of a completed CHAT framework is shown in figure 2 below. The basic framework from figure 1 is pictured in the middle with the comments of the leaders around the outside.

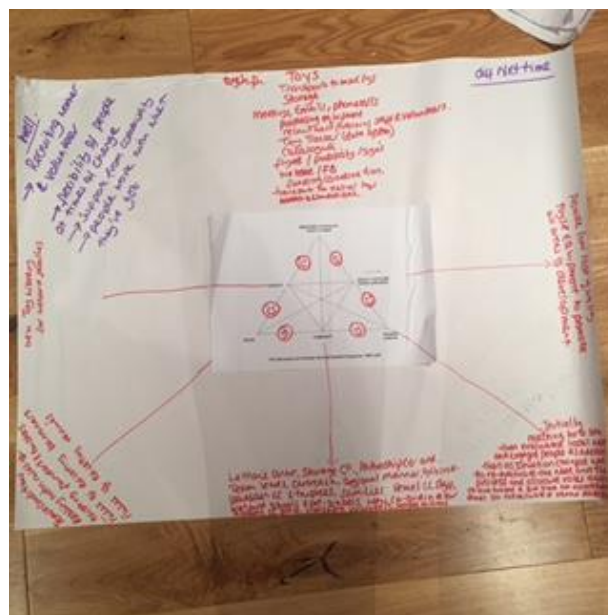


Figure 2: Completed CHAT framework.

Subjects

The subject of the leaders CHAT analyses were all the same. All of the groups had families as the subjects around whom the activity system was focussed. For some of the groups, however, this focus was secondary as it was contingent on the development of the staff team or children's centre. Ultimately however, the success

of these was focused solely on families. Without families there would be no need for the staff teams or children's centre.

Objectives

The objectives of the CHAT analyses varied according to the seniority of the team of leaders. Four of the groups had objectives that centred around service design. These were:

- *Establishing a home learning group*
- *Implementing a free swimming project to reduce obesity*
- *Implementing a project to increase the number of English as second language families in the centre*
- *Developing a new toy library.*

In contrast, the senior leadership team focused on their recent tendering exercise to secure the future of the entire group of children's centres:

- *Writing a tender for the children's centre future.*

It seemed interesting to consider whether these very different leadership objectives would create different activity systems and, or leadership practices.

Communities of Practice

The scale of the task to be achieved did not seem to have a major impact on the scale of the community of practice. Each project had between eight and 12 members. These were varied in membership including members of the children's centre group and; *the local authority, health, social care, education, board members, elected members, church and faith groups, other community organisation staff, volunteers and parents.*

The leaders had little difficulty in identifying the range of people within their communities. They were clearly used to working with them given their ease of identifying them and their familiarity with them. The team said that they had spent considerable time and effort developing their network of contacts and that this was now an area of strength for them. This demonstrates the importance of the historical nature of CHAT, in that leadership practices are never static and the past needs consideration alongside the present and future.

Division of Labour

These wide communities of practice led to complex and nuanced ways of dividing the labour up. There was no one fixed way of managing this, rather the ways of distributing the tasks depended on a combination of what the task was, who was being involved, and how they had related to the children's centre previously. For example, the completion of the tender involved some hierarchical division of labour as certain sections had to be completed and signed off by staff at certain levels,

beyond this, however, the task allocation was expertise led to ensure that the tender was as high quality as possible.

Division of the service design tasks was less hierarchical and primarily involved more expertise-based division of labour. There were also examples of these systems allocating tasks on the basis of who had most time. Relationships were also potent ways of allocating tasks, especially with the management of volunteers and parents. This form of task allocation was used with all volunteers and parents, but was also a feature of the division of labour with all other members of the community of practice, especially if it has lasted over time. The four types of division of labour were therefore: *hierarchical, expertise based, capacity based, relational*.

The leaders thought that implicit 'know how' was involved in deploying the right division of labour at any one point in time, and that it was contingent on context, task and person. The complexity and nuanced nature of this part of the activity system was considered one of the most difficult to learn by the leaders, and comprised much of their discussions with new staff.

Tools

Tools are categorised into three areas as per Wartofsky (1979). Primary tools are direct artefacts used such as equipment. Secondary tools are representations and encoded versions of the primary tools such as models, protocols and expectations. The tertiary tools are abstractions that guide the overall work of the system from ideological, paradigmatically or political perspectives.

In the primary tool section are electronic tools, physical tools, time and social capital. The electronic tools were common features of everyday life including:

- *Tender data bases, tender portal, email, blackberry, telephone, statistical database, facebook, twitter, computer, printer.*

Joining these were some obvious physical tools including:

- *Venues, furniture, vehicles, food and drink, staff resources, equipment resources such as toys, promotional materials such as posters and leaflets, management tools such as planning, monitoring proformas, evaluation, budgets, risk assessments and strategic plans.*

Whilst these may have been some of the most obvious tools, they comprised some of the greatest difficulties for the staff navigating them. There was often a lack of physical resources due to the low budgets that children's centres had. The leaders frequently felt constrained by reporting procedures and heavy bureaucratic protocols that they felt took them away from the face-to-face work with families.

Time (or the lack of it) featured on all the analyses, it seemed that time was a limited resource and that lack of time created a tension in achieving all the objectives.

Social capital was also tool commented on as a resource. This included: *relationships, networks, connections, who I know*. This tool was strongly linked to the wide community of practice that needed sustaining through social capital.

Secondary tools included the holistic nature of services delivery and a focus on independence. The range of services provided by the children's centres (22 different offers) demonstrated the extent to which they attempted to be holistic. This would reduce the number of places a family needed to go to secure the support that they needed. This expectation placed great demands on the leaders of the organisations to do everything and be everything.

A secondary focus was on the importance of education to enable children, young people and adults to be independent from the welfare state and to contribute to the state. This manifested in the provision of literacy, parenting, and employability sessions. This could be a tension with the need to engage parents on terms that were meaningful to them and working with them unconditionally.

The holistic nature of the provision and the work to support families into employability positioned children's centres as agents of the state, seeking to enable citizens to conform to pre-determined notions of 'good parents' and 'good citizens'. This stood in stark contrast to the values and beliefs of the staff who wanted to provide high quality and long term care for families in ways that were meaningful for them.

The tertiary tools or ideologies at play were deficit discourses around 'troubled families' (DCLG, 2012) neoliberal discourses of accountability and managerialism (Rogowski, 2008: 17; Garrett, 2003:22), and the commodification of humans into units that contribute to economies (Maloney, 2015).

There were therefore tensions in the micro activities using physical tools in the children's centres, and the hegemonic discourses that governed them at a macro level as tertiary tools. This made judgments of what were 'right' or 'wrong' leadership practices difficult to determine.

Rules

A wide range of tools was used to manage activity across the systems reflecting the neoliberal influences at play. These included: *the law, local authority policies, contract rules, the centre's own policy, informal rules, prioritiation rules, professional code of conduct, the centre's cultural norms, the practitioners unspoken rules*.

Perhaps one of the prime rules governing the work of the children's centres was the engagement of the parents and families – no matter what the policy of the centre, local authority or government, the centres would not remain open if parents and families did not attend. Engagement was therefore one of the most powerful but unstated rules. And this had great potential to create tensions if, for example, parents wanted something not within the centres specified offer.

All of the projects were subject to all of these different forms of rules. Whilst the external rules carried serious consequences for infringements, the consequences of not sticking to internal cultural rules and norms were being told you had got it wrong or a joke and a ribbing. Silence, blaming and conflict did not feature in the work of the children's centre leaders. The combination of nine sets of rules was complex and staff commented on the need to 'get to know' the system before it was possible to navigate life in the children's centres effectively. They saw this as their responsibility as mentors to new staff.

Tensions

With 12 connections on each CHAT analyses, there were a total of 60 areas of possible contradiction. The connections between the elements of the CHAT analyses are dialectics. The dialectical aspect of CHAT is perhaps the least understood or explored aspect of the theory. It is through these dialectics, these relationships between holistic components, that the entirety of the activity of leadership can be understood. It is not fragmented into linear, binary or separate pieces, but viewed as a nexus of interacting activities (Roth, Radford and LeCroix, 2012). It is also these contradictions that lead to growth and change. These should not be considered as obstacles to be overcome, but evidence of opportunities for growth, signs of healthy, mobile organisations of activity (Foot, 2014:337).

The CHAT analyses completed by the leaders of the children's centre included:

- *Rules and task: there are not enough resources for the task / too many tasks for the resources to complete*
- *Rules and task: the complexity of the rules make it too difficult to achieve anything, they constrain flexibility*
- *Tools and subject: the volume of bureaucracy absorbs human resource and directs energy away from the subject - families*
- *Community and division of labour: the complexity of the people in community and the ways to divide labour make it difficult to operate*
- *Tools and task: there is not enough time to complete the work*
- *Tensions within tools: the micro practices are in tension with macro discourses*
- *Tensions within rules: the rules set by the centre, local authority or government may contrast with the rules of engagement set by the families themselves.*

Seeing these tensions mapped out was a trigger for the leaders to rationalise what had often been an internal disquiet or frustration at how hard their day-to-day lives were. Suddenly those internal senses were made explicit and rendered visible. This process also opened up the space for expansive learning.

Expansive learning

The leaders quickly engaged in discussion about what the CHAT analyses meant and what they were realising from the activity. Their realisations included some validation and recognition of what they do well:

- *We deal with a lot of change*

- *We deal with complicated stuff*
- *We do effective leadership, we work well as a team*
- *We are not in control of some things*
- *We are very determined and have ambition*
- *We take risks and try different things*
- *We work with different and new partners*
- *We are good at vision and communication*
- *We are good at learning from the past*
- *We are supported through team work*
- *We use our range of professional backgrounds*
- *We communicate well and have shared understandings*
- *We have the right strategies at the right time in the right places with the right resources.*

These comments further document the leadership practices of this group of leaders. Ambition, innovation, risk assessment, determination, collaborative working, strategy, teamwork, communication and learning are key strengths that enable their system of leadership to work well.

The leaders then started to discuss the tensions. Rules and tools were the two areas that particularly intrigued them, and they began to plan ways to reduce the complexity of the rules that governed who did what, and to increase the number of tools that they had available. This created a new project on smart working, so that precious human resources spent time doing tasks that were of high value to the families, rather than spending it on tasks that were of high value to external stakeholders. This refocusing on the core purpose of the children’s centres and key values of the staff reinvigorated the leaders, and they left committed to questioning each moment of their day with “in what ways does this support families?” This shows how a relatively short conceptual activity, mapping leadership practices with CHAT led to validation, affirmation, and development for the children’s centre leaders.

Summary

Analysis of the data led to an understanding that there were different layers within the CHAT. There were day-to-day leadership practices driven by the elements of the micro-system that were strongly family oriented. Wrapped around these was a middle or ‘meso’ level of leadership focused on the Children’s Centre, that in turn provides support to families. Outside these are macro-leadership tasks involved in engaging in national level politics and policy outputs. These are summarized in table 1 below:

	Micro	Meso	Macro
Subject	Families	Families	Families
Objectives	Families lived experiences day-to-day are successful and	Successful services measured via the outcomes they	National discourse of families as successful units of the economy –

	fulfilling evidenced through outcomes	achieve for families	independent from welfare and contributing to GDP
Communities of practice	Wide range of children, families, volunteers, other practitioners and partners	As micro, plus local authority partners, stakeholders and politics	Relationships with government agencies and bodies mediated through policy
Division of labour	Based in relationship, expertise, capacity	As micro plus hierarchy	Purely hierarchical
Tools	Equipment, time, social capital, spaces, planning protocols	Effective delivery of 22 services to limit the damaging impact of 'bad' families on society	Accountability Managerialism Value for money Commodification
Rules	Parental engagement Organisational norms, rules, policies	Local authority norms, rules and policies	National law and policies

It became apparent that although contradictions between the six elements of the CHAT, whilst difficult, were reconcilable in practical terms. Contradictions between the layers of the CHAT, and particularly tensions involved an element and level of the CHAT system. Rather than being practical problems to solve (find more time, money, staff etc.) these all involved a values dimension, they required someone to say this matters more than that, I will meet this stakeholders needs at the expense of those. There were no clear or simple decisions, but complex values based decisions. And it was there that created the greatest difficulties for the leaders.

Implications for leaders

Analysis of the different elements of leadership at different levels can lead to an understanding of the leaders lived experiences as fraught and complex. Children's centres are complex, multifaceted organisations with a wide range of stakeholders and activities, governed in nuanced ways. The task of leadership therefore cannot be left to chance, but needs to be surfaced, debated and rendered explicit. This need not be a lengthy or painful experience. In this example, one developmental research session, one afternoon of discussion rendered the tacit explicit.

The analysis was reassuring for the leaders, it enabled them to understand what they were doing, why they were doing it, and why they experienced difficulties. Once the practice was visible it was the possible to reinforce and lever further as a deliberative rather than accidental practice. This was a springboard for further development. In short, time to think about leadership always pays dividends.

Implications for researchers wishing to use CHAT

CHAT is a powerful conceptual tool that can enable leaders to better understand the activity that occurs implicitly in their organisations. Its use requires careful consideration though. The framework is a general heuristic tool and the researcher needs to tailor a set of questions to the context. This needs to take account of what the focus of the activity system is, but also the language that will resonate with the staff, the length of time available and the range of participants.

It is important to use real practice as the focus for the activity theory. Engeström's (2001) original developmental research workshops used video footage of practice and service users views. This meant that the conversations were very real, there was no possibility of the practitioners letting themselves off with cosy conversation. You may also want to bring some evidence into the discussion to ensure a critical edge to discussions.

I have used CHAT in a number of settings featuring different levels of relationship and rapport. I have found that the tool works well even if the participants do not know one another, however, it is a more pleasant experience if there is trust and rapport between participants rather than distrust and hostility!

As the CHAT analysis involves deep critical thinking, I have sometimes found that a break (hours or days) between the analysis and the review and developmental or expansive learning can be beneficial. The developmental research workshop is an intense experience. Adding pace with some good quality breaks should ensure that participants are fresh and able to engage well in the expansive learning. This may partly be due to the different styles of analysis required. The first part is a mapping of what is, surfacing implicit practice, and the second part is what could be, planning new practice.

Conclusion

This case study has employed a CHAT analysis to reveal the complex nature of leadership practices in one group of children's centres. The CHAT analysis was conducted with leaders of the group in a collaborative process of inquiry. Six elements of the CHAT model and the contradictions between them were used as one phase of analysis. From this emerged a secondary analysis of micro, meso, and macro layers of leadership practice and the contradictions in these. This rendered leadership practices clearer, and accounted for the complexity that leaders experience. The research deepened understanding, promoted development and consolidated good practice in the children's centres and a multi-layered CHAT is therefore proposed as a useful tool to examine leadership in children's centres. This case study is offered as a springboard for future research ideas.

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