



PROJECT LEARN SCHOOL COMMUNITY: AN EDUCATIONAL
PRACTICE MEETS AN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY THEORY

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Abstract. Project Learn School community is a unique school co-op in Philadelphia. Founded 30 years ago, Project Learn was created as a co-operative between teachers, parents and students. The main philosophical principle, derived from J. Dewey's educational theories is the principle of equality between the parties in the educative process. Other guiding philosophical principles are: the emphasis on the unique constellation of abilities of every student, creating opportunities for meaningful personal involvement in the learning process, developing a sense of responsibility in students for themselves and for the larger world, and, finally, educating the whole person rather than just teaching academic skills. Although Cultural Historical Activity theory of L.S. Vygotsky was not very well known in the United States at the time of its founding, this school embodies several basic principles of Cultural Historical Activity theory. Among them is the principle of social mediation of the relationship between the subject and the object. The same principle is actualized through the rich use of cultural tools and symbols such as very developed programs in art, music and drama, as well as the frequent use of play and play like activities both to motivate and to create a collaborative learning atmosphere. Furthermore, the unique style of governance, where all families participate without delegation of their decision making powers, provides for a powerful model of human relationships, rules and norms believed to be the most beneficial for individual learning and the over all social development.

Key words: Project Learn School Community, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory.

“Project Learn School Community” is an elementary (K-8) school in Philadelphia's Germantown /Mt. Airy neighborhood. More than just a

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school it is a community of parents, teachers and children whose main goal is the education of children. The ideas and principles built into every aspect of the existence of Project Learn are strikingly similar or identical to the ideas that were developed by Vygotsky in the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 20th century. Over the years, Vygotsky's ideas evolved and were further developed both by some of his immediate colleagues in the former Soviet Union, and by some of the educators and psychologists in the West. Vygotsky's theory became a cornerstone of what is known today as the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Cultural Historical Activity Theory approach considers cognitive development to be a product of social interaction and historical and cultural environment in which an individual is born. In other words, learning and development are seen as being social processes even when their outcomes may be seen as individual achievements. The major developments of CHAT in the west and particularly in the USA largely happened in the past 30 years, however, CHAT is by no means a mainstream educational theory today. It was even less known as an educational theory at the time when Project Learn School was founded. Yet, the way Project Learn is organized, the actual practices of the community taking place at Project Learn, look like they were designed with CHAT as a guiding set of concepts. The aim of this paper is to describe several aspects of community practices that take place at PL. We will try to illustrate with concrete examples some of the guiding concepts built into the PL philosophy.

The first part of this section lays out "principles" and "customs" of the Project Learn School Community, starting with a history of the Project Learn. The second part then discusses some of the basic concepts of activity theory. Some of those concepts of CHAT were, in fact, built into the philosophy of PL from the very first moment. We will also discuss some of the CHAT concepts that are not a part of the PL principles and educational beliefs, but which non-the less tacitly operate within school.

Project Learn's Educational Principles and Practices

Short History. Project Learn can trace its roots to the basement of a home in the northwestern part of Philadelphia in the spring of 1969. Several families who felt strongly about how and what their children should learn, and about a parent and child's role in that process, began an ungraded primary class. This small alternative school used as its faculty parents who had been trained as teachers. The energy and commitment of those involved caught the

attention of the School District of Philadelphia, which at that time had begun a period of reorganization and innovation under the leadership of Superintendent of Schools Mark Shedd.

The fledgling school was adopted by the district as an elementary unit of the new Parkway system, an alternative public program that placed great emphasis on using cultural and community resources as an integral part of instruction. It was relocated in the fall to a former public school building in downtown Philadelphia.

While the new unit – called Paxton-Parkway – was in the process of fine-tuning its program, a power struggle began within the district over who would control the school. Rather than face the jurisdictional issue head-on, the district chose instead to eliminate the elementary unit altogether. Parents of the students, however, were committed to the program and decided to keep the school going themselves.*

It was in the early years – difficult and often precarious – that the school's basic philosophy was formed: that parents and children must be actively involved with the teachers in designing and implementing the school's policies and programs.

Project Learn has always functioned as a “school community” – a true commonwealth where consensus, equality and regard for the individual are implemented both in the educational program and in the parent-teacher governance of the school.

Educational philosophy. The philosophy is based on several basic principles. They are:

- The belief that every student has unique talents, interests, and learning styles, and that the program should be responsive to those differences.
- Since education is only meaningful when students are personally involved, Project Learn Community believes in giving students the oppor-

* In January of 1970, they renamed it “Project Learn” and moved it back to the Northwest section of the city. It operated for two years in church basements in Mt. Airy and for another year in a rented building in Germantown. In the spring of 1972 the school community made two major decisions: to seek a private school license and to purchase a three-story building at 6525 Germantown Avenue with the help of 10 committed families who co-signed the mortgage. The school moved into its new quarters in the fall of 1972 after extensive renovations carried out by members of the community. Within a decade, the school's need for space had exceeded the capacity of the building, and a three-story classroom addition was completed in 1987. To provide adequately for the continuing growth of the school, the community in 1993 purchased the three-story building next door and made plans to renovate it as well as construct a new three story classroom and office unit in the space between the two buildings. This project, which made clear the school's commitment to the historic district of Mt. Airy and Germantown Avenue, was completed in 1995 with extensive financial support from the school community and local banks.

tunity to share in the planning and directing of their education. The school strives to provide a productive and creative learning environment that meets the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of every student.

- Emphasis is on developing a sense of responsibility in students for themselves and for the larger world, encouraging lifelong learning, developing the knowledge and skills needed for empowerment, learning how to work in multi-age groups, and cultivating critical thinking.

- It is the goal of Project Learn that students, staff, parents and volunteers work collectively to foster an atmosphere of respect and involvement.

These principles are realized through a unique set of activities and the organization of children into groups and group activities.

“The hardest part of being a teacher at PL was to live what I believed. To continue to remember that I was operating on a new theory which I had not experienced as a student. It was hard to stay aware and not to slip back to old and learned patterns. It was hard to keep other teachers aware, too. One had to remind oneself and the others not to say ‘This is a bad child!’ but instead to say ‘What is it that we are not doing with and for this child? How can we better direct this child?’ That kind of education is harder because one has to listen to a child and follow the child’s map. And with 15 children in a class – there is a lot to balance” (Donna Allender, PL founding teacher).

Group skills and activities. A unique part of Project Learn is the emphasis on working cooperatively. These skills prepare our children for the workplace and other challenges they will face as adults. Various activities are especially designed for children to develop leadership skills and learn to work together, negotiate differences, and take responsibility for part of a project. Two major kinds are “GROUP” and an all-school assembly, also called FTGOTS (For The Good Of The School):

“In GROUP, we talk about stuff we want to do. It is a time just to basically be with your group. It does not take a long time. We get some time to do things with each other. Sometime we have meetings about things that happened. Group is sometimes twice a week and when we have FTGOTS – once a week. FTGOTS is different from GROUP because we discuss all school issues and not single group issues. A representative from each group helps create a meeting agenda. If you want to have an issue or conflict discussed, it must be on the agenda” (a Project Learn Student).

Weekly GROUP meetings as well as bi-weekly all school meetings allow children to make decisions about their environment, addressing issues that are important to them. These can range from interpersonal conflicts, playground activities, or ideas about new elective classes. These meetings, and other scheduled times when the children work in multi-age groupings,

create an environment where the children develop the skills to work together. This skill is vital to the education of the children at Project Learn. A truly successful person not only knows his/her times tables, sentence structure or history, but also how to work with other people – young or old.

A sense of community is also fostered among the students through a range of other activities – student meetings, thematic studies, and learning to work together on community focused projects. Bi-weekly all school meetings (FTGOTS) are held in which a student directed agenda is addressed. Information is presented, students discuss the issues, and informed consensus is reached. Issues presented include, for instance: limiting the amount of trash accumulated each week, determining what games can be played in the back yard, and how to make a game safer.

Yet another form of group activity are bi-weekly school assemblies – SPOTLIGHT ON YOU. At these assemblies, students may perform anything they choose – a joke, a song, a musical selection, a portfolio of artwork, a choral reading, class projects, or a group built Lego building. Concerts, speakers and student performances are also held throughout the year.

Finally, several times each year we hold Group Skills Days – special days when regular classes are abandoned to work together as a community on a particular theme. The school year begins with three Group Skills Days. The teachers choose a theme that serves three functions – it provides an opportunity for students to meet each other, it includes activities that break the ice and help students feel comfortable in the first days of school, and it provides a chance to review or become acquainted with school policy. For example, building on the theme “Families,” students discussed the various kinds of families in our community, examined how our school becomes a family for the year, and reviewed the rules we need to follow to function as a family. Additional Group Skills Days held later in the year may have a curricular focus such as “Women Heroes,” or focus on Martin Luther King Jr., or a day of service in the community. Others may be a day of fun such as “Shall We Dance?” a day of instructional dance, or “All about Your Heart” on Valentine’s Day.

Social skills developed in group activities distinguish PL students in other schools they later end up going to. After graduating from Project Learn students often return to share experiences they have had in dealing with high school teachers. One student told of his success in having his 8:00am lunch period switched to 11:20am after speaking to his principal and negotiating with the adult in charge.

Academic Skills. Students at Project Learn take classes in reading, mathematics, science, social studies, art, music, Spanish and physical education. The curriculum is integrated as much as possible, so it may be difficult sometimes to discern where one subject ends and another begins. Subject matter throughout the curriculum is brought to life with hands-on activities, demonstrations, field trips, and the arts. Interviewing, research, organizing, and study skills are worked on from the lower grades on up.

Curriculum and the choice of classes are not completely laid down for the students. As soon as they are in their third year, students are given an opportunity to choose elective classes in the afternoons (4 afternoons a week – Wednesday is a short day). Electives are offered in every area: art, music, gym, sciences, social sciences, writing – both creative and reporting etc. Elective classes may span several generations and only some of them are limited by age. It is most usual to see younger and older children working together on Project Learn newspaper or taking photography classes together.

Sometimes a lot of learning happens through special projects and after school programs. For instance, the PL after school program has been a member of a club organized by NASA for several years – studying Mars.

“The nicest thing about Project Learn is that teachers are trusted to develop their own curriculum and are not just given a set of instructions. I develop my own curriculum every year. In fact, I have been teaching for 32 years and I think that I taught the same things in 32 different ways” (Nancy Bailey, PL founding teacher).

Art, Music and Play. Art, Music and Play have a special place in the Project Learn curriculum. In most elementary schools, art has traditionally been a subject in which students are allowed and encouraged to use their own creative processes. In Project Learn art is used not just as a creativity booster but also as a means to develop ties with the wider neighborhood cultural institutions and with the people of the community. All PL students take art classes, either with their group teacher or the art teacher or both. In addition there are special electives offered each semester for the students who are interested in more art. The art teacher also organizes projects that are integrated into the wider community and neighborhood museum activities: PL students participate with their own exhibits in the special yearly Fiber Art exhibition (The Fiber Café). They create art for the MANA project, which delivers meals and art to homebound AIDS patients at Thanksgiving. This art is exhibited at the nearby Woodmere Gallery, prior to distribution. The school also opens its doors to the neighborhood children for a Saturday morning art class each month. Children from the surrounding community

join regular PL students to create various art projects. The Second Saturday Art project depends on a special grant – or special fundraising activity, and it is free for the neighborhood children.

In addition, artistic projects are a part of every holiday and a special event in the school. Last summer, a former parent who also was an after-school teacher died. The art teacher, also a close friend of the deceased, declared the whole semester to be an exploration in Blue.

Besides regular art classes, many children are interested in the contemporary art of cartooning. An after-school teacher (an artist himself) offers the cartooning elective both during the regular school hours and in the after school program. Recently he started a new project: children will produce their own Claymation movie. Students in the Claymation class start with designing a character – usually in several drawing projects. They, then proceed to create their characters in clay. They also work on a story and the dialogues. This deep and studious project, which lasts for a whole semester, will yield perhaps a 15 second movie.

Music and dance are also very prominent in the life of Project Learn. In addition to various music and dance classes, every year PL produces a full scale musical (usually one of the known classic musicals like “Oliver”, “South Pacific”, “Sounds of Music” etc). Children of all ages are involved in all different aspects of such a production: acting, singing, dancing, directing, producing costumes, painting back drops and making other elements of the scenery, creating props, lighting effects, etc.

Play in its various forms has a special place in Project Learn. It is both a free activity and also a tool for teaching. Project Learn’s back yard was always equipped with play elements: old tires, balls, a basketball hoop, and a simple jungle gym. Several years ago, a parent designed a new colorful and much more interesting climbing structure. This structure was built and soon became a favorite place to hang out and play not only for the younger children but also for the Junior High students.

Students at Project Learn play at various times: during the recess and break periods, during before- and after-school hours. But play and imagination are also included in various curricular activities. Telling stories and creative writing have prominent place in the curriculum. Many projects in social studies are done through imagining and creating whole worlds. For instance, during the Black History week, students create art inspired by Black History, they read and write stories and poems with Black History themes, they may cook some traditional Black culinary specialties, they listen to music and songs from the time, etc. Creating a whole world is

especially visible during a week long study of another culture, called “The Theme Week”, children in cross age groups integrate art, music, cooking and dance with the study of the geography and history of another country or continent.

Evaluation. Project Learn School has developed a unique set of assessment and evaluation tools. Conferences with students, staff and parents (all together!) and formal written evaluations are the main forms of assessment and evaluation. Standardized tests and formal grades are not used at Project Learn School.

Conferences focus on the student’s academic strengths as well as areas that need special attention. Evaluation is also given to the way the student is growing in the school community. At this time, parents, teachers and children together, set goals so that program can better serve each student. There are two required conferences each year – a third conference is optional.

Written evaluations at the end of each school year are given as a summary of all what has transpired in the school year: stating first the abstract of each course curriculum and then the individual student’s strengths. Notes are often made of the areas, which will require special attention for the following year. Students are given an opportunity to add self-evaluation elements to the report. These become a part of a students’ permanent record.

While classroom tests are sometimes given, there are no standardized tests or grading systems at the school. Informal assessment and communication about student progress is ongoing between teachers and students and between parents and teachers. Portfolios of student work, particularly writing samples are gathered and used as a basis for parent conferences and as a part of a student’s records. Practice for standardized tests is offered in seventh and eighth grades in preparation for high school entrance exams. These practices give teachers the opportunity to guide the students in test taking strategies and allow them to become comfortable with the format of standardized tests.

Students are involved in the process of evaluation and assessment as equal partners and “owners” of their own development. From the kindergarten and first grade on, children are active partners in evaluation. They are systematically given opportunities and are taught the art of assessment and evaluation. The assessment process represents a direct work in the “zone of proximal development”: Children are taught how to make use of social interactions and perceptions and internalize them as guided self-

awareness and personal evaluation. Conferences are also used to create trust and positive relationships between teachers, parents and children. Especially when there are tensions and problems to deal with, children are taught to express and formulate their concerns, create goals and design plans of action. Children are never compared to other students but evaluated on their own past work and growth in terms of the learning goals they themselves have created together with their parents and their teachers.

Community of Practice

It is not merely an educational theory that made Project Learn School a “school community” or that kept it going for more than thirty years. While theory is an important and an indispensable educational tool, it has been the ability of the teachers and parents to create a meaningful practice. They created a community of practice in which education is the main activity, learning the main goal of this activity and where democracy and the equality of all those involved is the highest principle.

From this principle of equality all other principles and beliefs in the Project Learn Community can be derived: The teachers and the parents understand that cognitive and academic development and learning are inseparable from social relationships, social processes and the development of whole personalities. They understand, furthermore that the best learning takes place in close relationships based on equality and mutual trust. They believe that individuals develop in multiple ways, often following different paths, and that they should not be punished (or rewarded) for these differences but praised and supported as valuable members of the community. They understand the importance of meaningful adults in the educational process and include parents in every aspect of the life of Project Learn School: from teaching to the school governance.

Self-Governance and administration rules. A school community is not an ordinary community. It differs from a “neighborhood community” or from a “work community” in many ways. But one of the main ways in which Project Learn School Community differs from other communities is its ability to educate every member – not just the children of the community. Being a member of the Project Learn Community means more awareness and self-awareness. It means taking responsibility in decision-making. It means understanding the causes and the consequences of our own decisions. It requires doing homework not just for the children but also for all the parents who want to be effective members of this school community.

Project Learn is about involvement and community: involvement of students in their own education, involvement of parents in all aspects of the school, and the importance of communication and relationships between staff, students, parents, and the wider community. Project Learn is a cooperative: just as the students cooperate in different kinds of groups as part of their education, parents perform many of the tasks which would be done by staff at other schools, including cleaning, administration, office work, transportation, teaching, supervision in the schoolyard, recruitment, development, staff evaluation and hiring. Every family has a co-op job, usually averaging several hours a week. This responsibility can only be avoided by buying out, i.e. paying a higher tuition. In addition to the co-oping job, each family is also responsible to help clean a portion of the school four times during the school year. Each co-op job has a tuition reduction credit attached. This is a major way that tuition is kept affordable. The major goal of this tuition reduction system is an attempt to educate children from the broadest economic spectrum possible. Much of the administrative work is also done by the teaching staff, in partnership with parents.

Project Learn has also had a tradition of egalitarianism since its inception, consistent with its cooperative nature. All full time staff has always been paid at exactly the same salary rate. Teachers with years of teaching experience or advance degrees receive the same compensation and benefits as newly minted teachers. In a parallel way, the tuition level for students has also always been exactly the same. Children in the kindergarten program are charged the same tuition as those in the eighth grade. This approach creates an atmosphere of egalitarianism in which responsibility and ownership of the school is the same for every teacher as well as every parent.

This philosophy of involvement, cooperation, community, and equality is embodied in the way decisions are made at Project Learn. The ultimate decision-making authority for the school is the Town Meeting, made up of all students' parents (or guardians) and the staff. Students are encouraged and invited to attend and participate in Town Meeting if they take that opportunity seriously and responsibly, but interest in this has been extremely rare. Town Meetings are regularly scheduled once a month during the school year, except in December, but special meetings can always be called. Parents are obligated to attend every regularly scheduled Town Meeting (at least one representative for each student family/household), and are fined \$100 if they miss more than one. Like co-oping, it is possible to buy out of the Town Meeting responsibility, but this is very rare. The Town Meeting is led/facilitated by the Lead Parent (elected by the Administrative Committee,

which is elected by the community as a whole). Efforts are made to encourage everyone to speak, sometimes giving preference to those who have not yet spoken, even if they were not first to raise their hands. Proposals are enacted by modified consensus. Project Learn's decision making process means that, after a proposal has been made, seconded, and discussed, a vote is taken by asking for all in favor, then asking for all opposed. If more are opposed than in favor, the proposal is rejected. What makes PL's decision-making process unique is that even if a majority of votes are in favor, the group is then asked if there are any blocking votes. An individual can cast a blocking vote if, on principle, they feel very strongly that the proposal should not be enacted. Until all blocking votes are retracted, the proposal cannot be passed. The idea is that each person casting a blocking vote explains their feelings or reasoning, and the community with them tries to improve or clarify the proposal to address and satisfy the concerns. There have in fact been situations where a single opposing vote that was a blocking vote eventually completely changed a proposal far from what it was initially.

This form of modified consensus gives an incredible amount of power to every individual in the community. It truly epitomizes egalitarian involvement and empowerment. With that power comes the responsibility of listening to each other and being reasonable. The effect is that no proposal gets passed that anyone feels strongly against, so there is a general sense of buy-in to every decision. One effect is that proposals often get modified creatively on the floor as they are being discussed, to incorporate all voices and points of view as much as is possible. Total consensus, as often practiced by Quaker communities, frequently results in continuation of the status quo (minimal change), since it can be hard to get everyone to agree to something new. Modified consensus, on the other hand, makes significant change much more possible and likely, but only with broad support. Unlike straight Roberts' Rules majority voting, modified consensus is less likely to lead to hurt feelings and wheeling and dealing for votes.

To provide leadership, set the agenda for the Town Meeting, make it run efficiently and effectively and to appropriately deal with day-to-day operations and the implementation of Town Meeting policies and directives, there is the Administrative Committee. This committee of more than a dozen is composed of staff volunteers and co-oping parents (this counts as the parents' co-op job, but they have to be in at least their second year at the school). Most proposals get their initial airing at Administrative Committee, where they can be modified to maximize the chances of passing at Town

Meeting. Members of the Administrative Committee serve as liaisons to the standing committees (Maintenance, Fund-raising, Recruitment/Publicity, Personnel, In-School Co-oping, and Finance). The Administrative Committee is the closest thing at Project Learn to a Board of Trustees, but does not have the authority, mandate, or assumed term longevity that most boards possess. In a sense, every parent and staff person is on the Board (as part of Town Meeting), and so everyone must think about the overall long-term health and financial viability of the school as a whole. This can be both a challenge and a strength. The Town Meeting approves the composition of the Administrative Committee each year, who elect volunteer officers (Lead Parent, Treasurer, and Secretary) internally. The Lead Parent leads/facilitates the Administrative Committee meetings as well as Town Meeting. The Administrative Committee meets a week before each Town Meeting, as well as in December and June and often a number of times over the summer.

The budget process at Project Learn is a good example of how this decision-making process can be very effective. Passing a budget for the next school year is one proposal that must happen every year. The current practice is to have the ad hoc Budget Committee (staff and parents), led by the Treasurer with support from the Bookkeeper, discuss and present the major forces and factors likely to be involved in the budget. These are then presented to the Administrative Committee, possibly modified in response to comments, and then presented to the Town Meeting in November. After getting feedback from the community and an informal mandate for the priorities for the budget, the Budget Committee then meets several times to work out a detailed budget, keeping the comments from the community in mind. Often, people who have expressed strong opinions about various aspects of the budget will be invited to the meetings if they do not come on their own. This initial proposal is presented to the Administrative Committee, possibly modified, and then presented at the January Town Meeting, just for discussion. If necessary, the Budget Committee then meets with anyone expressing concerns to incorporate those concerns into the budget, and an updated proposal is presented to the Administrative Committee. After possible final modifications, the final budget proposal is then presented and voted on at the February Town Meeting. As can be seen, there are many opportunities for all voices and perspectives to be expressed, so typically by the end of the process, a consensus has already emerged and the vote proceeds quite quickly and easily.

Paralleling the Lead Parent structure, one or two staff members serve as Educational Coordinator (or Educational Co-Coordinators), which in the

past was called Lead Teacher. This position is the closest Project Learn has to a Principal. The teacher in this position is responsible for leading weekly staff meetings (currently Wednesday afternoons), signing checks and contracts, and keeping an eye on and coordinating overall activities and the academic program at the school. However, the Educational Coordinator position does not have responsibility for hiring, evaluating, or firing staff members. The responsibility to evaluate the staff and initiate the hiring process is vested in the Personnel Committee, which currently consists of parents and staff members. To hire for a specific position, an ad hoc hiring committee is formed which includes members of the Personnel Committee and additional volunteer parent and staff (open to anyone who commits to going to all of the meetings for that hiring process). The community gives this ad hoc hiring committee the power to do the hiring, with as much input as possible. The procedure for firing or laying off a staff member is not as clearly defined. Most of the time, difficult discussions have occurred in a Staff Meeting (or individually with the Educational Coordinator), and an attempt is made to have all parties agree that the fit is not right for a particular staff person so that the staff person leaves voluntarily. In the case of a potential layoff scenario, ideally the staff discusses as a community how reductions mandated by budget difficulties can be handled, whether by staff voluntarily reducing their position level (to 9/10 or 8/10) or by someone voluntarily leaving.

This decision-making structure has served Project Learn very well for over 30 years. It is totally consistent with, and reinforces and enhances, the educational philosophy of the school. Students realize that their parents are deeply involved with the school, not only for fundraising as is the case in many school but also for hiring teachers, evaluation of staff, teaching elective classes, going to meetings, and generally helping to run the school. That extra effort by their parents helps encourage them to put in extra effort in school, and to feel a pride and ownership that is not possible without such involvement.

Conceptual bases of Cultural Historical Activity Theory – with a twist

“The hardest thing for me was to help new parents understand and trust that real learning is a matter of personal responsibility on the part of their children. Teachers create and enrich the learning environment and encourage the learning process. Parents provide guidance and support their children. But it is the children who are responsible to make it all their own. Once a child accepts this active role, becoming a life-long learner is an easy next step. Most parents

embrace this as the real goal of education for their children” (Fran Fox, Project Learn’s founding teacher).

Project Learn School Community was founded in the beginning of the seventies, a time when the activity theory was almost completely unknown to the educational profession in the United States. Project Learn grew out of the beliefs in the Deweyan ideas about active nature of an individual interaction with the world through learning: “the organism interacts with the world through self-guided activity that coordinates and integrates sensory and motor responses ... the world is not passively perceived and thereby known; active manipulation of the environment is involved integrally in the process of learning from the start” (from “The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy”,

<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/d/dewey.htm#Theory%20of%20Knowledge>). There were other philosophical and theoretical influences under which the founding teachers and parents operated. It would be beyond the scope of this article to describe them all. But, one of the most profound features of Project Learn School Community is that it operates as if it were guided by the Cultural Historical Activity Theory which was founded by Vygotsky in the late 20s and early 30s in the Soviet Union.

The central concept of the Cultural Historical Activity Theory is that no human being relates to the objects and other beings in their environment in a direct way. Instead, the relationship between an individual and her/his environment (the subject-object relationship) is *mediated* by the society in which this human being develops. In other words, the history and the culture of a society are an integral part of human development and not merely the “environment” for psychological and biological development. Social interaction, and, more importantly, *tools and symbols* that belong to a historical and a cultural moment of a developing individual, are as central to the psychological development as are biological processes.

Based on this hypothesis, Vygotsky developed several key concepts to describe development. They are:

- *Mediation* – Tools and Symbols are social products, which directly mediate the relationship of the individual to her/his environment. Every person experiences and understands the world through using the language of the social group in which he/she develops and by using tools and other socially produced objects that exist at the time.
- *Learning and cognitive development* take place within *activities* in which one participates. Moreover, they are a result of a individual’s personal activity and involvement in learning process. Social interaction within and

about activities is a place where every human development starts and where it takes place.

- *Zone of Proximal Development* – cognitive development always starts within a social process in which an individual is a co-partner. Each learning process goes through a phase in which learning takes place between the individual and her/his instructor or teacher. Only gradually a person can take over all the parts of the learning activity. Vygotsky explained the zone of proximal development as a difference between what the student can do alone (on a test) and what s/he can do with a ‘help’ of an instructor. For instance, two or more students may get the same score on a test, but their zones of proximal development may differ in a sense that one of them needs just a little help to achieve a greater score on the test while no help will raise the score of the other student. Zone of proximal development is also visible in the difference of the understanding a child or adult may manifest in play as opposed to “reality”. A famous example Vygotsky gave was about two sisters who used to play being “sisters”. When playing they behaved like “sisters”: they helped each other, were pleasant and tolerant, walked hand in hand – in other words, they understood and used the rules of behavior which should apply to the “sister” relationship. Of course, in reality they were not behaving like that all the time. Thus, play also represents the zone of proximal development. Zone of Proximal Development is a true zone in which learning process takes place – it is represented by those skills and knowledge that are still not developed but which are “in the workshop” so to speak. Teaching is the most successful if it takes place in the zone of proximal development, because it is just what the student really needs – not what is already learned and represents no challenge; not something that is totally over her/his head, but just that what he/she is just in the process of “getting”.

- *The teacher’s role is to direct* the learning process through being a resource for the students and through creating rich learning environments. Vygotsky (1987) wrote:

“From the psychological point of view, the teacher is the director of the social environment in the classroom, the governor and guide of the interaction between the educational process and the student. Though the teacher is powerless to produce immediate effects in the student, he is all-powerful when it comes to producing direct effects in him through the social environment. The social environment is the true lever of the educational process, and the teacher's overall role reduces to adjusting this lever. Just as a gardener would be acting foolishly if he were to try to affect the growth of a plant by directly tugging at its roots with his hands from underneath the plant, so is the teacher

in contradiction with the essential nature of education if he bends all his efforts at directly influencing the student. But the gardener affects the germination of his flowers by increasing the temperature, regulating the moisture, varying the relative position of neighboring plants, and selecting and mixing soils and fertilizer, i.e., once again, indirectly, by making appropriate changes in the environment. Thus it is that the teacher educates the student by varying the environment.”

- *Learning to create, develop and sustain social relationships*, to be a part of a group and a community is equally significant as the learning of academic subjects.

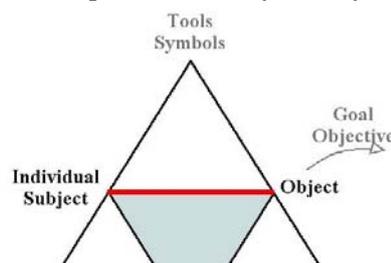
In this paper we only present an analysis of the process of mediation and the ways mediation “works” in Project Learn School.

*Mediation – the central concept
of the Cultural Historical Activity Theory*

Mediation is usually seen as a social interface – by the way of socially produced symbols and tools – in the relationship between the Subject and the Object, i.e. between an individual and her environment. Schematically, this is represented in Figure 1.

The basic relationship between an individual and the world of objects is mediated by the society. Line “a” represents the relationship between the individual and her/his environment (objects). The small shaded triangle is, then, this basic relationship in which an individual, engaged in an activity, achieves her/his goals (objectives), by acting upon objects in her/his environment. The society produces Tools and Symbols, which an individual uses to manipulate objects. The relationship between an individual and the social group to which he/she belongs (line “b”) is regulated by various rules, norms and customs. And finally, the society relates to the world of objects (line “c”) through the division of labor (Engeström, 1999). Each human activity can be represented by a system of relationships depicted in the above model. Learning can also be seen as an activity in which a person has a goal to better understand (to learn more about) a segment of our world. The individual’s learning is mediated by the symbols, concepts and material tools a society has created to “handle” this segment of the world. Furthermore, the Learning activity is mediated by a set of rules and norms which exists within a society for each particular student.

Figure 1: Relationship between subject, object and society



The activity theory model of learning is very useful. It explains the relational structure of knowledge and of the activity, which produces this knowledge. It shows the relationships between knowledge and symbols/tools. Moreover it shows the connection between the rules, norms and customs of a society on one hand and knowledge of the world on the other.

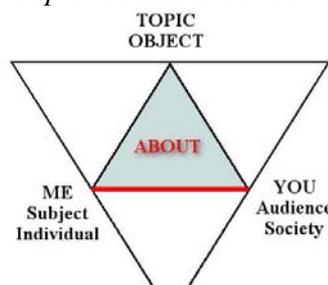
However, looking at *mediation* only as the social interface into the individual's relationships with the world of objects is not enough. It is true that this interpretation of the activity theory model is very useful for understanding the relationship between the learner and the subject matter. But this view alone is not sufficient to explain the relationship between learning and teaching: two complimentary but very different activities in education.

There is another way to look at the relationships in an activity system, a way that reveals more about the relationship between the teacher and the student. This time, a person's social relationships with other relevant participants in an activity are the focus of our attention.

An object or an objective (Figure 2) becomes a *topic of the relationship* between the teacher and the student. In other words, their relationship is ABOUT a relevant topic. This topic may also happen to be an educational goal.

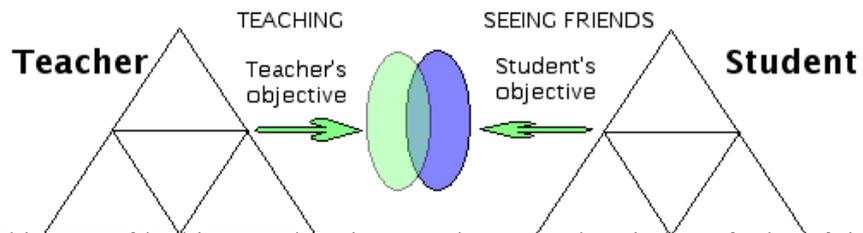
People's interpersonal relationships, as well as an individual's relationship to the community as a whole, are always ABOUT something. They may not be about the same topic all the time, and even within the same time they may be about more than just one topic. But topics (or the objects/objectives) to which they refer, *MEDIATE* relationships between people.

Figure 2: Topics as mediators between people



In a recent presentation at the AERA 2002 Conference in New Orleans, Yrjö Engeström discussed the difference between the teaching activity (or even the learning activity) and the going-to-school activity. In his view, teachers have different objectives than students, and, in fact, they have, whole different activity systems. Schematically, this could be represented like in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Teacher and student objective discrepancy



This way of looking at education may be a true description of a lot of times that teachers and students live through in school: having different goals which may or may not overlap a bit, being in different activities, parallel but not much interactive.

Project Learn School Community, on the other hand, shows us that teaching and learning may sometimes become a part of the same activity system. When a teacher can establish a relationship with her students, which is ABOUT the topic of a mutual interest, when, for a moment, they truly relate to each other ABOUT this topic, teaching then becomes an activity, which guides learning.

When Project Learn was founded, Vygotsky's ideas and the whole elaborate paradigm of CHAT was not a part of the educational vocabulary and thinking in the USA. Project Learn School was not founded solely based on educational theories. It was based even more on the very strong beliefs of its founders and participants in the EQUALITY of all human beings and in the DEMOCRATIC principles, which should govern human relationships.

Mediation as a theoretical concept is not something that you can “put” into an educational process or take out of it. Mediation takes place all the time.

But how do you take advantage of it, when you understand it – is another thing altogether. What made Project Learn so unique is the simple fact that democratic beliefs and practices enhance the process of mediation and learning in every activity and enterprise – including education. A true link between teaching and learning is established when a teacher can create relationships with her/his students in which all the participants relate to the same topic (object/ive) and each participant can benefit from the others’ involvement with the same topic.

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PROJECT LEARN SCHOOL COMMUNITY:
СУСПЕТ ОБРАЗОВНЕ ПРАКСЕ И ТЕОРИЈЕ
О ОБРАЗОВНОЈ АКТИВНОСТИ
Анстракт

Project Learn School Community је јединствен школски кооперативни пројект у Филаделфији. Започет је пре тридесет година и замишљен као сарадња наставника, родитеља и ученика. Заснива се на филозофском принципу равноправ-

ности учесника у процесу образовања, принципу који потиче из Дјуиеве теорије. Други филозофски принципи на којима се пројект заснива су: наглашавање јединственог склопа способности сваког ученика, стварање услова за смислено лично учествовање у процесу учења, развијање осећаја за одговорност ученика за себе и ширу околину и, коначно, образовање целокупне личности уместо само стицање академских вештина. Иако теорија Виготског није била нарочито позната у Сједињеним државама у време оснивања, ова школа отелотворује неколико основних принципа његове културно-историјске оријентације. Нарочито се истиче принцип друштвеног посредовања у односу субјекта и објекта. Исти принцип се реализује кроз интензивно коришћење културних средстава и симбола у детаљно разрађеним програмима у области уметности, музике и драме, као и кроз учесталу употребу игре и игроликих активности у циљу подстицања и стварања сарадничке атмосфере за учење. Јединствени начин руковођења у коме учествују све породице, без делегирања сопствене моћи за одлучивање, у великој мери доприноси оваквом моделу хуманизованих односа, правила и норми за које се верује да су најплодотворнији за индивидуално учење и целокупан друштвени развој.

Кључне речи: Project Learn School Community, културно-историјска теорија Виготског.

Анна Марьянович-Shane и сопр.
ПРОЕКТ *ВЫУЧИ* – ШКОЛЬНОЕ СОДРУЖЕСТВО:
ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНАЯ ПРАКТИКА ВСТРЕЧАЕТСЯ С ТЕОРИЕЙ
ОБ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ

Резюме

Проект Learn School Community – единственный в своем роде кооперативный проект в Филадельфии. Его реализация началась тридцать лет тому назад, а замысел проекта состоял в установлении сотрудничества между учителями, родителями и учащимися. Проект основывается на философском принципе равноправия участников в процессе образования, заимствованном из теории Дьюи. Остальными философскими принципами, на которых базируется данный проект, являются: подчеркивание единственной констелляции способностей любого учащегося, создание условий для осмысленного личного участия каждого в процессе учебной деятельности, развитие чувства ответственности учащихся по отношению к себе самим и к своему окружению, и, разумеется, образование целостной личности вместо обучения в собственном смысле, т. е. развития академических умений. Несмотря на то, что теория Выготского во время обоснования проекта особой известностью в Соединенных Штатах Америки не пользовалась, он все же воплощает несколько основополагающих принципов развивающей и культурно-исторической ориентации теории Выготского. Особо подчеркивается принцип общественного посредования в отношениях между субъектом и объектом. Особый способ осуществления руководства школой, в котором принимают участие все семьи учащихся, без делегирования собственной мощи в принятии решении, в значительной мере содействует претворению в жизнь данной модели гуманизованных отношений, правил и норм, в связи с которыми существует уверенность о том, что они имеют наиболее плодотворное

воздействие на индивидуальную учебную деятельность и общественное развитие в целом.

Ключевые слова: Project Learn School Community, культурно-историческая теория Выготского.