

Teaching - and - Learning as a developmental tool:
Collaborative transformations in a child welfare program

By

Eduardo Vianna

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

Teaching-and- Learning as a developmental tool: Collaborative transformations in a child welfare program

by

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This study aimed at contributing to institutional change and individual development in a residential program for adolescents by integrating insights from Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology and critical pedagogy. My goal was to transform institutional practices away from control and punishment by implementing collaborative, dialogical teaching-and-learning activities that open zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). These activities gradually expanded the institutional context for learning and dialogue and empowered the residents as agents of institutional and their own transformation. Moreover, placing teaching and learning at the center of this intervention resulted in the emergence of learning as the dominant form of institutional activity as it progressively became a form of self directed activity on the boys' part, which decreased the need for disciplinary measures shifting the activity system of the

group home away from custodialism (Polsky & Berger, 2003) and helped forge a stronger link between schools and the institution.

Drawing on systemic-theoretical instruction and developmental teaching allowed me to help the boys grasp theoretical concepts, which radically transformed the meaning of learning activity as it enabled them to see hidden connections and concretely understand the practical relevance of theoretically mediated forms of reflection for understanding and contributing to the world around us. As a result, the boys' motivation for and attitude toward learning increased steadily as well as the number of boys on college track, which became a leading institutional concern. This had deep consequences for the institution as all participants expanded their vision of the boys' potential. By appropriating learning activity the boys expanded and deepened the possibilities of realizing their dreams and fulfilling their human potential.

In conclusion, this study examined how inadequate assumptions about human development, tied to a pathological view of youth living in oppressive circumstances, serve as barriers for change in the child welfare system. It reveals how the quality of instruction can either create impediments for youth development or opportunities to overcome resistance as youth embrace learning as a meaningful activity. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the inseparable dynamic of individual and contextual transformation whereby teaching and learning play a central role in human development.

To Paula and Dušana
and to the memory of Jocelyn Solis

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Rationale for this Study	10
2.1. Child welfare practice in crisis: poor conceptualizations of child development as impediments to change (including psychological practices and discourses)	10
2.2. Developmental principles: implications for child welfare policies and programs	33
2.3. The Alternative: bridging education and psychology by placing teaching, learning and development at the center of child welfare practices and policies	40
3. Theoretical Foundations	51
3.1. Vygotsky and Freire: Theories of Practice	51
3.2. Vygotsky and Activity Theory: The dialectics of teaching, learning and development	57
3.3. Leading Activity and Development: At the intersection of play and learning	62
3.4. Self Development as Shifts in Leading Activity: Implications for adolescent development	73
4. Research Questions	77
4.1. Action Research within a CHAT Perspective	77
4.2. Research Questions	81
5. Method	89
5.1. Situating Myself in the Institution	89
5.2. Emerging Collaborative Practices: Implementing novel activities in the institution	93
5.3. Creating Zones of Proximal Development through Play	100
5.4. Monitoring and Supporting Learning: Shifting Institutional Practices	106
5.5. Data Collection	148
6. Data Analysis	151
6.1. Unit of Analysis: The Institution as an Activity System	151
7. Results	161
7.1. Setting the stage	161
7.2. Phase I – Control vs. Resistance as the dominant institutional activity	165
7.3. Phase II– Opening Zones of Proximal Development: From learning to Play to playing to learn	206
7.4. Phase III: The emergence of learning activity as the leading activity ..	227
8. Discussion	241
8.1. Reconfiguration of the institutional activity system	241
8.2. Perturbation in the System: repositioning and the mutual embeddedness of activities	244
8.3. New Tools, New Motives: The dialectical unity of affect and intellect in development	248
8.4. Mutual transitions in activity: the co-emergence of tools and results ..	249
8.5. Reflection on Method	250
9. Conclusion	259
10. Bibliography	266

List of graphs, tables, and figures

Graph 1. Number of children in foster care in year 1998 and 2001	11
Graph 2. Percentage of children by type of foster care placement in 1998 and 2001	11
Graph 3. Permanency of foster care children in percentage in 1998 and 2001	12
Graph 4. Placement of foster care children in 1998 and 2001	13
Figure 1. Residential Program as an activity system based on Engeström's model (1999)	152
Table 1. Job Description	201

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore ways to create alternative institutional practices in a child welfare residential program by integrating insights from Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology and critical social theory and pedagogy as guiding tools. These theoretical perspectives have been successfully applied to ordinary school settings for decades in this country and abroad, but have not yet been extended to the sphere of the child welfare system. This research focuses specifically on transforming residential care practices by engaging youth in collaborative activities that 1) open zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) by expanding and deepening the institutional context for learning and dialogue and 2) contribute to empowering the residents as agents of institutional and their own transformation. Drawing on the cultural-historical theory of activity and critical pedagogy, my aim is to reveal the central role of teaching and learning in the dialectics of youth development and social change. My argument is based on a critical examination of traditionally existing and recently emerging theoretical and methodological approaches combined with empirical evidence from three years of ongoing practitioner research in a group home for boys. This study aims at revealing a) how inadequate assumptions about human development, closely tied to a pathological view of children and adolescents living in difficult and oppressive circumstances and further enhanced by the separation of psychological from educational issues in various levels of theory and practice related to child development, advocacy and protection, serve

as barriers for change in child welfare practice, research and policy; b) the vast transformative potential of the cultural-historical theory of activity and critical social theory and pedagogy in overcoming the pitfalls in bringing about social change, d) the fundamental role of ideals of social justice and equality supported by a dialectical historical view of human development in orienting theory, research and practice.

In consonance with critiques stemming from feminist, post-modern, post-structuralist and cultural-historical perspectives, I argue that many traditional psychological perspectives corroborate inadequate assumptions about human development that attribute developmental outcomes primarily to intrinsic psychological characteristics, such as individual efforts and biologically constrained intellectual capacity. Drawing on theories that emphasize the contextual and situated nature of human development, I critically examine how traditional psychological perspectives have, explicitly or implicitly, contributed to the pitfalls of child welfare policy, practice and research by legitimizing a pathological view of children and adolescents living in difficult and oppressive circumstances. Based on a participatory action research approach, this study aims at contributing to institutional reform by demonstrating how an emphasis on the constitutive role of teaching and learning in human development (Vygotsky, 1978) associated with a critical educational perspective (Freire, 1970) can bring about institutional transformation and social change.

As is well known, the U.S. child welfare system is in a deep crisis (Cohen, 2005; Hutchison, Dattalo, & Rodwell, 1994). My contention is that despite all the

attempts that have been taken at reforming the system, child welfare policy and practice is still dominated by a deficit or pathological view of child development in conditions of adversity. These views, supported by traditional theories of human development, serve as impediments to the transformation and improvement of child welfare practice. This problem is particularly acute in the field of residential care where the pitfalls of the system are glaring and manifested in a myriad of problems encountered by youth, ranging from low academic achievement to delinquent behavior and criminal involvement. In general, such problems are framed as “psychological disorders” or “disturbances” - e.g., behavioral problems, conduct disorders, emotional disturbances, etc. (Carman, Dorta, Kon, Martin, & Zarrilli, 2004; Hodges, Hernandez, & Nesman, 2003; Pazaratz, 1998).

Researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers focus almost exclusively on phenomena purportedly located at the individual level and neglect how social practices and individual action are mutually constitutive. For example, the fact that children and adolescents have been removed from their homes or have been victims of abuse and neglect is usually interpreted as putting them to be at risk for psychological disturbances. Consequently, a great deal of child welfare practices consists of providing those youth with clinical services at varying levels, from counseling and anger management to psychotherapy and psychiatric intervention through medication and inpatient treatment. In this framework, institutional aspects, such as poor quality of residential care, especially manifested in poor staff-resident interactions, are usually not addressed. Without consideration of how child and adolescent development are inextricably linked

with societal practices important power issues that cut across the child welfare system will remain unexamined. This seems to perpetuate a cycle in which the victims, children and adolescents, are blamed, in the form of diagnostics and labels, for their limited achievement and precarious well-being. For instance, lack of a strong motivation for academic work, and poor academic achievement, are considered as intrinsic characteristics of individual children. This vicious circle, in which children's poor developmental outcomes reinforce the notion of their limited potential, seriously constrains the possibility of creating alternative interventions.

Fortunately many researchers and scholars have pointed out the shortcomings that stem from such deficit views that have informed child welfare practice and have proposed alternative ways for understanding and helping children and adolescents living in substitute care. Through theory-based applied research, important advances have been brought forth, which can be traced to changes in the underlying assumptions about human development. Chief among those changes is the expansion of the theoretical horizon by including social interactions into accounts of individual development, which have had a profound impact in improving child welfare research and policy (Polsky, 2003; Pardeck, 2002). For example, through forty years of research, Howard Polsky (1962) has made an important contribution by critically examining the detrimental impact of custodialism in residential care and proposing the creation of a residential community in its stead.

In consonance with Polsky, other authors have focused on issues concerning the quality of care provided by staff on developmental outcomes (Pazaratz, 2003; Handwerk, Friman, Mott, & Stairs, 1998). Similarly, many have called for more democratic and less authoritarian institutional practices (Pardeck, 2001). However, the literature on child welfare and residential care is heavily influenced by a psychiatric perspective in which developmental theorizing is typically ignored. Recently, this issue has caught the attention of some authors who have recently called for adopting developmental principles as guidelines for institutional change in child welfare practices (Melpignano, & Collins, 2003). This approach has been rooted in the emerging positive youth development perspective (Seligman, M. & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Larson, 2000). Positive psychologists urge that we move away from deficits and pathology to focus on the strengths of young people (Lerner, R., Dowling, E., & Anderson, P. 2003). Despite all those efforts, however, much remains to be explored and understood in child welfare research and youth development, as demonstrated by vague theoretical accounts that do not provide clear principles or mechanisms of developmental change, contradictory research findings, conflicting assumptions and opinions about children's needs, and the eclecticism of institutional practices that fail to unambiguously support child and adolescent development. The inadequacy of developmental perspectives that inform child welfare practice and policy is evident in the developmental expectations for youth in residential care- and for youth in general. The current ideology of the child welfare system regards youth in substitute care as having, or being at risk for, emotional disturbances

that are commonly associated with behavioral issues. It is not surprising that it is those practices to which residents are frequently referred (often therapy or counseling). Hence, the view of child and adolescent development that emerges within, and is supported by, such institutional settings is very limited. In general, educational issues are considered in isolation from psychological ones, both in the child welfare literature and in institutional practices. This orientation toward prevention and treatment of psychological problems drastically limits the horizon of possibilities for those youth. By focusing on behavioral and emotional issues, child welfare practice neglects the role of teaching and learning in youth development, not unlike traditional psychological and developmental theories. As a consequence, academic achievement, one of the stated goals for youth in the child welfare system, is more of a mirage than a reality. This is reflected in practice insofar as preparing those children for college and providing them with high quality education, are virtually never spelled out as attainable goals. Instead, the focus is on attaining life skills, or 'independent living skills', and vocational training to guarantee economic self-sufficiency (Carman, Dorta, Kon, Martin, & Zarrilli, 2004; Melpignano, & Collins, 2003; Thompson, et. al., 1996). It is not surprising that children growing up in the system are vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes.

The point of departure for this research is the need to offer an alternative conceptualization of child and adolescent development in order to address the pressing issue of child welfare reform. Drawing on the cultural-historical theory of activity, I will employ the notion of open-ended, dynamical, and hierarchically

integrated activity systems as an analytical tool to promote and account for child and adolescent development in institutional context. A key aspect of this approach is the focus on tool-mediated human action, which emphasizes both the situated nature of human development and the fundamental role of human agency in social practices. This study is based on my work as a consultant for a group home for boys where I worked for over three years. This practical work gave me an opportunity to contribute to institutional reform and to promote child and adolescent development by creating conditions for the resolution of contradictions in institutional practices through the implementation of collaborative activities that have expanded the activity system of the group home. This process will be described in greater detail in the analysis section where I discuss how I used the concept of open-ended dynamical activity systems as a tool to coordinate theory and practice and to structure my method and the analysis of the results.

Methodologically, this research followed a participatory action approach in which the researcher, the staff, and the children were simultaneously the subjects and the objects of the study. A central concern of my method was to implement collaborative learning activities that would provide the boys with access to a wide range of cultural tools, such as theoretical concepts in the natural and the social sciences, history, mathematics, critical perspectives, and artistic works, such as novels and films. In this process I continuously observed and evaluated the developmental impact of such tools as the boys' contribution to institutional practices changed as they appropriated such tools and as their

interests and motivation shifted. In other words, this study was based on creating zones of proximal development in order to catalyze institutional change and youth development. One important result of my practical work was my own learning experience in how to introduce cultural tools within the zone of proximal development of the boys (and of the institution).

This research also emphasizes how knowledge and action are blended inasmuch it results in knowledge for improving social practices. In this sense, the methods and the results of this study are dialectically connected and co-evolved. Following Vygotsky, this is a study of individual and institutional transformation and it involved the ongoing creation of tools to enable such transformations. This study strives to overcome the radical distinction between theory and practice in an attempt to produce and apply theory as part of the overall search for transformative knowledge. By drawing on a situated and activity-based approach this study emphasizes a) the blending of knowledge and action, b) the mutual constitution of individual development and social practices, and c) the centrality of teaching and learning in creating social change. This research explores how these theoretical perspectives offer conceptual tools to orient research in the pursuit of ideals of equality and social justice by organizing institutional practices to fulfill these goals.

In sum, the aim of this research is twofold. On the one hand, it extends psychological and educational perspectives, namely, Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory and critical pedagogy, respectively, to address institutional reform in the child welfare system. On the other hand, it has practical

relevance in that it generates knowledge about how to create optimal developmental conditions for adolescents living under State custody in residential programs. In this regard, this study has close affinity with the now burgeoning field of applied developmental science that seeks to integrate developmental research with social practice, such as policymaking and program development and reform, in order to serve as a means to collaborate with communities and directly contribute to social justice. This practical work has given me an invaluable opportunity to put theoretical principles to the test of practice as it focuses on processes of mutual transformation between people and their contexts and on the central role of the researcher as an agent of social change. This study focuses on how residential care, a critical component of the child welfare system, can be dramatically improved if Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology and critical social theory and pedagogy are adopted as guidelines for alternative policies and interventions.

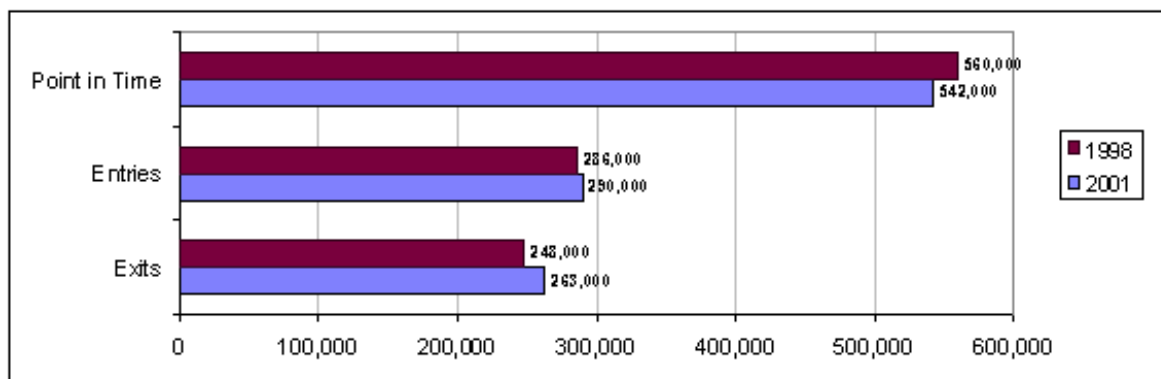
2. Rationale for this Study

2.1. Child welfare practice in crisis: poor conceptualizations of child development as impediments to change (including psychological practices and discourses)

According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, the foster care population has nearly doubled since the mid-1980s, leading to dramatic increases in federal foster care expenditures. The child protective system, for instance, receives about two million reports of child abuse and neglect each year involving about three million children. Nearly a million of these children are found to be maltreated. More than half of them are found to be victims of neglect (Cohen, 2003). The Urban Institute estimates that in fiscal year 2000 total spending (Federal, State, and local) for out-of-home care was at least \$9.1 billion (Bess, 2002). Today, over half a million children are in foster care (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse) and many of them have been in the system for years (GAO, 1999). The number of children entering the system is still growing with a gap of about thirty thousand more children entering than exiting the system between 1998 and 2001 (Graph 1). In 2001 about 290, 000 children entered the foster care system. Garbarino and Eckenrode (1997) point out to a strong relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect that results into a high numbers of children in foster care. This is even more troubling considering that poverty is increasing in many states in the U.S. For example, according to the most recent Census data, from 2000 to 2003, there was a 40.7 percent

increase in the percent of poor families who are raising children under five years of age in New Jersey. In that state, the number of uninsured children increased 51 percent from 1999 to 2003.

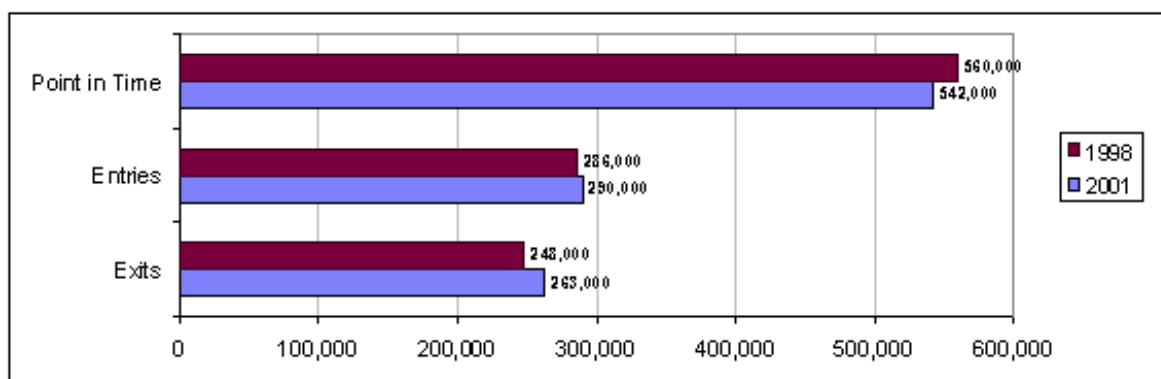
Graph 1. Number of children in foster care in year 1998 and 2001.



Source: NAIC (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse) (2003). Foster Care National Statistics. www.calib.com/nccanch

In 2001 almost half of the children (48 %) in 2001) were placed in foster family homes and about twenty percent (18%) were placed in group homes or institutions. Other types of placement included relative foster homes (24%), pre-adoptive homes (4%), and others (6%), (Graph 2).

Graph 2. Percentage of children by type of foster care placement in 1998 and 2001.

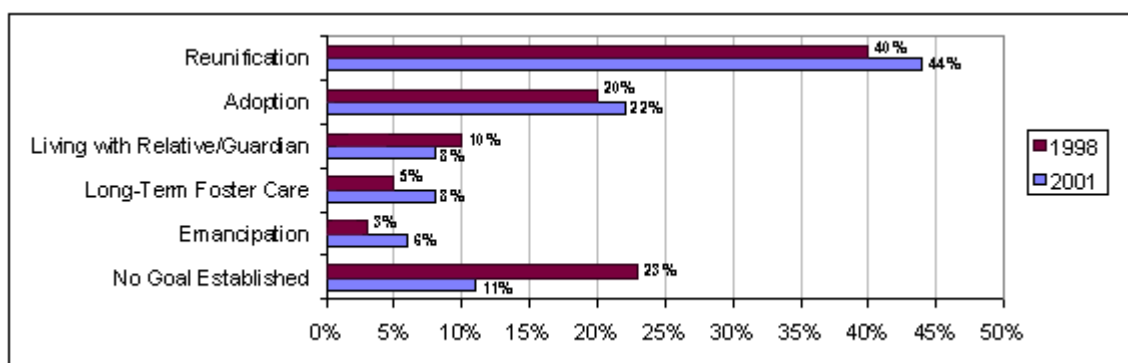


Source: NAIC (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse) (2003). Foster Care National Statistics. www.calib.com/nccanch

Not only is the number of children in substitute care staggering, the length of time those children stay in out-of-home placement is also high. Many of them

stay long enough to stay in the system until they age out. According the U.S. General Accounting Office (1999), twenty thousand (20,000) adolescents leave the foster care system each year and are expected live independently. The graph 3 presents the percentage of foster care children by their permanency goals in 1998 and 2001.

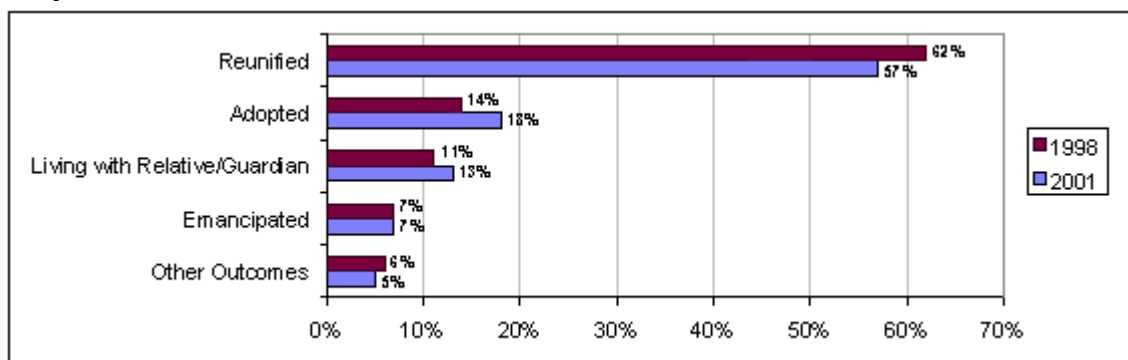
Graph 3. Permanency of foster care children in percentage in 1998 and 2001.



Source: NAIC (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse) (2003). Foster Care National Statistics. www.calib.com/nccanch

Graph 4 illustrates what was the actual placement of children who exited the foster care system in 1998 and 2001. In 2001 57 percent of children who exited foster care were reunified and 18 percent of children who exited foster care were adopted, 13 percent of children who exited foster care were living with a relative or guardian, 7 percent of children who exited foster care were emancipated.

Graph 4. Placement of foster care children in 1998 and 2001.



Source: NAIC (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse) (2003). Foster Care National Statistics. www.calib.com/nccanch

Before I describe the current structure of the child welfare system, I will briefly present a historical perspective on child protective services as reported by Patricia Schene (1998). According to her, “the history of child protection in the United States is marked by a continuing, unresolved tension between the aim of rescuing children from abusive homes and that of strengthening the care their families can provide” (p.23). Moreover, Schene explains that the formal system through which American society responds to child abuse and neglect, currently a largely governmental one, was in the past performed by the leaders for vulnerable children in private child advocacy and child welfare agencies. By the early twentieth century more than 300 hundred societies for the prevention of cruelty to children were active in many cities in the Northeast and Midwest as part of the American Humane Association. These private societies received public and private funds and carried out the following functions: investigation of reports of child abuse and neglect, filing complaints against the perpetrators in court, and aided the courts in the prosecution of those complaints. Some even had police powers and could take the custody of children. However, Schene argues that during the mid-twentieth century, the emphasis shifted in the eye of

professionals from law enforcement to rehabilitation through social services. Gradually, states, counties, and municipalities began to take over the responsibility for child protection. The year 1935 marks the first initiative of the federal government in the child welfare sphere by passing a law that established the Aid to Dependent Children program that offered cash assistance to help poor, single mothers to care for their children instead of losing their custody. Furthermore, that legislation included limited federal funding to encourage states to provide protective and preventing services to children. However, Schene explains that states actually used those funds to pay for foster care, not to provide supportive services to families who maintained custody of their children. By the 1960's the issue of child abuse and neglect had gained national importance and in 1974 a federal law was enacted, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), that encouraged states to pass laws requiring the identification of children in need of protection and the investigation of reports of maltreatment. The law also established standards for receiving and responding to such reports. Even though future legislation increased funding for states to address child maltreatment and provide social services, Schene contends that "by the end of the decade, three-fourths of all child welfare monies were devoted to foster care rather than to services to support and preserve families" (p.29). From 1976 to 1993 the number of reports grew exponentially (more than 347%) with a large number of children entering foster care, being moved from home to home, and remaining in the system for a very long time. In this context, child protective agencies have been under intense criticism for interfering

unnecessarily in families while only few resources for social services are available. Despite sweeping reforms instantiated by the federal government in public laws (e.g., the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the Family Preservation and Family Support Program of 1993) intended to prevent out-of-home placement, the child welfare system has continued to focus on providing substitute care for children whose parents are unable or unwilling to care for them. Changes in legislation also strengthened the links among investigatory Child protective services, child welfare agencies, and the juvenile courts. In the following paragraph I will review how the system of child protection currently works.

As Schene (1998) clarifies, the term child protective services most commonly refers to a particular agency within a public department of social services whose functions include “receiving, screening, and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect from the community to determine if they meet the criteria defining maltreatment set out in state statute and policy. Thus, state child welfare departments are responsible for 1) identifying and responding to child abuse and neglect, 2) helping families resolve their problems so they can keep or regain custody of their children, and 3) providing substitute living arrangements in foster care. The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (2003) describes the child welfare system as a complex group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families to successfully care for their children, whose specific procedures vary widely by state. The system does not function as

a single entity and many organizations in different communities work together to with the purported goals to strengthen families and keep children safe. Child protective services (CPS) often contract and collaborate with private child welfare agencies and community-based organizations to provide services to families, such as in-home (e.g., family preservation) services, foster care, residential treatment, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, parenting skills classes, employment assistance, and financial or housing assistance. Reports of abuse or neglect that warrant investigation are assigned to a CPS case worker who makes decisions regarding the validity of the allegations, the identity of the perpetrator, and the condition of the children living in the home. The case worker also determines whether further agencies must be recruited to monitor and/or provide services to the family, whether children (or the perpetrator) must be removed, and whether law enforcement and the courts need to be involved.

Most commonly children enter the system either because of abuse and neglect, which is closely associated with parental alcohol and drug use, or due to 'behavior problems' that have become unmanageable to their families or caregivers. Commonly, these two issues are associated, even though the literature on 'troubled youth' or on emotional/behavioral disturbance typically treat family issues as risk factors that might have played a distal role in youth psychopathology. Thus, even though attempts at reforming the child welfare system have called for a greater involvement of the family in treating youth with emotional/behavioral disturbances, the locus of the disorder is still situated within individual youths. The focus on mental pathology has been strengthened in the

last two decades as psychiatric discourses and investigative practices gained prominence over child welfare practice, research, and policy. In this context, a child's problematic family experience, such as abuse and/or neglect, is interpreted as a risk factor for mental disorders.

As the historical overview of the child protective system reveals, the main concern is purportedly with children's safety and physical and socio-emotional well-being. Thus, whenever a child's safety is deemed by CPS case workers as being in jeopardy, a myriad of out-of-home foster placements must be considered, including family homes (both relative and nonrelative), private for-profit or nonprofit childcare facilities, or public childcare institution. In many states, all of these placements together are referred to as "substitute care." The type of placement for children removed from their families is contingent on an assessment of their risk, usually by child welfare staff but sometimes also by the court. As Cohen states, child welfare caseworkers act as decision makers, rather than as service providers. Their decisions, framed by laws, policies, and procedures, are based on assessment of the family's strengths, needs, resources, and risks (Cohen, 2003). Thus, depending on risk assessment, age, and available placement options, a continuum of care system is mobilized to protect children from abuse and neglect. Due to a growing emphasis on mental pathology for youth "at-risk", current child protective practice and policy are based on the principle of providing a full range of mental health services to children and their families (Stroul, 2003; England & Cole, 1992). Indeed, following the system-of-care program theory (Stroul & Friedman, 1986), the

federal Center for Mental Health Services at the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration has supported the Comprehensive Community Mental Health for Children and Their Families Program that has established systems of care for mental health services in 67 communities throughout the United States (Manteuffel, Stephens, & Santiago, 2002). According to the system-of-care approach, children with severe emotional disturbance need access to a wide array of community-based services that center on their individual needs, include their family in treatment planning and delivery, and provide services in a culturally competent manner. Furthermore, those children should be placed in the least restrictive setting necessary to meet the needs of youth and their family (Dore, Wilkinson, & Sonis, 1992).

Within the discursive framework of protecting children from harm, to describe the consequences of abuse and neglect follows as the next priority so that the necessary mental health services can be provided to those children (Armstrong & Evans, 1992, 1998; Gottlieb, Reid, Fortune, & Walters, 1999; Kendall-Taskett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Saxe, Cross, & Silverman, 1988). Therefore, the child welfare literature can be characterized by narratives of child protection geared towards identifying “at-risk children” in order to prevent and treat mental health issues associated with abuse and neglect. For example Sedlak & Broadhurst (1996), report that most of the children and adolescents in out-of-home placements have not known a long-term, nurturing, stable environment, but instead have experienced only repeated abuse and prolonged neglect. These authors conclude that maltreated children’s developmental

trajectory is disproportionately compromised and leads to disproportionate involvement in the mental health, juvenile justice, adult criminal justice, and social service systems. Similarly, Nicholas, Roberts & Wurr (2003) suggest that residents of children's homes in the U. K. constitute a particularly vulnerable group who are known to have high rates of mental health problems and limited access to services. According to their review, these children have a higher number of risk factors predisposing them to mental health problems, ranging from conduct to depressive and anxiety disorders that are common among those children, particularly for those placed in residential out-of-home facilities. Likewise, recent research in the field of social work has called attention to what has been identified as the vulnerability of this population to poor outcomes (GAO, 1999). Thus, a subtle shift of focus occurs as the need to protect children becomes interwoven with prevention of mental disorders. Consequently, an emphasis on clinical aspects seems justified.

The growing focus on mental health has also entailed a need to replace imprecise, lay terminology and classification practices by seemingly more scientific ones, which resulted in the adoption of psychiatric diagnostics. For instance, in the 1990's several authors in the social work and mental health literature called for increased attention to psychological assessment of youth while entering care. Friman (1996), for example, a psychologist for Father Flanagan's Boys' Home, complained that youths entering care are typically described with vague, non-technical terms such as delinquent, troubled or neglected. In that institution more than 1,000 interviews conducted based on a

diagnostic interview procedure developed by the National Institute of Mental Health revealed that the average youth meets criteria for at least three diagnostic and statistical manual (DSM) diagnoses and displays a pattern of psychiatric symptoms not significantly different from a comparison group, especially in the area of anxiety disorders. The author reports how those findings were used to begin modifying treatment programs to meet what he refers to “heretofore unknown clinical issues” (1996, p. 3). Similarly, others have suggested that children with serious emotional disturbance (SED) who may not have been identified as such may not be receiving appropriate services such as mental health and social services (Knitzer, 1993; McIntyre, 1993). For instance, Pumariega, Johnson, and Sheridan (1995) conducted a study in five large residential group homes in South Carolina and found significantly higher levels of emotional disturbance and substance abuse problems in this population. According to them, their findings support the importance of addressing the clinical needs of youth in these programs, which they argue is not happening due to lack of sufficient resources to provide active therapeutic programs. As these authors suggest, mental health has become the main concern, as evidenced by the growing literature on youth with emotional and behavioral problems. From this perspective, the movement toward adopting more ‘professional’ terminology has been highly successful. Today, a decade later, the discourses and investigative practices on what previously referred to as ‘troubled’ or ‘disruptive’ youngsters and adolescents (e.g., Friman, Toner, Soper, & Sinclair, 1996; Hoagwood & Cunningham, 1992) have been replaced by the more scientific-

sounding terms severe emotional and behavioral disorders (e.g., Breland-Noble, Farmer, Dubs, Potter, & Burns, 2005; Burns & Hoagwood, 2002; Epstein, Kutash & Duchnowski, 2005). Indeed, the literature on systems of care that emerged in the past decade is so dominated by a psychiatric orientation, that psychological disorders are the point of departure for most studies. This means that a developmental perspective is lacking and the origins of 'troubled behavior' is not as relevant and severe emotional and/or behavioral disturbances are taken to be the cause of out-of-home placement (e.g., Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002; Lourie, 2003; Stroul, 2003). From a critical perspective however, this change in discourse and research practices has clear drawbacks as it reinforces the notion that there is something intrinsically problematic about those youths. Furthermore, this focus on mental health virtually excludes attention to teaching and learning processes from developmental accounts, which I contend creates a vicious circle by limiting the developmental opportunities to youth in out-of-home placements. As an instantiation of this problem, I will describe in the results section how educational and mental health practices compete in very concrete terms for youth's time and effort as appointments for mental health services invariably take place in the after school hours.

As my review suggests, such narratives of child protection associated with mental health, rooted in developmental perspectives that ultimately inform and shape child welfare practice, are pervasive in the social service and literature. It is widely available in official publications of U.S. Children's Bureau, such as the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information. These are

services of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, that publish information on programs, research, legislation, and statistics in order to connect professionals and concerned citizens to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. Through its comprehensive set of publications, which are all available online, it offers guidelines for child welfare practices based on scientific frameworks that are also available. For example, in 1994 its User Manual Series published the paper 'Treatment for Abused and Neglected Children: Infancy to Age 18' (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Urquiza, 1994). This publication consists of a compilation of psychological perspectives that account for child and adolescent development in terms of major achievements/milestones, which are categorized in different developmental areas, namely, intrapersonal development, interpersonal development, physical development, sexual development, and behavioral conduct development. The article, prepared by a child clinical psychologist and a licensed clinical social worker, depicts child development, much the same way as traditional developmental theories; i.e., as a collection of independently developing areas without integrating them into a coherent whole, unitary process. The goal is to provide professionals and interested citizens with an understanding of child and adolescent development with a focus on psychopathology so that the consequences of child abuse and neglect can be recognized and addressed, including assessment of maltreatment, the

therapeutic process and the role of the therapist, treatment issues, specialized interventions, and case management.

In this study I aim to reveal how gaps and contradictions in child welfare discourses and practices are closely tied to inadequate assumptions about child and adolescent development that result in framing as pathologies the problems and difficulties faced by those children. At a very general level, many developmental theories lend themselves to a narrow and ill-conceived focus on individual children as the unit of analysis and the locus from where emanate all their psychological phenomena (their personality, emotions, intelligence, behavior, etc.). As Glick points out (1995), developmental theories tend to describe and explain child development without reflecting on how theoretically informed their understanding of children is. Assumptions about child development are embodied in what aspects of child development theories focus on and what is discarded from analysis. According to him, “since “the child” is a compelling natural kind, seeming to provide the conceptual target for theory in a straightforward way, it is easy to forget that the child in question is a “theorized child” depicted and interrogated within the framework of the conceptual topicalization moves that theories make” (p.359). Glick’s analysis is extremely relevant to a critical examination of how child welfare practices have been supported and legitimized by developmental theories. The developmental theories that have informed child welfare practices conspicuously forget about or eliminate the contextual, situated and relational nature of human development, which opens the door for misconceptions about youth development.

Chief among developmental misconceptions is the pathologization of children growing up in adversity. As Polsky (2003) contends, “A powerful professional establishment has emerged in the United States based on pathologizing children and youth who cannot be raised by their families and/or have gotten in trouble with the law. The prevailing viewpoint is that children in trouble suffer from psychopathology and therefore need psychotherapy, of which today there are a plethora of different schools”, (p.117). Therapeutic services are emphasized in the ‘treatment’ of children’s problems. The foster care system is set up in a way that any problem related to a child gets to be framed as a clinical issue. Despite acknowledging the influence of dysfunctional developing contexts (abusive or neglecting families and institutions), once a child displays a problem, it is treated as a clinical condition. Counseling and/or therapy are considered the appropriate approach. Issues of learning and development are ubiquitously absent in the literature. Thus, children’s development is conceptualized in light of deviations from normative development and, to a large extent, this pathological frame of reference essentializes behavioral problems. Furthermore, a myriad of psychological disturbances are diagnosed and treated as somewhat independent processes. Even though their same causal links are usually recognized, such disturbances are addressed as self-contained and relatively insular processes. Not uncommonly children are referred to multiple forms of treatment, which further fragments the approach to the child’s issues. Completely absent is a focus on the systemic interrelations among the psychological processes underpinning such constructs as psychological disorders and disturbances.

I will now focus on residential care as a particular type of service in the continuum of care of the child welfare system. Such institutional settings are mainly devoted to treating youth and correcting their problems, which are understood to be family based (Morgan, P., 2006). There are two types of residential care placements, namely, residential treatment centers and group homes. The former is defined as a “24 hour facility for seriously emotionally disturbed children, which offers special education and therapy, and is not defined as a hospital” (Carman, Dorta, Kon, Martin, & Zarrilli, 2004, p. 381). Residential treatment centers fall under the more restrictive side of the continuum of care and they offer in-home educational programs. Such treatment centers are reserved for youth with serious ‘behavioral problems’ or those categorized as suffering from severe emotional disturbance (SED). In contrast, residential group homes are less restrictive and need not suffer from severe ‘behavioral’ or ‘emotional’ problems. Typically, youth in these programs attend public schools in their neighborhoods and use mental health services offered in their local communities, as reported by Pumariega, Johnson, and Sheridan (1995). These authors suggest that residential group homes are progressively more important components of the system of mental health care for children and adolescents as they are “increasingly being used as either a step-down or even an alternative to psychiatric hospitalization or residential treatment as a result of the increasing cost and restriction of such care and the shift to more acute model of psychiatric hospitalization” (p. 427), which suggests that many youth entering such programs may have high levels of emotional disturbance. Despite the differences in

intensity and location of services provided to youth in group homes and residential treatment centers, the approach is consistent with the child welfare practice in general. As I outlined above, the focus of the services provided to children falls on mental health and several psychological perspectives have informed child practice and research, ranging from behaviorism, to cognitive approaches, psychodynamics, or, not uncommonly, eclectic combinations of these.

Notwithstanding a growing focus in the literature on how institutional social interactions – particularly staff-youth interactions- contribute to successful outcomes in group care (Pazaratz, 2000), the developmental challenges that many of those children and adolescents face, such as low academic achievement and transgression of institutional rules and regulations, are still commonly treated as mental health issues and often result in the diagnosis of psychological disorders (Carman, Dorta, Kon, Martin, & Zarrilli, 2004; Rosen, M., 1998, Landrum & Singh, 1995,). As many adolescents are labeled as emotionally and/or behaviorally disturbed, poor developmental outcomes are framed as psychological disorders possessed by the individuals, which further reinforce erroneous assumptions about their limited potential that are consistently found in the psychological, psychiatric, and social work literature on the U.S. child welfare system. Not surprisingly, youth's progress in the system is followed by treatment plans, a term that clearly indicates a pathological view of youth growing up in the child welfare system.

Most of the literature on children and adolescents under the care of the welfare system consists of social work, counseling and clinical psychology or psychiatric research. In the social work literature an explicit discussion of theoretical accounts of development was virtually inexistent until very recently. As I already noted, the psychology literature emphasizes acquisition and treatment of mental health disturbances, with different theoretical orientations. In reviewing the literature I encountered the following genres: 1) therapeutic interventions for treating children, often combining cognitive and behavioral therapy, but also some psychodynamic approaches 2) training youth workers, 3) prevention of delinquency by attending to risk factors, 4) developing life skills and preparing for independent living. The latter is part of the trend that emerged in the past decade toward assessing the well-being of youth who age out of the system, which I will review later. Implicitly or explicitly, however, models of human development inform research and theory. Generally, one finds a predominant type of research with a pragmatic orientation toward intervening in an identified variable, invariably a psychological construct, which brings about positive change in the chosen variable as a result.

For example, Krueger & Hansen (1987) identify low self-concept as a determinant of behavior. According to them, those who are unable to cope with the changes and problems of adolescence tend to develop self-concepts and, consequently, behaviors that conflict with societal norms. In a research conducted in a group home in New York their focus was to raise awareness and self-concept as a means “to develop alternatives to troublesome behavior

patterns.” An important part of their intervention was performed by a tutor who coordinated schoolwork and homework. The researchers report that the tutor is responsible for seeing that projects are completed, that the youths study for exams and that assignments are turned in on time. They also report that “response is generally favorable, since the youths see themselves beginning to succeed in school.” Nonetheless, no further details are provided and the interesting process of how learning activity contributes to overall development is not discussed. Instead, the researchers are interested in documenting positive changes in self-esteem and not in gaining a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the relation between learning and development. There is no consideration of the quality of the instruction the adolescents received, its potential and limitations, and how that affected development. Attention to how teaching and learning contributes to youth development is glaringly lacking in the child welfare literature, although many have pointed out the causal link between poor academic performance and antisocial behavior in children- together with ineffective parenting and identification with a deviant peer group (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989, Loeber & Dishion, 1983).

As a norm, studies on residential care do not report academic performance outcomes, but those children’s low academic achievement is almost a truism. The few studies that address educational needs are mostly concerned with residential treatment centers. Those studies tend to focus on special education for severely emotionally disturbed children. Carman, Dorta, Kon, Martin, & Zarrilli (2004) reviewed the educational challenges of residential

programs. The main issue for them seems to be providing instruction without compromising their youths' emotional needs. The authors propose the creation of a balanced milieu whose therapeutic and educational components should mirror each other (p.386). They identified two educational approaches to teaching emotionally disturbed children in residential care. First, a common view that children should only "be away from the mainstream" to manage the emotional problems (386). In this educational model the role of the special education teacher is one of the behavioral manager and the development of curriculum and instructions often become only a secondary issue. In the second approach of a balanced milieu they propose that the role of curriculum and instructions change as this educational process is seen as a healing vehicle for children rather than a separate and disconnected process (ibid).

Despite the secondary importance given to teaching and learning in youth development in residential care, the few studies devoted to those issues show significant improvement as a result of emphasizing instruction (Krueger & Hansen, 1987; Thompson, Smith, Osgood, Dowd, Friman, & Daly, 1996). Recently, Edwards & Chard (2000) reported that students with emotional and behavioral disorders in a residential treatment center benefited from a curriculum reform program that established high academic expectations for the residents. The researchers examined the effects of systematic instruction in story elements and narrative summary integrated into an English and history curriculum. They found out that in addition to improvements in summary writing there was a significant association between student academic engagement and teacher

engagement. As a prelude to the discussion of how Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology offers an alternative to the pathological and fragmented accounts of youth development, it is interesting to note how conspicuous the separation of teaching and learning from developmental process is. Even when instruction, conceived as an intervention, produces developmental results, the focus remains on treating pathologies rather than on promoting youth development. To reverse this trend is the rationale and point of departure of this study, which is rooted in the Vygotskian claim about the centrality of teaching and learning in development.

Corroborating the secondary role ascribed to education in youth development in residential care, child welfare practices and discourses emphasize the acquisition of life skills. This is particularly evident in the studies that focus on youth aging out of the system. In an attempt to better understand the characteristics of children who exit the system, Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kayler and Nesmith (2001) interviewed 141 young people before and after they came out of residential care in 1995 and 1996 in Wisconsin. They found out that, while being in care, 92% of them were very or fairly optimistic about their future, and most of them (79%) expected to enter and complete (63%) college. However, the data suggest that their educational goals and future achievements would be limited due to low current academic achievements. For example, 30% of the participants reported that at some point in the past they had failed to complete a grade, and almost 37% reported having been in one or more special educational classes. Half of them had to change schools at least four times since beginning formal education. Although about one fourth of them (26%) scored at or above a

12th grade reading level, almost one third of the (32%) participants were at or below an 8th grade reading level, and the rest of them were classified as “prereading” level. Those researchers also focused on mental health services and they found out that half of their interviewees had received such services. In addition, their study also focused on independent living training and they found that the vast majority of the residents (76%) had been trained in one such area, including money management, food preparation, personal hygiene and health care, finding housing, transportation and employment, educational planning, using community resources, interpersonal skills, legal skills, and parenting. The percentage was even higher (85%) for training in personal health care, job seeking, and decision-making skills.

Rather recently a trend emphasizing children’s rights has emerged in this literature as several studies have attempted to go beyond an exclusive focus on youth by addressing the training of youth workers (Morgan, 2002; Pardeck, 2002; Pazaratz, 2003). These studies are usually rooted in psychodynamic developmental theories (e.g., Dowling, 2004) and criticize the focus on control pervasive in residential care. Most notably, Polsky (2003) focused on the prevalent custodialism in residential facilities whereby control of residents becomes the goal of treatment. According to him, these interventions promote adversarial relationships and power struggles between staff and children in care. In his words, “the custodial model of care is based on the idea that “disturbed” and “deviant” children and youth cannot live and succeed in a normal residential community. This is a myth, which is primarily a product of professional,

organizational, and monetary considerations rather than the true capabilities of children and youth. The custodialism resulting from this myth substitutes the means for the ends forcing institutions to concentrate on control and conformity of residents rather than on their rehabilitation via the creation of a powerful, habitable residential community. Children and youth for the most part are regarded as irredeemable and custodians are scapegoated as culprits. (p. 7).

Polsky & Berger (2003) offered a residential habilitative community as the antidote for custodialism, which should serve as “the main healer and a capability building environment that promotes the mental and physical health, skills, values, inspiration and responsibility for continuing self- and – community growth and positive development by students and staff” (p. 7). His model is based on dialogue among all members of the community in the form of ongoing discussions and debates. Polsky’s approach toward community building is a major step forward in residential care as it spotlights how contextual aspects and patterns of social interactions in residential care are constitutive of the problems faced by youth. His approach avoids the typical deficit of pathological view of youth in residential care and thus it avoids blaming the victims. Instead, Polsky places greater responsibility on the institution to create favorable conditions for youth development. Yet, he pays little attention to the actual process of child and youth development apart from a focus on reducing deviant behavior and eliminating the negative influence of the peer culture. In this sense, Polsky’s approach falls short of integrating teaching-and-learning and development.

In sum, the fragmentation of youth development in separate areas is pervasive in the child welfare literature and is manifest in the separation of educational and psychological services offered to youth. Following a Vygotskian perspective I argue that bringing teaching-and-learning processes to the center of developmental accounts adds an essential piece that allows for a reconceptualization of child welfare practices and policy.

2.2. Developmental principles: implications for child welfare policies and programs

As I already mentioned, some recent scholarly work addressing the crisis in the child welfare system has brought to the fore the importance of a developmental approach to reform child welfare practices. Melpignano & Collins (2003) wrote about infusing youth development principles in child welfare practice. Together with other authors (e.g., Delgado 2002, Seita, 2000) their perspective is rooted in the emerging field of positive psychology (Lerner, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). According to the National Collaboration for Youth (1999), positive youth development is a “process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent” (cited in Melpignano & Collins, 2003, p. 160). The proposed shift towards such principles is definitely a step forward that emphasizes that youth in substitute

care have the same needs and hopes as other youth and must be respected in actively making decisions for their future. As they point out, “state agencies have legal responsibility for youths in their care and, thus, real power, which may conflict with empowerment strategies (ibid. p.160). In order to bring knowledge about child and adolescent development into child welfare practice they conducted a Delphi survey of experts to generate suggestions for training welfare workers and potential policy approaches to change in the child welfare system. One of the strongest elicited and rated responses from the group of experts surveyed was to bring developmental principles into placement (substitute care). Many respondents addressed the need to think about positive development, which means shifting the focus away from control and compliance. The following is a list of the most important topics identified by the experts: 1) developing youth’s self and interpersonal skills (e.g., self-esteem, conflict resolution, problem solving), 2) developing trusting relationships with youth, 3) transition planning/goal attainment: education, employment, housing, etc., 4) developing support systems for youth, 5) life skills for youth, and 6) principles of positive development. Next, the experts rated the feasibility of what the child welfare system can do to support youth. The first few topics rated were: 1) train youth in life skills, help youth develop relationships/interpersonal connections, and support educational and vocational training. Paradoxically, education is both emphasized and marginalized insofar as the quality of education and its impact on youth development is completely absent. For example, the experts consulted suggested training youth workers to overcome internal barriers to educational

achievement, identify educational options/steps to educational attainment, conduct educational assessments, and set educational goals with youth.

However, attention to youth education is considered one among other competing aspects and thus teaching-and-learning is not viewed as constitutive of youth development. Next, I will briefly review the main tenets of positive psychology that is beginning to influence child welfare research and policy.

Positive psychology is concerned with changing the focus in psychology away from pathology and deficit views and towards the fulfilled individual and the thriving community (Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, 2000). According to Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson (2003), this emerging perspective emphasizes the strengths present within all young people and that youth be viewed as resources to be developed. Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson (2002) explain that this new vision has only come about after an arduous scientific path against an antithetical theoretical approach that excluded deviant behavior from principles of basic developmental processes, which split basic from applied science. Moreover, this pitfall involved other splits, such as between individual and context, organism and environment, etc. Positive psychology, which is closely associated with applied developmental science, calls for an understanding of the relational nature of development. Larson (2000), for example, argues that developmental psychology has not neglected the positive, given that development is a process of growth and increasing competence. However, in regards to social and emotional development, negative aspects have been emphasized. As he points out “we have a burgeoning field of psychopathology but have a more diffuse

body of research on the pathways whereby children and adolescents become motivated, directed, socially competent, compassionate, and psychologically vigorous adults” (p. 170). In this framework the malaise affecting American adolescents, characterized by boredom, alienation, and disconnection from meaningful challenge are not viewed as signs of psychopathology, but rather as signs of deficiency in positive development (ibid.) Likewise, issues ranging from drug use and teen pregnancy to school dropout are manifestations of the absence of engagement in a positive life trajectory. The author claims “many youth do their schoolwork, comply with their parents, hang out with their friends, and get through the day but are not invested in paths into the future that excite them or feel like they originate from within” (ibid). For him, the central question of youth development is “how to light adolescents’ fires”.

Similar to Csikszentmihaly’s work on flow, which focuses on the quality of experience while engaging in different activities, Larson focuses on activities as the contexts of adolescents’ daily experience through which initiative is instantiated. The latter is a core construct for him, which is related to capacity for agency or autonomous action and is also a central requirement for other aspects of positive development, namely, creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement. Larson defines initiative as the ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal. It involves three crucial aspects: intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement with the environment, and the latter must occur over time- a temporal arc of effort toward a goal. Larson examines different activities vis-à-vis their role as supporting the development of

initiative. He concludes that the great majority of adolescents spend their time in two opposite experiential situations. “In schoolwork, they experience concentration and challenge without being intrinsically motivated. In most leisure, including TV watching and interacting with friends, they experience intrinsic motivation but not in a context of concentration and challenge. Neither provides the combination of both these elements necessary for the experience and development of initiative” (p.5).

Larson points to structured voluntary activities as the type of activity that brings together both intrinsic motivation and concerted attention. The kinds of structured voluntary activities he considers include extracurricular activities and community youth activities as well as structured activities that youth participate in on their own, such as hobbies and sports. Despite being voluntary, these activities involve some structure, meaning that participation occurs within a system involving constraints, rules, and goals. Eccles & Barber (1999), for example, reported positive changes in GPA between 10th and 12th grades correlated with participation in youth structured activities in a large sample of white, middle-class youth. Marsh (1992) found significant relationships, although with small effect sizes, between participation in extracurricular and community activities and positive changes in self-concept, schoolwork, and educational and occupational aspirations from 10th to 12th grade. Larson points out those effects are much larger in research on adventure programs, which consist of intense mental, physical, and interpersonal challenge usually for a period of two to four weeks. Interestingly, Larson concedes that a number of researchers have

demonstrated that there are ways that schoolwork can be made to be intrinsically motivating, as for example in doing independent research projects, which combine the three elements of initiative. However, Larson considers evidence from research evaluating adventure programs as the most compelling because they have demonstrated significant developmental gains in variables related to self-control, such as independence, self-efficacy, assertiveness, internal locus of control, and decision-making, which also relate to his construct of initiative.

One wonders, however, if such positive changes can be generalized to other contexts that demand higher levels of intellectual involvement, such as the critical and abstract thinking characteristic of the theoretical type of generalization required for scientific learning (see Davydov, 1988). In fact, in the next section I review the literature on developmental teaching (Davydov, 1988; Engeström, 1996; Gal'perin, 1989; Hedegaard, 1990; Lompscher, 1999) that has produced robust and unequivocal evidence about the developmental impact of instruction based on teaching theoretical concepts and scientific modes of thinking. Equally missing in Larson's perspective is attention to issues of power and the development of critical consciousness, what Freire (1970) calls *conscientização*. Given that those studies were conducted almost exclusively with white populations, and which have led some to ponder if positive psychology is indeed white psychology (Bacigalupe, 2001), it is not so clear that such voluntary activities would have a strong impact in empowering youth living in conditions of adversity. After all, despite Seligman & Csikszentmihaly's caveat that psychologists know very little about how normal people flourish under benign

conditions (2000), an enormous segment of the American population survives and endures under conditions of adversity, not to mention the greater proportion of worldwide population that faces oppression and poverty in massive scale. Moreover, it is not at all clear how voluntary structured activities in themselves will provide youth growing up in oppressive circumstances with the tools to help them transform those circumstances and motivate them in their struggle for equality and social justice.

In order to overcome such limitations, I explore in this study the potential of activity theory, with its emphasis on developmental teaching, and critical pedagogy to guide professionals in helping youth construct powerful tools for self development and social change in the context of residential care, which serves mainly minority children that come from poor families. In the theoretical foundations section I review the literature that I find most useful in providing guidelines for promoting the development of youth in oppressive arrangements, such as residential institutions. I will further explore how the activity theory account of the social development of motivation and its dynamic unity with cognition encompasses other perspectives in self or identity development in adolescence, such as Csikszentmihaly's approach based on the notion of 'finding flow', and extends them by proposing clearer, more specific mechanisms of self development embodied in transformations of activities.

2.3. The Alternative: bridging education and psychology by placing teaching, learning and development at the center of child welfare practices and policies

In light of the critical review of current and emerging practices, policy and research in the child welfare system, this study is rooted in the activity theoretical approach, which integrates the insights of critical and contextual developmental theories and helps to disclose the intimated connection between traditional developmental assumptions and the shortcomings of child welfare policies and practices that pathologize youth, especially those in substitute care. My goal is to provide further empirical evidence for the practical relevance of the activity theoretical approach, which encompasses positive psychology principles but takes them much further in terms of specifying mechanisms of developmental change. The cultural-historical theory of activity views human development as a process of transformations of goal-directed human activities extended and mediated by culturally-generated and socially-transmitted activities crystallized in cultural tools (Stetsenko, 1999). By emphasizing the role of cultural tools in developmental processes the CHAT approach calls for an understanding of learning as being constitutive of development (*ibid.*). Following Vygotsky's claim that properly organized instruction leads development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning (1978, p.90), many CHAT researchers have emphasized the importance of learning in overall development, with a special focus on the development of the

self, or personality, the term used by CHAT authors such as Leontiev and Gal'perin.

The CHAT view contrasts sharply with the views that inform and shape child welfare policies and practices that typically ignore the role of learning in development. My contention is that a failure to acknowledge the central role of teaching and learning and, consequently, the quality of instruction in human development, drastically limits the potential of child welfare policies and practices to promote development and prepare children for participation in society. Typically, higher educational goals are hijacked by more limited expectations for youth in residential care because of their insufficiently developed academic skills and motivation, which are taken as independent from one another both in theory and practice. In this context, self-sufficiency is the expected outcome for youth in residential care, which is evidenced by the system's focus on independent living skills (or life skills), the development of interpersonal relations, and emphasis on vocational training parallel in detriment to preparing youth to further their education, such as by moving on to college. The cultural-historical activity theoretical approach disavows such inadequate views and gives us a tool to look at development as a social process whereby intrapsychological functions and processes, such as motivation, attention, higher order and critical thinking are viewed as transformations (e.g., internalization) of processes of social interaction and cooperation (inter-psychological). According to Vygotsky, the development of higher psychological functions is less a precondition than the outcome of development. Writing about the scientific concept formation in children, for

instance, Vygotsky (1962) states that the development of concepts presupposes the development of many intellectual functions such as deliberate attention, logical memory, abstraction, and the ability to compare and differentiate. In his view, “the development of the psychological foundations for instruction in basic subjects does not precede instruction but unfolds in a continuous interaction with the contributions of instruction” (p. 101). Thus, the cultural-historical theory of activity views child development as a fundamentally social process in which teaching-and-learning plays a pivotal role as it facilitates the appropriation of higher order cultural tools. As I will detail later on, cultural tools are understood as embodiments of social activities reified in material or symbolic form to which children are introduced in the course of social interactions with adults or peers that have mastered the meaning and function of such tools (Stetsenko, 1998). In the theoretical foundations section I also address how the cultural-historical activity theoretical approach emphasizes contextual aspects in child development, which explicitly expands the analytical focus to include institutional practices as the loci where particular forms social interactions take place and thus shape the activities of children and, consequently, profoundly affect their development.

Importantly, by applying cultural-historical activity theory as a guiding tool, I argue that the poor academic performance of children in residential care does not result from any deficits or psychopathology, but rather on their limited opportunities to engage in activities that promote the appropriation and mastery of the cultural tools expected of them. This permits us to investigate the extent to which the poor quality of the inner city public schools children in group homes

attend have in promoting, or not, their development. As will be discussed further, my involvement as a tutor (among other roles I played as a developmental consultant) for the children in the group home has made me witness the enormous degree of alienation and disconnection those youth experience in their schoolwork. It is not at all surprising that most of them lack the required motivation to perform extremely abstract and, for the most part, meaningless tasks they are given in their schools. To my knowledge, no one has examined how inadequate schooling and low quality of instruction create further impediments for the development of youth in the child welfare system. Therefore, it is a plausible hypothesis, and a good youth advocacy strategy, to assume that poor academic performance and low motivation for formal learning are significant contributors to the commonly reported emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal problems manifested by children and adolescents in substitute care, as opposed to being the consequences of intrinsic personality dispositions or defense mechanisms assumed to have been caused by abuse and neglect. This is not to deny the suffering those children experience as a result of being removed from their homes due to abuse and/or neglect and the corollary emotional issues those experiences elicit. My argument is that having suffered such traumatic experiences should not be utilized as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy that assumes that those children have enduring limitations to learn as a consequence of trauma. As many researchers (e.g., Werner, 1995; Felsman & Vaillant, 1987) indicate, those children's resiliency, to which a myriad of protective factors contribute, is a powerful tool in helping them cope with stress and trauma. As

Emmy Werner explains, “risk factors and stressful environments do not inevitably lead to poor adaptation. It seems clear that, at each stage in an individual’s development from birth to maturity, there is a shifting balance between stressful events that heighten vulnerability and protective factors that enhance resiliency” (Werner, 1989, p. 111). My experience with the boys at the group home suggests that an adult’s commitment to their learning and development, materialized in collaborative activities, creates a powerful context for developing strong interpersonal relationships and for articulating a vision for the future that includes the possibility of not having to stay within the confines of poor neighborhoods and low quality of life.

The profound influence of social processes in personality development has received a great deal of attention in cultural-historical theory. Leontiev (1978) proposes that we understand human life as a dynamic, hierarchically integrated system of activities replacing one another in an endless cycle that entails previous activities being subsumed by emerging activities. This view has inspired a great deal of theoretical advance and research on the formation of learning activity and its role in human development, especially during the school years. According to El’konin (1973), historically evolving and socially organized practice is the main source of psychological development. In this view, institutional practices are the contexts for the development of children’s activities, which characterize children’s relation to the world. As children’s participation in societal practices expands, such as going beyond the family to school, their activities will expand accordingly. In schools, children encounter a system of learning activities

whose object may not be evident to them and for which they may not have developed the necessary motivation. According to Lompscher (1999), learning activity is directed toward the acquisition of societal knowledge and competence. It is performed with the goal of coping with learning tasks, presupposing that special learning objects or domains are constituted, i.e., subject matters that constitute parts of societal knowledge and competence especially selected, shaped and presented for the purpose of acquisition. Similar to all kinds of activity, learning activity is not simply given to the individual, but has to be acquired by the individual as part of the societal culture and experience. However, within the traditional transmission model of teaching, learning goals are presented in a ready-made form to the students, which can severely hinder their development of learning motives. As Lompscher argues, “despite declarations about the learner’s position as an active subject, in most classrooms students are objects of didactic actions aimed at the transmission of knowledge and skills (and norms and values, as well) from the teacher’s head (or from the textbook) to the pupil’s heads” (p. 266). As a result, many children fail to develop the necessary motivation towards formal learning, which could explain poor academic achievement and ‘behavioral problems’ that are common in the school system. The consequences are alarming as evidenced by research showing that poor academic performance is one of the leading predictors of antisocial behavior in children (Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989). Consistent with its contextual view of human development, the CHAT approach emphasizes the central role of the quality of instruction in

developmental outcomes, which I briefly review in the section on theoretical foundations.

This theoretical standpoint calls for a critique of the notion of motivation as an intrinsically individual process. In the context of the practical work in the group home it is critical, among other aspects, to generate knowledge about how to motivate the boys for doing their academic work with enough quality for its results to be meaningful, i.e., in order for children to construct methods for the analysis of problems they encounter in everyday life. The preliminary observations from my work with the boys, framed by the theoretical perspective adopted in this study, suggested that motivation for certain activities (e.g., doing homework, studying, etc.) emerges in the context of social interactions with adults and peers and eventually is internalized by the child. In this sense, motivation is seen to develop along the lines Vygotsky spelled out in his account of the formation of higher psychological functions. In other words, by following Vygotskian activity theory I could observe how motivation has social origins and is mediated by the adult who introduces tools that enable the child to progressively take over the control of the activity. Importantly, these theoretically informed observations bring close together the use of tools and the development of motivation. Consequently, it sheds light on the role of learning in promoting development, including cognitive and, significantly, self processes- or personality in CHAT terminology. This theoretical understanding of child development, articulated in the notion of the self as a leading activity (Stetsenko & Arieviditch, 2004), provides a conceptual basis upon which to elaborate an integrative view of human development without

fragmenting it into separate processes such as learning, development, cognition, motivation, etc. This theoretical approach also encompasses the perspective on emergent motivation championed, among others, by Csikszentmihaly (1990), which I will discuss in the theoretical foundations section, as well as Larson's perspective on the development of initiative. However, the cultural-historical perspective makes the social nature of human development much more explicit by connecting motivation, or initiative, to access to cultural tools.

Specifically, the point of this study was to provide an alternative framework that emphasizes teaching and learning as central processes to create democratic practices and promote human development, which open up new and better possibilities for intervention. In particular, this study focused on revealing and establishing optimal developmental conditions for boys living in a group home by creating opportunities for and with them to appropriate and transform cultural tools and develop new skills necessary to expand their present and future participation in societal practices. In this process novel 'cultural tools' were introduced, which gave rise to new interests and aspirations as individual boys appropriated those tools in the context of their everyday lives. The consequent dynamic and mutual transformations in individuals' motivational and intellectual spheres brought about changes in priorities that led to new ways of self-understanding that emerged fairly clearly in circumstances that required this level of self reflection (e.g., when individuals must choose between two mutually exclusive types of activity, such as between partying or studying before an exam).

In this sense, this study tapped into the mechanisms underpinning self transformation.

The theoretical framework upon which I am drawing challenges the pathological or deficit view of youth development in residential care by appreciating the contextual and relational nature of psychological processes. Even though only very few studies explicitly address the issue of self or identity for youth in substitute care, individualist notions of self, identity, and personality are pervasive in our current ideology and manifest in the discourses and practices of professionals in the child welfare system. In fact, this is one of the findings of my practical work in the residential institution and a great deal of my research is devoted to transforming such view. Thus, I believe it is crucial to provide a framework for understanding human agency without resorting to essentialist views of the self or to the notion of stable personality traits typical of naïve psychological assumptions. To this end, I find it particularly interesting Rose's detailed account of the perils of the liberal understanding of the self, characteristic of western liberal democracies, that emphasize autonomy, freedom, and individuality in detriment to the acceptance of the profoundly social nature of our selves (2001). According to Rose, such notions are intimately connected with scientific knowledge and practices based on a liberal ideology, especially articulated in psychology, psychiatry, and related fields, which comprise what he terms the 'psy' disciplines. In such traditional accounts the individual self is supposed to be inhabited by an inner psychology that animates and explains his/her conduct. As Rose contends, the 'psy' disciplines constitute an intellectual

technology, a way of making visible an intelligible certain features of persons, their conducts, and their relations with one another (p. 10). Upon drawing on the history of the 'psy' disciplines, Rose points out how their apparatuses have shaped the ways in which human beings have regulated others and have regulated themselves in the light of certain games of truth, which is linked with shifting organizations of political power. His claim can be clearly evidenced by examining child welfare practice, policy and research. As Rose notes, the history of the psy disciplines is intrinsically linked to the history of government.

According to Rose (*ibid.*), the prevailing image of the free willing, autonomous, individualized self, who is the locus of thought and beliefs and the origins of its own actions, permeates everyday practices that determine how individuals are acted upon and legitimize certain power arrangements. This is closely related to the notion of personality as a collection of stable individual traits. An extremely problematic implication of such notions concerns what constitutes real opportunities for individuals to make choices. In the reality of child welfare practice, these notions become embodied in the desired outcomes for children under the tutelage of the child welfare system; e.g., in designing treatment plans. Evidently, whatever goals are set for children, they inevitably rest on assumptions about children's development. Those assumptions can be directly seen in official texts and in mission statements residential institutions, such as group homes. Usually, they spell out acquiring skills for independent living and improving social interactions. As a search to the web sites of many group countries across the country reveals, those goals often include promoting

Christian faith. Sadly, high school graduation, although expected as an outcome, is implicitly articulated as the end of the educational road for children aging out of the system. College preparation is rarely spelled out as a goal for those adolescents. Concomitantly, vocational education opportunities are always around in the background. Among other things, this includes military recruitment. Recently, some researchers have put forth the notion of positive youth development as system of guidelines to inform and reform child welfare practice, whose main principles I already discussed.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Vygotsky and Freire: Theories of practice

This study is inspired by Vygotskian and Freireian scholarship that is particularly committed to social justice. My aim is to demonstrate the enormous transformative potential of their approaches to bring about institutional reform and dramatically improve child welfare practices. The theoretical framework of this research is centrally concerned with conceptualizations of youth development as embedded and contributing to institutional practices. Thus, I start by reviewing how Vygotsky's and Freire's ideas point to the practical relevance of conceiving of research as theoretically conceptualized practice.

Stetsenko & Arieviditch (2004) have recently pointed out the unique view on the role of practice in Vygotsky's project that challenged, both in its theoretical claims and in its own historical development, common ideas about science as being a purely mentalist, ideology- and politics-free pursuit of abstract principles and truths. As they argue, this project constituted a form of social practice firmly rooted in ideals of equality and justice and committed to purposes of improving the human condition. This particular type of collaborative project of social transformation is characterized by 1) understanding science as collaborative, transformative, practical social practice, 2) its Ideological commitment to ideals of social justice, equality, and social change, 3) considering the inseparability of knowledge and action, theory and practice, 4) accounting for the collaborative

nature of psychological processes- self, identity, teaching, learning and development, and 5) being opposed to traditional – politics-neutral, cognitivist and individualist – views of psychology that exclude analysis of the moral, practical, and political dimensions and relevance of knowledge (ibid.).

Stetsenko & Arieviditch's analysis of Vygotsky's collaborative project of social transformation brings to the fore how "theory and science at large are not separate from life in all the complex unity of its dimensions such as practical goals, conceptual tools, political agendas, moral challenges, and ideological commitments" (ibid, p. 60). This view of science entails "the notion of knowledge as a form of active transformative engagement (= meaningful activity) of people with their world – aimed at changing this world (including oneself), conducted in view of social goals and agendas, while making use of and contributing to culturally evolved cultural tools and practices" (p. 60). In this perspective, knowledge construction is seen as a process existing only in the ongoing and never-ending collaborative practices of transforming the world. Doing science then is conceptualized as "transformative activities of people who ultimately pursue real-life practical and ideology-driven projects in society ..." (p. 68). This understanding of knowledge as practically connected with the world is particularly relevant in the context of this study as I aim to point out how psychological theories and their underlying assumptions about human development shape child welfare knowledge in policy, research, and practice. This is precisely captured by Stetsenko & Arieviditch's argument that "knowledge and theories have agency and practical relevance in the world that in that they inevitably enact, bring about, and

foster certain practices in and visions of the world. Even theories that change nothing in and about the world do actually contribute to it, albeit only by preserving the status quo and preventing changes in it” (p.68). Thus, knowledge is necessarily value-laden and moral, produced and achieved only from a certain standpoint. As Stetsenko & Arieivitch point out, research always addresses “the questions as to how, what for, and especially for whose benefit each research agenda is carried out” (p.69). This is mostly clear in the process of elaborating research goals, which embody and reflect the researcher’s moral commitments and standpoints, and are further embodied and reflected in all aspects of research from the theoretical foundations to the design and data collection.

Vygotsky’s approach to human development as a social and historical process provides researchers with a powerful tool to overcome the split between individual development and societal practices, This is embodied in his theoretical claims that psychological processes emerge from and are part of collaborative activities and that teaching-and-learning has a central role in leading development. This approach calls for a new vision of psychology committed to creating new forms of social life and practice, especially when it is expanded by an emphasis on the mutually constitutive role of human subjectivity in social practices and dialogical interactions (p.66). According to Stetsenko & Arieivitch (2004), the key question of the Vygotskian project is “how to create psychological processes that set individuals free, rather than how to observe the existing processes” (p.77). This orientation converges with Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed that clearly states the role of the educator as an agent of social

transformation that promotes ideology critique that sets in motion a process of raising critical consciousness, or conscientização. The latter is the Portuguese word Freire used to describe the emancipatory task of the teacher as a cultural worker. Freire's translator in English, Myra Bergman Ramos (1970), explains that this term "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (p. 35). Freire's pedagogy is characterized by its dialogical and problem-posing method aimed at creating solidarity between teachers and students that helps students "perceive through their relations with reality that reality is really a *process*, undergoing constant transformation (Freire, 1970, p. 75, italics in the original). Freire's conceptualization of the role of the educator is one of the main pillars of my research methods and I will further discuss it in the methods section.

Freire's focus on conscientização, integrated with the Vygotskian project expanded by Stetsenko & Arieivitch (2004), allows us to see the central role of psychological processes (human subjectivity) in mediating collective activities (societal practices) and their potential for transforming them, including the self and its collaborators. According to Stetsenko & Arieivitch (ibid), in the framework of Vygotsky's project, human subjectivity is viewed as stemming from and inevitably participating in and contributing to collective material practice. In their words, "human subjectivity, processes of material production, and social interactions all co-evolve as parts of a unified system constitutive of human social life, interpenetrating and influencing each other in an endless cycle of dialectical

manifold transitions and mutual penetrations from material to mental and from individual to social, knowledge and practice” (ibid, p. 67).

Inspired by Freire’s work, critical social theory has been advancing a multidisciplinary knowledge base with an emphasis on the emancipatory function of knowledge (Leonardo, 2004). Critical social theory promotes critical thinking in education and takes the quality of education to be proportional to the depth of analysis that students have at their disposal (p.11). Leonardo (ibid.) contends that students experience education in an alienated and abstract form as they are deprived of opportunities for historical, critical analysis. He argues that critical social theory “broadens students’ horizon of possibility, expands their sense of a larger humanity, and liberates them from the confines of their common sense” (ibid., p12). In congruence with Stetsenko & Arievitch (2204), critical social theory privileges the role of theory by understanding it as closely tied to practice as the latter’s conceptual form as it is produced and applied as part of the overall search for transformative knowledge (Leonardo, 2004). By bringing criticism at the center of knowledge production, critical social theory “pushes ideas and frameworks to their limits, usually by highlighting their contradictions...and cultivate[s] students’ ability to question, deconstruct, and then reconstruct knowledge in the interest of emancipation” (ibid, p.12). Leonardo cites Appleman’s work with English teachers and quotes an interesting sentence by her: “we want our students...to reflect a keen understanding of their location (and degree of complicity) within a variety of competing ideologies and possibilities” (Appleman, 2000, p. 126, cited in Leonardo, 2004). I find that point particularly

relevant for my work as an educator in the group home in that critical social theory aims to expose the contradictions of social life, which constitutes a great deal of what I attempt to do in my practical work.

This study embodies Vygotsky's and Freire's theories as a tool for transforming social practices. It seeks to extend their psychological and educational perspectives, namely, Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory and critical pedagogy, respectively, in order to address institutional reform in the child welfare system. This research has practical relevance in that it generates knowledge about how to create optimal developmental conditions for adolescents living under State custody in residential programs. As I describe in the methods section, this study emphasizes research as praxis, that is, a theoretical and methodological project interested in understanding human experience while taking action that promotes its improvement especially in diverse contexts of social injustice (Stetsenko & Vianna, 2004). I will further explain how practicing research committed to social justice and equality calls for (a) a novel type of relation between researchers and participants, (b) re-formulation of links between knowledge and action, and concomitantly, theory and practice; and (c) critical re-thinking of the very status of psychological practice (*ibid.*) In the next section I discuss how the central role ascribed to teaching and learning in youth development in Vygotsky's theory and its later elaboration by cultural-historical activity theorists helps overcome, in theory and practice, the pitfalls of developmental accounts that have informed child welfare practices. As previously discussed, the latter relegate teaching and learning to a secondary role, not

integrally connected to youth development. The constitutive role of teaching-and-learning in child and adolescent development is the cornerstone of my approach to promote youth development and institutional reform in a residential program.

3.2. Vygotsky and Activity Theory: The dialectics of teaching, learning and development

The cultural-historical theory of activity, rooted in Vygotsky's works and elaborated by his collaborators, such as Luria, Leontiev, and Gal'perin, and further expanded by several generations of scholars, emphasizes the creative potential of human agency and the paramount importance of having access to historically evolved cultural tools as key aspects of human development (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1987; Werstch, 1981). According to this approach, the foundation and source of human development are purposeful, social interactions mediated by cultural tools (Leontiev, 1983, Werstch, 1985). In order to satisfy their needs, individuals jointly participate in activities in the course of which they must appropriate and re-construct the use of historically evolved cultural tools that mediate their actions in the world. By trying and mastering the tools that mediate their relations with the world and with one another, individuals change themselves as new possibilities for action become possible, therefore expanding their horizons. The more individuals gain access to, appropriate, and further elaborate the tools with which they act in the world and contribute to social practices, the greater the possibility of changing and expanding their position in

the web of social relations and institutional settings in which they act. In this process, individuals continually develop an understanding of the world and of themselves and seek to overcome the contradictions in social practices to which they contribute (even if that means opposing change) by creating, in collaboration with others, novel solutions (even if that means actively opposing others) they creatively appropriate the use of cultural tools, which creates the possibility of advancing the tools. Simply put, by mastering cultural tools in the course of collaborative activities, individuals transform the social practices to which they contribute and transform themselves, including how they understand their own possibilities, interests, and commitments (Stetsenko, 2004).

This theoretical framework calls for an understanding of human development that integrates self development, social interactions and the appropriation of cultural tools. As Stetsenko points out, transformations of object-oriented, purposeful activities mediated by cultural tools is the germ cell concept within this framework (1998). This germ cell concept serves as the analytical unit for psychological research that brings together individual and contextual processes and seeks to contribute to transforming societal practices. In this particular study, I draw on this notion of development as transformations of activities in order to explore ways to promote youth development and institutional change based on introducing different types of cultural tools and implementing novel activities in a residential program. My method is based on my commitment to employing empirical psychological research as a tool to social transformation and youth development- understood as mutually constitutive processes.

One of the most important practical implications of activity theory relates to the central role of cultural tools in human development, which points to the constitutive role of teaching and learning in child development, which is characterized in large measure by creative appropriation of historically evolved and culturally transmitted cultural tools. This understanding of child development reveals the prominent role of adults and institutional arrangements in creating opportunities for children to master cultural tools. Congruent with Dewey's view of schools as laboratories of human development (Cahan, 1992), Vygotsky and his followers have devoted a great deal of attention to schooling and formal learning and its potential to promote development. The key issue in the connection between formal learning and child development is how cultural tools of higher order, such as theoretical concepts and scientific modes of thinking, bring about higher new developmental levels. This issue was particularly salient in Gal'perin's research program, which made an enormous contribution to Vygotskian theory. Before I review his contribution to cultural-historical activity theory, I will turn to Vygotsky's conceptualization of the relation between learning and development.

Contrary to Piaget, for whom the development of higher forms of thinking is a precondition for children to benefit from instruction, Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized learning as paving the way for development to occur. This idea is formally expressed in Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) according to which children go beyond their current developmental level through joint participation in social activities through which new tools are

introduced and later on mastered by the child. As children master the use of those tools they can operate in more sophisticated developmental levels, characterized by higher levels of abstraction and generalization. Vygotsky was concerned with how formal instruction introduces children to scientific forms of thinking and thus leads development.

Gal'perin (1989/1969) further elaborated on the concept of ZPD by emphasizing how the developmental impact of instruction is contingent on the quality of the "cultural tools" (e.g., theoretical concepts) to which children are introduced. Importantly, cultural tools were conceptualized by Gal'perin not as static objects to be internalized as inert facts and formulae, but rather as embodiments of certain cultural practices, crystallized templates of actions, schematized representations of certain ways of doing things as discovered in the collaborative history of humanity (Arievitch & Stetsenko, 2000). Gal'perin examined how the quality of cultural tools impacts the outcome of learning activities vis-à-vis how efficiently they allow children to orient themselves when facing particular tasks. Gal'perin identified what he termed systemic-theoretical instruction, characterized by providing students with means for theoretical generalization and abstraction as the most profoundly developmental type of instruction. In this type of instruction, students learn to construct a method for orienting themselves by distinguishing essential characteristics of different objects and phenomena and by forming theoretical concepts on this basis, which function as cognitive tools in further problem solving. This type of instruction introduces children to concepts, models, theories, and ideas that present, in a

generalized form, the essential features of a given class of phenomena. As a norm, such features pertain to general regularities in how phenomena evolve and relate to each other in human practices. Systemic-theoretical instruction is characterized by revealing the origins, development, and the general structure of objects or phenomena by developing cultural tools that reflect these features in a form most conducive to the construction of a solid orientational basis that allows for wide transfer and generalization.

Systemic-theoretical instruction results in impressive improvements in children's abilities to analyze, plan, monitor their actions, set goals, and to systematically control how those are achieved. Moreover, and of special significance for this research, this type of instruction leads to dramatic improvements in children's learning motivation. This latter aspect will be further discussed in connection with Vygotsky's insight into the dynamic unity between intellectual and affective lines of development. This view discloses the close ties between learning and self development, which is characterized by the emergence of and co-evolution of motives and goals in the course of collaborative activities (Stetsenko & Arieviditch, 2004).

One important part of this study is my commitment to create real opportunities for the boys at the residential program to appropriate human history as deeply and broadly as possible. This may seem as a somewhat authoritarian top-down imposition resulting from an academic bias toward privileging theoretical forms of knowledge. Based on a dialectical view of history, I contend that personal agency can in fact be profoundly expanded and empowered by

drawing on the knowledge produced by previous generations, provided that this is done in a creative way in light of present practices and issues. This dialectical approach to learning and development has been recently discussed by Vianna & Stetsenko (2006). As they point out, a dialectical view of history emphasizes “the co-emerging development of the individual human being through and in humanity as well as the development of humanity through and in each individual human being (...) as a never-ending, ongoing, continuous process of expansion of collaborative transformative practices of people in the amalgamation of past, present, and future”. Drawing on history in its dialectical meaning does not entail falling into an authoritarian and unidirectional doctrine of education. On the contrary, such an approach to learning and development is even more radically liberal than many liberal trends in education because it focuses on “the dialectical co-authoring of development and history by each and every individual child (and teacher) with the rest of humanity (including its past and present generations), through collaborative activities that continue and simultaneously transform history through the ineluctable agency and responsibility of people as actors who together create society and history itself and are created by them”(ibid).

3.3. Leading Activity and Development: At the intersection of play and learning

According to CHAT institutional practice is the main source of psychic development. Social interactions mediated by cultural tools are the foundations for and the source of human development. In this view, historically evolving and

socially organized institutions are the contexts in which children develop.

Inasmuch as different institutions are dominated by different activities, the child's relation to the world will change according to the activity dominating in an institution acquiring the role of a leading activity in different periods of life. Shifts in the dominant type of activity inevitably involve a shift in the motives that give rise to the activity. As Leontiev (1978) explained, activities are distinguished from one another by their different objects. "It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction. (...) the object of an activity is its true motive. It is understood that the motive may be either material or ideal, either present in perception or existing only in the imagination or in thought. The main thing is that behind activity should always be a need, that it should always answer one need or another."(p. 62). This idea was first proposed by Vygotsky who sought to explain the unity of cognitive and affective processes in human development. According to him, "if we ignore the child's needs, and the incentives which are effective in getting him to act, we will never be able to understand his advance from one developmental stage to the next, because every advance is connected with a marked change in motives, inclinations, and incentives. That which is of the greatest interest to the infant has almost ceased to interest the toddler."”(p.92).

According to El'konin (1972), play is the dominant activity in preschool age, followed by formal learning during school age, and forming intimate relationships with peers is the leading activity for adolescents. The shifts from one dominant type of activity to another entail a shift in the motives giving rise to the activity.

Therefore, to the extent that particular forms of collective activities characterize the social contexts in which children develop, they need to appropriate the motives of those social activities in order to become competent members of their societies.

The fundamental role of play in children's development has long been established in the cultural-historical tradition. Vygotsky considered play to have a vital role in children's development by leading them beyond their current developmental level, i.e., by opening zones of proximal development (1978). He arrived at this conclusion by analyzing how children's motives change during the course of their development. In his view, "the maturing of needs is a dominant issue (...) because it is impossible to ignore the fact that the child satisfies certain needs in play. If we do not understand the special character of these needs, we cannot understand the uniqueness of play as a form of activity." (p. 92) Vygotsky then suggests that play seems to be invented at the point when the child begins to experience "unrealizable tendencies". He explains that the child enters an imaginary situation to resolve the tension between the impossibility of satisfying certain desires and the tendency toward their immediate fulfillment (p. 93).

Vygotsky further revealed the role of play in creating zones of proximal development by attending to an interesting contradiction in play. According to him, while play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulses and to subordinate his or her behavior to rules, play is also connected with pleasure; i.e., in play the child does what s/he most feels like doing but within specific constraints (p.99). According to Vygotsky, any imaginary situation

contains rules of behavior. For example, if a child wants to play mother and her doll is her child she must obey the rules of maternal behavior (p.94). Vygotsky then concludes that a child's greatest self-control occurs in play. This spontaneous subordination to rules that occur in play creates zones of proximal development for the child. "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself." (p.102) Thus, Vygotsky claims that the child moves forward essentially through play activity. In this sense, he considers play as a leading activity that determines the child's development.

Elaborating on Vygotsky's claim, other activity theorists have argued that play satisfies children's need to learn the ends and motives of adult activities which are not outwardly visible from those activities. Leontiev (1981) points to the child's desire to act as adults as the essence of play. The child wishes to participate in the social life of adults but do not have the necessary skills to do so. Moreover, El'konin (1972) has demonstrated how children appropriate the objectives, motives, and norms of the relations in adult activities by reproducing or imitating those relations in their own activity with their peers and within the collectives to which they belong. In this sense, play functions as a tool through which children appropriate adult forms of behavior and it creates opportunities for new motives to emerge. Thus, according to El'konin, in play the child imitates human actions in many ways and they assume the role of the adult, its functions and work in society. Thus, Leontiev and El'konin suggest that learning is already contained in play activities. Drawing on their works I explored in my practice at

the group home the contradictions inherent in play to set in motion shifts in motives and thus promote learning by bringing it to the fore during play activities.

Importantly, Leontiev and El'konin elaborated a theoretical account of self development – personality development in their terminology- that conceives of development as shaped by the child's participation in societal practices that progress through periods during which certain activities play a leading role, which is connected with the organization of the child's activities in the institutional contexts where development takes place. As I discuss in the methods section, this principle has been instrumental in guiding my research vis-à-vis identifying what activities would be most meaningful for the boys in the institution, which is critical for implementing activities that open new zones of proximal development. Particularly in the initial stages of my empirical work in the group home, attention to the role of play in child development was a critical guiding tool to devise developmental collaborative activities.

El'konin's analysis of the problem of stages in child development reveals an interesting dynamic of developmental periods in which the development of intellectual and affective motives regularly alternates one another as the dominant type of activity. According to him, periods characterized chiefly by the assimilation of the objectives, motives, and norms of human relations (the child's need-motivational sphere) are subsumed by periods characterized chiefly by the appropriation of socially evolved modes of action with objects, in which the child predominantly develops operational and technical capabilities (hence, the child's intellectual and cognitive powers) and vice-versa.

As children grow older and their place in societal practice begins to shift and the contradictions between play and learning grow sharper in their activities. When children achieve school age there is a growing expectation that they internalize the need to engage in formal learning. As children appropriate learning motives, formal learning becomes their leading activity. This shift from play to learning as the child's leading activity can be particularly problematic for children growing in oppressive and materially challenging circumstances, especially when the adults around them do not encourage or support learning- for various reasons, perhaps for not having had that opportunity themselves or, what unfortunately seems to be common in child welfare programs, for a lack of understanding of the key role of teaching and learning in youth development.

Furthermore, the quality of the instruction children receive is of paramount importance in that it determines, to a large extent, developmental outcomes that include the appropriation of theoretical and critical ways of thinking and the extent to which learning activity will be appropriated by the developing self. As I discussed in section 2.3, the instruction children receive in many schools is still characterized by a transmission model of teaching in which learning goals given to children ready-made. As a result, many children fail to develop the necessary motivation towards formal learning. In these circumstances it is not uncommon that children's leading activity move from play to forming intimate relationships with peers (e.g., becoming members of cliques and gangs), which El'konin proposes to be the adolescent's leading activity.

One interesting question that the cultural-historical activity theoretical perspective opens up is what happens when children “jump” a leading activity (or a stage for short), such as going from play as the leading activity to forming intimate relations with peers? In other words, what happens when youth enter adolescence- and their connections with their peer group takes on a leading role in organizing their lives - without having embraced learning as a meaningful process for self development and empowerment? Does that constrain personal agency by limiting the choices available? I will explore possible answers to this question by considering other approaches to self or identity development in adolescence. First, it is noticeable that the in the literature on adolescent development the role of embracing learning as a leading activity for self development has not received much attention outside cultural-historical theory. Nevertheless, the importance of learning in self, or identity, development is alluded to in different theories. For instance, one of the most important themes in Erikson’s theory of identity development is identity crisis in adolescence (1968). Successful resolution of this crisis occurs when adolescents, having figured out ‘who they are’, realize in which direction they want to go in life, what path they want to pursue. Conversely, identity diffusion is characterized by a lack of such commitment, or fidelity, as Erikson calls it. Erikson suggests that trying out different roles is critical for resolving the identity crisis. The question then is: what factors contribute to a successful identity formation? How does one’s history impact how one enters adolescence? Even though Erikson describes the stage preceding adolescence as characterized by the struggle to acquire competence,

which happens through learning the important functions of in one's society, he does not detail how that may shape the process of setting goals and committing to them, other than explaining that some individuals emerge out of that stage with a sense of inferiority if the learning process is not satisfactory. Erikson's ideas corroborate the importance of teaching-and-learning in identity development, but it is necessary to gain deeper and more detailed knowledge about how these processes can be brought together in order to provided optimal conditions for adolescents to develop a meaningful life project. The activity theory approach allows us to see how high quality instruction helps one to be equipped with key resources, or crucial cultural tools, that not only provide adolescents something to fall back on as they search for a path in life, but also greatly enhance their choices, quantitatively and qualitatively. Thus, self development is seen as inextricably linked with the appropriation of cultural tools, including the development of theoretical forms of thinking, inasmuch as setting goals and establishing priorities is contingent on resources available and the knowledge and skills one has constructed.

Recently the connection between emergent motivation and self development has been theorized by Csikszentmihaly. His approach to self development comes close to the activity theoretical approach to the extent that he connects self development to the pursuit of particular goals (Csikszentmihaly, 1997). In his account, "it is the goals that we pursue that will shape and determine the kind of self that we are to become. What makes Mother Theresa the nun radically different from Madonna the singer are the goals into which they

have invested their attention throughout their lives. Without a consistent set of goals, it is difficult to develop a coherent self” (p. 23). Specifically, Csikszentmihaly has devoted a great deal of attention to adolescent development by examining the link between adolescents’ enjoyment of productive activities, such as school work, and their commitment to pursuing career goals, often embodied in the pursuit of higher education. Based on the experience sampling method (ESM), in which adolescents received random electronic signals that prompted them to fill out a survey on the quality of their experience, Csikszentmihaly found out that having enjoyed productive activities early in adolescence (i.e., having experienced ‘flow’, as he calls it, while engaged in such activities) is a good predictor of continued commitment to pursuing career goals and going to college. An important question remains unanswered, though: why do some adolescents engage in productive activities more often than others? Part of the answer is suggested by Csikszentmihaly’s own contention that young people have unequal access to meaningful job opportunities and adult working models. According to him, “contrary to what one might expect, affluent teenagers actually work more often in high school than poorer students, even though they don’t have to. And exposure to productive tasks in the home, the neighborhood, and the community is much greater for children who grow up in wealthy and stable environments. There one can actually find fifteen year olds who plan to become architects and who have learned to draft in a relative’s architectural firm, who have helped design an extension to a neighbor’s house, who have interned with a local construction company- although such opportunities are infrequent. In

an inner city high school, the most popular informal career counselor was a school guard who helped sharp young boys find jobs with the gangs, and directed good-looking girls toward so-called modeling jobs” (p.54). Thus, one can conclude that access to participating in productive activities is crucial to self development to the extent that the motivation to commit to career goals emerges in the course of those activities.

This theme echoes in Damon’s work on moral development (1995). Recently, he and colleagues have focused on the development of purpose during adolescence (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003), which is defined as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p.121). Their approach emphasizes the sense of direction in life that is provided when an objective for purpose is created, which is compatible with the activity theory position in relation to self development that I discuss in the following section. Based on a review of the literature, they conclude that attaining a sense of purpose in life is linked to “health and productive behaviors in all their manifestations- psychologically, socially, and physically” (p.124). Furthermore, it has been shown that purpose is negatively correlated with psychopathology, including drug use and antisocial behaviors. In sum, the authors conclude that research findings “confirm the centrality of meaning and purpose in adolescent lives” (p.126) and they call for an increased understanding of the processes and conditions that cultivate noble purposes in young people. However, these authors, not unlike Csikszentmihaly, do not consider the centrality of teaching and learning to development. Moreover,

they propose a traditional method for studying such processes (i.e., based on observations, questionnaires, and interviews), whereas this study, rooted in the developmental teaching and action research traditions, takes a formative approach to this question. Thus, based on the activity theoretical perspective I suggest that the quality of instruction (i.e., how meaningful learning objectives are), is an important element in the quality of the experience of productive activities. Thus, one of the pillars of my method was to co-construct learning activities with the boys that helped them embrace learning as a path for self development or, in other words, as a life-long activity.

Therefore, in the context of my empirical work, one of the main challenges was to implement meaningful activities with the boys and yet push them to acquire increasingly more sophisticated forms of thinking. In other words, my search to provide youth with learning opportunities that open zones of proximal development is a key aspect of this work. Thus, I was particularly concerned with creating opportunities for the boys to appropriate learning motives, in order to engender transformations and shifts in how they prioritize their activities. This process has profound consequences for self development and for changing social practices. How I worked toward this end in collaboration with the institution and the boys and the changes that occurred as this project grew will be detailed in the method and results sections.

3.4. Self Development as Shifts in Leading Activity: Implications for adolescent development

An understanding of the self and the interrelated notions of identity and personality are central to the theoretical framework upon which I drew to carry out this research project. As I previously reviewed, the expanded version of activity theory that has inspired this work posits human subjectivity and psychological processes as an inevitable moment that mediates collaborative activities that constitute societal practices. (Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 2004). This understanding of the self converges other theoretical accounts that view individual and social processes as mutually constitutive, such as post-structuralism (Rose, N. 1998) and critical psychological anthropology (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) by understanding the self and identity as always embedded in social activities (or practices) and by emphasizing the role of mediating artifacts (material or symbolic tools) as available resources for the constitution of subjectivity. Importantly, those approaches have emerged from a critical perspective on essentialist accounts that locate the self inside of autonomous, bounded, coherent, individualized, intentional, persons who are the locus of thought, action, and belief, the origins of their own actions, and the beneficiary of unique biographies (Rose, p. 3). Overall, those theoretical perspectives overcome the pitfalls of idealistic accounts that abstract mental processes away from social reality. This critical examination of what constitutes individuality is particularly useful in dismantling pathological views of

psychological processes, ranging from conduct disorders to learning disabilities and stable personality dispositions.

The theoretical framework of this study provides me with an analytical tool to further explore the notions of self, identity and personality as emerging through activities located in specific institutional settings. The activity theory notion of self, expanded recently by Stetsenko & Arieviditch (2004), upon which I am drawing, postulates three interrelated principles. First of all, the self is conceptualized as something that we do, rather than have. Secondly, it focuses on the specific actions that allow individuals to orient and position themselves in the realm of interpersonal relationships. Thirdly, the self is viewed as a result of prioritizing socially situated actions in accordance with an individual's unique positioning in sociocultural reality. These ideas were first elaborated by Leontiev (1978), whose theory of personality centers on the dynamic emergence of motives and movement in their hierarchy engendered by the endless cycles of activities that comprise the web of societal practices in which we act. The concept of activity postulates that human actions are oriented toward particular objects that define the activity and motivate it. Motives are not directly present in consciousness but act as the driving force of the individual's actions and determine the particular ways of positioning oneself in relation to the web of institutional activities that comprise our everyday lives. The development of personality relates to the work of resolving and dealing with conflicting motives that arise in particular circumstances in which we must make choices and establish priorities. Leontiev gives the famous example of a boy who cheats in a task and is rewarded by an

adult whom he believes does not know about the cheating. The child experiences the reward as a 'bitter candy'. The boy becomes aware of the two motives that directly conflict with each other and that leads to an emotional reaction that can serve as a catalyst for a new self.

According to this perspective, personality and self-development is embedded in the continuous process of evolving system of activities. In this uninterrupted process of ongoing individual (re)positioning required by the demands of everyday life, particular modes of activity are enacted based on the selection, however unconscious it may be, of modes of appropriating available tools (e.g., through play vs. learning activities). This selection process has to be incessantly re-enacted and thus new choices are, at in least in principle, always possible. Nonetheless choices are contingent on the tools available. Here, conceptual tools play a major role. Such tools include knowledge of the world, society, and history as well as a vision of what is possible or worth to strive for as an individual, which inescapably generate self-reflection, albeit in varying degrees of organization and differentiation (Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 2004).

In sum, the notion of the self as a leading activity emphasizes: 1) the social character of self development, 2) its embodiment in social practices as individuals engage in collective activities, 3) its dynamic, rather than essential, nature as reflected in the co-evolution of goals and motives of individuals, and 4) the role of mediating artifacts (material or symbolic tools) as available resources for the constitution of subjectivity. Specifically, this notion proposes that the self develops through transformations in an individual's contribution to social activities

through which self-identity processes emerge as necessary moments when individuals position and re-position themselves in the ongoing flow of social practices in which their actions are situated (Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 2004). In this sense, the self emerges through the dynamics of the co-evolving goals and motives as individuals make choices, commit to certain ideals, develop new goals, and establish priorities. In the course of positioning oneself in everyday practices located in institutional contexts, certain activities gain prominence and play a leading role in the emergence of the self or the development of personality, the term used by CHAT authors, where personality is understood as an open-ended hierarchical system of activities (Leontiev, 1978).

In sum, the notion of the self as emerging in the context of social activities, which are always social, sheds light on the importance of the tools available for self development. Consequently, teaching-and-learning, as a privileged context for the appropriation of cultural tools, can play a fundamental role in self development. This is the central thesis of this work.

4. Research Questions

4.1. Action Research within a CHAT Perspective

The point of departure for this study was my practical work in a group home for boys in the New York Tri-State area. The population of the group home is characteristically disadvantaged children coming from oppressive circumstances, such as being abandoned or taken away from their parents due to a myriad social problems ranging from parental abuse or neglect to substance abuse and incarceration. Those boys typically lag behind in their academic achievement, have insufficiently developed motivation for school learning, and they frequently challenge the staff with disciplinary issues, which, in turn, adopt restrictive measures to control the boys. These issues are not at all unique to this particular institution and have been consistently reported in the literature about children living in out-of-the-home placements within the U.S. welfare system (Pazaratz, 2003; Polsky, 2003; Handwerk, Friman, Mott & Stairs, 1998). This situation has long been recognized as the crisis of the child welfare system and many have attempted and are currently attempting to reform it.

My objective was to trigger transformations in the institution, viewed as an open-ended, dynamical activity system, in the direction of establishing democratic institutional practices that promote the appropriation of learning activity by the residents. Ultimately, the goal was to de facto prepare the boys for a future richer in possibilities. This seemed to be urgently needed in the context

of custodialism whose negative consequences seemed very evident to me. Many boys were discharged from the institution and some ran away. Many already had criminal records and the threat of being placed in a more restrictive facility was always imminent.

A concern with the creation of optimal opportunities for the development of the residents of the group home was the cornerstone of this study, which shaped it in its entirety. Thus, the action research genre adopted followed from this commitment and it entailed not only the use of non-traditional methods but most importantly a completely different epistemology. Practicing psychology committed to social justice, in light of Vygotsky's cultural-historical project, has broad implications with regard to epistemological claims and methodology of inquiry and research in psychology, including design, ethical standards, procedures, recruitment practice, criteria of justification, ideals of rationality, validity, etc. The orientation of this research toward social justice and social development could not be mechanically added to a traditional research agenda. In consonance with action research, this study evolved in its entirety, since its inception, as a search for more democratic and developmental institutional practices based on theoretical reflection of my intervention. This process unfolded through the formulation of new questions as my practice entered new phases and new possibilities began to emerge. In other words, as my practice progressed and produced concrete results, new challenges emerged that required further reflection upon my practice to overcome contradictions in institutional practices. In this process, my method itself evolved as I sought to appropriate and

introduce new tools, while reinventing others previously available but insufficient to bring about the desired outcomes. In this sense, my method resulted in the development of new and more efficient tools, including deeper forms of theoretically mediated reflection, in a continuous process of tools and results transitioning into one another. This resulted in significant changes in institutional practices as its participants changed their activities and themselves, consequently changing their developmental context. An important dimension of this process was the construction of my own knowledge of how to expand my own horizons and enrich my practice.

The action research design of this research had several aims:

1. To collaborate with the residential program in order to expand the developmental opportunities for the residents, establish more democratic institutional practices, and expand the contribution of this research to this developmental process
2. To document how the process of implementing this collaborative transformative project has evolved in order to reveal the mechanisms that promote youth development and institutional change, including overcoming resistances to changes,
3. To draw on the knowledge generated as a result of theoretical reflection on institutional practices and on individual contributions to them by all members of the institution (including the researcher) in order to devise novel forms of intervention that address emerging needs and opportunities, and

4. To explore the potential of this research to inform child welfare reform and adolescent development, particularly in institutional settings.

This study was based on documenting the process of implementing this collaborative transformative project in the residential child welfare program in order to reveal the mechanisms that promote youth development and institutional change, including overcoming resistances to changes. This was done by employing the notion of dynamic activity systems (Engeström, 1999) as the analytical device to account for the interpenetrating changes involving individual and institutional activities. This approach emphasizes how change can be catalyzed 1) through the introduction of new tools that help overcome old contradictions and bring new ones to the fore and 2) by establishing common goals in a collaborative process of implementing novel activities. The analysis thus focuses on setting the system in motion through:

- the changes in institutional practices,
- the changes in how individuals contribute to those practices, such as how the boys, the staff, and myself position ourselves in the ongoing flow of institutional practices,
- the role of symbolic and material artifacts in the transformations described above, including changes in the spatial arrangement of the institution, and
- the changes (or lack thereof) of institutional rules, division of labor, and
- changes in the relations between the group home and child welfare workers, families, neighborhood public schools attended by the residents, funding agency and state and federal policies.

4.2. Research Questions

My method was based on a theoretical reflection of my practice as developmental specialist consulting for the group home, which constantly posed new questions that required further reflection. Thus, theory and methods were only distinct as moments of single process of ongoing and mutually enriching transitions from theory to practice. In this continuous process, my research questions themselves have evolved as my practice expanded and gained strength, which furthered the depth of my analysis and, consequently, opened new possibilities for acting in the institution, and so forth and so on.

Consequently, theory, method, analysis, and results have to be necessarily integrated as I present this research project. This could not be otherwise as I continuously drew on the notion of activity system to interpret the institutional context and to position myself toward bringing about change by introducing new tools and by establishing common goals, which are the pillars of my methods. Finally, the changes taking place in the institution were analyzed in terms of the how the activity system of the institution was being transformed as individual members were changing their activities. This continuous cycle of action-reflection-action evolved into different phases that reveal the developmental changes triggered by this work. In this process, my method evolved, which in turn raised new questions that consequently led to new methods, in such a way that this work is always in progress. I will now describe in concrete terms how this general process was instantiated at different stages as new tools created

expanded the possibilities for individual action that gradually began to shift the institutional activity system away from custodialism, even though this is by no means a finished process. I will describe how specific questions emerged from more general ones throughout this research project as I was confronted with the particular issues that I documented as I worked at the residential program. I start summarizing my research questions with the list below that represents my general questions when I started this work:

1. How does placement in the group home impact the residents' development? How do processes of self development emerge in the context of institutional practices?

2. What is the character of institutional practices, what are they aimed at? Does the institution offer good conditions for the boys to develop? What are the challenges faced by the institution? How can my work contribute to creating optimal developmental conditions in the institution?

3. What are the main activities carried out by the residents of the group home? What is the purpose of such activities? What is the boys' leading activity? What is the place of learning activities in the system of their life activities? How can my work contribute to the boys' development?

Those general questions evolved into more specific questions as my practice began to unfold in the specific institutional context of the residential program. As I started working as the developmental psychologist for the institution, I was confronted with a custodial system characterized by control vs. rebelliousness as its dominant activity. In that context, I was expected to provide

emotional support to the residents in order to help them cope with issues ranging from dysfunctional families, abuse, and neglect to history of truancy and behavioral problems. Consistent with the pathologizing framework typical of child welfare practices, my work was viewed by the institution as a tool to help them achieve their main objective of reducing the incidence of 'behavioral problems'. By engaging the boys in a process of 'dealing with their emotional issues' I was expected to help reduce the tensions and disturbances with which some boys challenged the program. As I describe in the first part of the method section, the goal set for me by the manager was that I would have the boys 'open up' for me and thus learn 'to deal with their emotional issues'. The institutional approach did not include an examination of how the boys' "problems" may be connected with institutional practices. Moreover, I started to observe the power struggles between staff and residents and amongst the residents themselves.

It was also clear right from the start that issues of teaching, learning and development were not the priority of the institution. This was evident not only in the conversations I had with my supervisor and the manager of the group home, but attention to teaching, learning and development was absent in the job description I was given. Thus, my initial hypothesis was that by bringing issues of teaching, learning, and development to the fore I would be able to collaborate with the institution in creating better conditions for the development of the boys. Based on the notion of self as a leading activity (Leontiev, 1978; Stetsenko & Arieviditch, 2004), I sought to create ways to help the boys to appropriate learning as a sense-forming activity (Leontiev, 1978), which in turn would help them to

articulate and materialize a vision for their future. However, there were enormous barriers in achieving this goal as most of the boys had aversion to doing school work, did not enjoy reading, and wanted to spend their time after school – when I had contact with them- in leisure activities, such as playing video games. This situation raised the following questions for me:

1. How are the dynamics of youth development embedded in the institutional practices of the residential program? How are conflicts, contradictions, and power issues played out in the activities carried out in institution? How can I position myself in the activity system of the institution without falling into the trap of custodialism?
2. How can institutional practices that emphasize control and discipline be displaced in favor of more democratic practices that support the boys' agency?
3. How can I implement my practices away from a focus on pathology toward an educational approach? How can learning activities be implemented in the institution? What are the obstacles for their implementation?

At the same time, as I started talking with the boys, I soon started to encounter their resistance. The manager and the staff determined that I would have conversations with them, which the boys construed as counseling and thus rejected it. Therefore, I was confronted with the boys' resistance toward me, which put me in a difficult place to directly implement formal learning activities. I had to slowly build my practices with patience and avoiding the typical role of the adult authority in the institution. I sought to engage the boys in forms of dialogue that would reveal my openness to critical discussions about institutional pitfalls

and my commitment to promoting their development. In my first two years at the institution I had met considerable resistance from the staff and the boys in implementing learning activities, as defined by Lompscher (1999). This led me to continually change my approach towards increasingly more democratic and collaborative activities that acknowledge, respect and build from the boys' agency. Then a new set of questions was raised:

1. How can I merge the institution's goal of reducing conflicts with the residents with the goal of promoting the boys' development?
2. How can learning activities be implemented in a way that the boys will experience them as enjoyable?
3. How can I bridge the boys' interests with the need to appropriate learning activity? How can new goals and motives emerge for individuals (boys, staff, and myself) as a result of changing institutional activities?
4. How can new tools be introduced in the institutional activity system? How can institutional practices be expanded?
5. What alternative practices can be implemented that would eventually lead to the appropriation of full-blown learning activities? How can I bridge the institution's clinical expectation of my work with a developmental approach?
6. What is the role of new forms of dialogue and critical thinking in creating conditions for the emergence of learning activities?

The question was precisely how to create zones of proximal development for the boys, for the institution, and for myself. Drawing on activity theory, I hypothesized that through play, dialogue, and other activities that would appeal

to the boys as leisure and social critique (watching films, going to museums and galleries, hanging out with them) I would be able to engage them in critical thinking and learning. These questions drove the first phase of this research and the activities implemented will be described in the first two parts of the methods section. The changes that followed this phase of the research will be described in the results section (7.2.), under the heading Phase I- Control vs. Resistance as the dominant institutional activity.

Through implementing novel activities that appealed to the boys I was able to develop my relationship with them differently from the usual antagonism that characterized much of their interactions with the staff and even amongst themselves. However, the impact of the new activities in creating the conditions for learning activities to emerge more systematically was still very limited. As I will describe in the results section, despite the development of my relationship with the boys, some still resisted and managed to avoid talking to me. Thus, I sought to devise a collective play project as an attempt to overcome one of the main hurdles I faced. Namely, I was confronted with the contradiction of introducing learning tools (e.g., theoretical concepts, models, essay writing, etc.) without imposing them on the boys or giving them ready-made to the boys. Drawing on activity theoretical framework I sought to embed learning goals in a collective project whose immediate goal was to offer a context for the boys to play collectively. I expected that through a gradual process of bringing to the fore the elements of social critique embedded in their play and embedding opportunities for knowledge construction in our collective activities, it would be

possible to help the boys to appropriate learning activities. The questions raised were:

1. How can play be used as developmental tool, especially for older children?
2. How can learning objectives be embedded in play?
3. What is the impact of engaging the boys in a collective project in shifting institutional practices away from control vs. rebelliousness?
4. How can a collective play project empower the boys and help them shift their activities away from resistance and rebelliousness?

These answers are addressed in the second part of the results section (7.3.), Opening zones of proximal development: From learning to play to playing to learn. Despite interesting results, implementing systematic learning activities was still difficult. While working with individual boys or with small groups, I was able to engage some of them in interesting moments where learning activities emerged. Then the conditions changed significantly as a full-time social worker, Ms. Li, was hired for that position that had been vacant for several years. By that time my collaborative practices with the institution had been more solidly established and I spearheaded a movement toward implementing full-blown learning activities. Based on theoretical assumptions rooted in Vygotskian CHAT, I formulated the hypothesis that the boys' appropriation of learning activity had been suppressed due to insufficiencies in the instruction the boys had received in their schools (Vygotsky, 1978), which significantly reduced the possibility of experiencing learning as meaningful and enjoyable. A second hypothesis

derived, as the first one, from CHAT was that the boys' motivation to learn – or lack thereof- was closely related to their knowledge of the subject matters being taught in school and their ease or difficulty in mastering the content of the courses they encountered in school. Once the conditions emerged, I then started my practical work searching for ways to put teaching, learning, and development at the center of the social practices in the group home. This I believe was my unique contribution to the residential program and to the boys. Thus, the last set of research questions includes the following:

1. How can learning activities be devised and implemented in order to create optimal conditions for the internalization of formal learning as a self-generated activity? How can learning be integrated by individuals into the system of their activities? How does that impact the hierarchical integration of their motives, or simply, how does that impact individuals' establishment and change of priorities? What is the impact of the quality of "cultural tools" in promoting learning and development?

2. How can learning activities be introduced without being imposed top-down on children? How can learning tasks be negotiated with children in a way that respects their agency and includes them in the process of setting goals? What contradictions must be addressed with the boys in order to negotiate their participation in collaborative activities?

3. What is the impact of the boys' appropriation of learning activity in transforming the institutional activity system?

5. Method

5.1. Situating myself in the institution

The residential institution where this research is located offers a home for ten boys at a time whose families either lost their custody or voluntarily handed it to the state. In most cases the state's child protective agency has temporary custody of the boys (which usually takes several years), but some boys have no family or they have only siblings, usually placed in different homes. Many of those boys have lived in different homes with relatives or foster parents. Most of them do not have an adult who consistently plays the role of a parent. Some boys have a grandparent, an uncle, an aunt or an older sibling with whom they have consistent contact, but none of them is involved in their lives financially or educationally- although some parents send lots of presents to them. Typically, the boys would have been through different schools, many times in different cities and counties - or even in different states, prior to coming to the group home and many are behind in their school year.

My contact with the group home came about as I was serving as their evaluator for another program run by its 'umbrella' agency under which the program is administratively nested. I was offered the position of psychologist for the group home, which had been vacant for several years. I considered this position as an opportunity to offer my expertise as a tool for institutional reform, so I accepted the job on a consulting basis. I came to the institution with a critical

perspective against pathologizing institutionalized youth and seeking to provide alternative developmental opportunities to the boys. Contrary to my vision, however, the job description and the expectation of my work, as expressed by the director and the manager of the group home, were clearly clinically oriented, not unlike most of the human services field. For example, the manager and the staff told me that the boys in residence came from dysfunctional families and that some displayed considerable behavioral and attitudinal problems. For the staff of the group home, my task was to help the boys handle their “emotional problems”, as they would constantly explain to me. The job description I was given was clinically oriented and contained in itself a framework for observing, addressing and acting upon children based on pathology. To paraphrase McDermott (1993), this job description was a device ‘to acquire’ the boys and scrutinize the ways they act, describe them with the (in)adequate psychological terminology, and intervene accordingly. The end of the spectrum was ever present as a possibility: a more restrictive facility, such as a residential treatment center or a juvenile detention center for the more serious cases of defiance and violation of rules. Among the activities I was supposed to carry out there were counseling individual and group sessions and crisis intervention. In practice, the manager expected that I would talk to the boys and would find a way to have them “open up” and discuss their ‘emotional issues’. It was clear that locating the problems in the minds of individual youths and leaving off the analytical hook contextual aspects, including institutional practices, the broader community, and child welfare practices, was not only a rhetorical device used by policy-makers and

researchers in professional and academic narratives. It was a common procedure instantiated in the everyday practices of the institution.

Consequently, a significant part of my work was devoted to creating a new role for myself as the psychologist for the institution. Due to the fact that I had known the agency director for several years, I had considerable leeway in devising my work. I must also say that, despite perhaps not understanding exactly where I was coming from, with my de-emphasis on clinical descriptions of 'behavioral problems', the manager and the staff always supported my work, which they considered as important by "exposing" the boys to things to which they did not have access. In this sense, my work was originally perceived as complementary to the work of the staff. This was the common ground from which my work grew, from educationally modest activities, such as field trips and play, to currently full-blown teaching and learning activities.

In the results section I will describe how my method evolved through three distinct phases, whereby my practice consisted of three different dominant activities. The first phase was characterized by my attempt to implement alternative practices at the institution away from a clinical approach. During that first phase, from February to September 2002 I met 16 boys, many of whom stayed in the institution only briefly. In this section and in the results section I will refer to some of the boys as I present examples of how my method was implemented and of what changed in the institution. The boys with whom I worked more closely in my first months at the institution include Rashid, Johnson, Jason, Trevor, and Brian. Daniel, Bobby, and Jamal were the most powerful boys

when I started working there and they resisted me more fiercely. Then George, Andre, and Jack came to the institution and I will mention them too in the results section. Of all the boys with whom I worked in phase I, only Johnson, Daniel, and Andre were also present during the second phase, which started in the second semester of 2002. Although Jamal stayed in the group home until October 2002, he was mostly absent in the afternoons when I would come to work. After a couple of months at the group home, despite having established some common goals with the manager and the staff, conflict ensued on many occasions, especially whenever the boys' play, whose content frequently involved teasing, would escalate into disrespect and insult. The staff, comprising the manager, two youth counselors per shift (Peter, Jerry, Mr. Wallace, Sylvia, and later Simon, worked the afternoon shift) and a social worker (who only came late in the spring of 2003), used to be burdened by many behavioral incidents, ranging from verbal disrespect and neglected hygiene to theft and physical assault. My presence in the institution was a novelty for the residents that forced them to position themselves toward me. They took different positions, and the way they approached or avoided me was very suggestive of the dynamics of self development and power struggles in the home. Some boys would constantly test my position of authority by teasing me. Even though many times I was unsure how to act, I decidedly did not react to such provocations with the common methods, such as raising my voice and threatening punishment. My reaction, many times perceived by the staff as weak, would open grounds for the staff to take measure against the boys in a move at the same protective of me, but also

disempowering. This was very common in the beginning and led me to seek for activities that would be of interest to the boys in order to avoid conflict. I also offered myself as a mediator between some of them and the manager, and formed alliances with the boys that found it meaningful to relate to me. One of my first successful moves was to offer to take the boys to field trips in New York City. This was particularly attractive to some of them and thus our activities began to converge. Through creating new activities, which I will describe later, I began to carve a space for myself in the practices of the institution that transcended the role of guardian. This created opportunities for deepening and expanding my dialogue with the boys without being caught in the rigid power asymmetry typical of their interaction with the staff. Thus, through new activities and new forms of dialogue I started to open zones of proximal development for the boys, the institution and for myself. My growing relationship with some of the boys gave me access to know more about them and the institution. In the context of our emerging friendship I was told about their challenges, including the injustices to which they were submitted and also, on occasion, contributed to. In this sense, this process is akin to an ethnographer's establishing key informants.

5.2. Emerging Collaborative Practices: Implementing novel activities in the institution

I started off my practical work at the institution by redefining my job description. As I described above, my work was framed in clinical terms and the

first task the manager gave me was to talk to boys with whom the institution was having a hard time. They constantly violated rules, their bedroom was dirty, they had problems waking up on time to go to school, they would curse at the staff when reminded that they had not yet done their chores, and had also been suspended from school from skipping classes and disrespecting the teachers. The manager was considering discharging them, which was the solution to the cases when boys consistently failed to conform to program rules. I talked to the those two boys, but they did not want to reveal much about themselves and most of the time they dismissed the accusations leveled against them as false. Over the next few weeks I met with those two boys systematically and their attitude changed from resistance toward winning me over. As I listened to them and did not impose my view on them, they started to listen to me too. They told me that they did not want to be discharged and promised to follow the program rules. In the nest days they started waking up early, doing their chores, and stopped cursing. The manager decided to give the boys another chance. Unfortunately, after some weeks they slipped back into their old behavior.

I also began to dialogue with other boys, which was extremely challenging with some of them. Most of the boys were very resistant when I started talking to them individually. With few exceptions, the boys would not come see me unless the manager or the staff intervened. I was not happy with the fact that some boys were told to come talk to me and their resistances made me feel bad. I was positioned by the staff in an authoritarian position inasmuch as the boys' agency was not respected, which already constrained the possibility of engaging the

boys in a Socratic type of dialogue. It was evident that the boys saw me as a tool for the institution to control me, which seemed to be the way they construed therapeutic and counseling practices. The fact that the staff decided that they had to come see me, only reified their perception of my role. However, that was a common form of interaction between staff and boys, which I could not change directly.

Moving away from a clinical approach, I started to think of ways to collaborate with the institution in seeking solutions to the systemic problems that were visibly manifested by the residents. My initial observations indicated that, despite the boys' talents and creativity, the residential program and other institutions in the community were not offering the boys the most favorable conditions for their development. Firstly, the climate in the group home seemed to be very tense. The boys in the group home were afflicted by serious developmental issues, such as low academic achievement and "behavioral problems", which were or could be officially classified as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorders, emotional disturbance, etc. The boys used to constantly engage in rough play and in teasing each other. Those activities comprised the most immediately and outwardly visible instances of "acting out", when some boys would act aggressively against the staff or toward one another, and of "getting smart", meaning that the boys would verbally disrespect the staff or each other with insults. A frequent type of incident would emerge out of play, usually teasing each other (e.g., making jokes invoking another boy's mother), which would escalate into open verbal or physical

confrontation and would eventuate in a staff member having to intervene to stop the conflict. Typically, the staff would intervene in an abrasive manner, such as yelling at the boys and threatening to punish them. Due to the high frequency of such episodes, the boys were constantly “put on restriction”; the most commonly applied disciplinary measure. To be put on restriction entails not being allowed to leave the premises of the group home and it may also extend to TV watching and video game playing. Interestingly, there used to be no mechanisms for getting off restriction and some boys would be kept on restriction for weeks and even more than a month. This seemed to create a snowball effect that dramatically affected the boys’ motivation. The staff, on their part, worked hard to keep the institution under control by enforcing disciplinary measures that invariably restricted the boys’ activities. Oftentimes punitive measures would further frustrate the boys and they would attempt to violate the restrictions imposed on them. It was on this vicious circle that I was supposed to intervene.

The boys’ anger would often come out in our interactions. For instance, as I started bringing movies on Fridays, Brian asked me one day, “*What does watching movies got to do with psychology? Aren’t you a psychiatrist?*” He consistently refused to talk to me individually. One day I proposed that the boys draw, which is an activity many enjoyed. Then Brian asked me the same question in front of everybody: “*Aren’t you a psychiatrist? Why don’t you talk to us?*” When we finally met individually and he challenged me throughout the meeting. His attitude was always very sarcastic. He told me that I knew nothing about “*black people living in the ghetto*”. Over time, Brian stopped confronting me,

as I would always embrace his anger and accommodate his defiant behavior by telling him I understood his frustration about that institution and the materially deprived conditions of his life.

My approach was not the same as the staff's approach. I was there three times a week for a few hours, but the staff was there full-time. In order for them to control the institution and enforce discipline, a system of restriction had been in place for many years whereby a resident who committed an infraction is not allowed to leave the premises. Typically, minor infractions (e.g., a chore that did not get done) result in a few days' restriction whereas more serious ones may result in many days or even several weeks (e.g., school suspension, car theft, etc.). Despite its immediate impact, the efficacy of such system is severely limited and even detrimental to the boys' development. As I witnessed, in many occasions the boys' restriction time had so rapidly accumulated that the end of the punishment would be farfetched to them. Instead of encouraging them to change their attitude, this would in fact contribute to the continuation of undesirable actions. Needless to say, such punitive system has negligible impact in promoting desired developmental outcomes, such as motivating the boys toward high academic achievement. Despite their basic needs being met (clothing, food, shelter, adult supervision, etc.) and reasonably frequent opportunities for sports, play and leisure, many residents were unhappy and many complained to me of boredom. Moreover, conflicts among residents and between residents and staff were common.

My initial reaction to those conditions was to conceive of alternative activities to give the boys additional opportunities to develop their talents and interests. One of my main goals was to go move beyond an individual level of approach and I sought to engage the boys in collective activities. The manager and the staff welcomed my initiative as they viewed it as providing the boys with “something extra to look forward to”. The first type of collective activity I implemented was to watch movies in the house. At first, this was very challenging, as the boys would start making fun of me and of the movies I brought. They would talk during the sessions, play with one another, throw pillows, make jokes, fight for each other seats, and even pass gas! After which they would laugh at my expense. Nonetheless, the boys enjoyed many of the movies, such as ‘One flew over the cuckoos’ nest’, whose content of institutional critique mirrored the power asymmetries in the group home. The boys identified with Jack Nicholson’s character, which was evident by the way the laughed and rooted for him. Then Fridays became established as movie day and the boys got used to it. Gradually their behavior became less challenging and we watched several different movies that went way beyond the typical Hollywood blockbuster, which was the type of movie to which they had access. I brought in movies that could capture their attention through powerful developmental stories, critical analysis of institutions, and racial issues.

The second type of collective activity I began organizing was trips to New York City on weekends, during which we visited museums, galleries, parks, and went to the movies. I usually brought a camera and let the boys take pictures,

which I later developed and brought to the institution where they were shared among the boys and the staff. According to the staff, the success of those trips was mainly due to the exposure to different things the boys were getting. I also treated them to some nice meals and they were very appreciative of that. Those activities were highly motivating to the boys, which helped change their relationship with me. Those trips also proved successful in attracting the more resistant boys to working with me. Some boys, who in the beginning had completely ignored me, had become more open to doing things with me. Those trips also proved successful in attracting the more resistant boys to working with me. Some boys, who in the beginning had completely ignored me, had become more open to doing things with me.

Despite my progress in expanding possibilities in the institution by offering alternative activities, I did not succeed in promoting learning activities during my first year there. Issues of learning and academic success were not the priority of the institution. This is not at all surprising and corresponds to the general orientation of child welfare practices, as the literature reviewed indicates. At the time I started working at the residential program, two youth counselors who were college students, Peter and Jerry, would occasionally help some boys with homework. However, that was not at all systematic and, despite the boys having to do 'study hour' every day (except Fridays) from 4:00 to 5:00 pm, most of them would only pretend to study. Communication between school and the program would take place mostly in cases of suspension and other incidents of misbehavior, such as 'cutting classes', bringing alcohol to school, etc. The

program had been chronically confronted with very low scholastic achievement and this problem was usually framed by the staff in terms of individual children's capacities and abilities, such as lack of intrinsic motivation. A quote from a dialogue I had with the manager a few months after I started working there illustrates well the institution's viewpoint. He told me: "Mr. Eduardo, you will waste your time trying to help all these kids. Some of them don't want to be helped. There is nothing you can do. Each individual is different." Alternatively, the staff also resorted to the boys' allegedly insufficient intellectual capacity to explain their developmental shortcomings. I was told that "some of these kids are not very bright". Thirdly, there were virtually no educational activities in the house, except for the study hour that was under loose staff supervision and seemed to be, for the most part, fictitious. Most boys had absolutely no interest in studying and a few were indeed practically illiterate. As a result, most of them had failing grades in school. Usually, whenever the manager would receive complaints from the school, the staff would take punitive actions to ensure that the boys do their schoolwork and behave according to institutional rules. Rebelliousness was a common response adopted by the boys when they feel forced to study or read.

5.3. Creating Zones of Proximal Development through Play

As my practice grew, I had many opportunities to play with the boys. This started with Rashid, who would come see me in the activity room everyday. Rashid loved to make rhymes for brief rap songs that they call 'free styling'. He

asked me to bring a tape recorder and he kept recording a rap he was trying to make. Brian also liked the idea of recording rap songs that he would improvise. Then he showed me two poems he had written. I encouraged him to write more, but he asked me how much I was going to pay him. I tried to organize free styling as an activity, but it did not work out. The boys would do that only when they wanted to. Despite my success in implementing alternative activities that expanded the possibilities in the residential program, I started to become aware of the limitations of my practice in bringing about a significant change in the activity system of the. Even though I was successful in establishing a close, dialogical relationship with particular boys, and despite the fact that I had been able to engage them in alternative activities, it became progressively clearer to me that the best alternative would be to propose a collective project in which they would participate as equal partners. On March 27, 2002 I gave the boys a survey asking what type of project they would be interested in participating and they chose to make a video. Johnson, the only boy in the program with the reputation of being a good student, had an outstanding talent for drawing and he wanted to be an artist. I had taken him and Rashid to the media laboratory at the New School University where a friend of mine was a student of media studies and the boys were thrilled visiting high-tech studios, editing rooms, playing with lighting and sound equipments, etc. Thus, the possibility of a video project was attractive to them. Then in the spring and summer of 2002 I started to plan the video project with them. This project became my dominant activity in the institution and

it will be described in detail in the next section as it constituted the second phase of my work.

Devising a collective project was my strategy to overcome the challenge of working with the boys. My expectation was that the collective project would help me create an alternative space of intervention in the institution and motivate the boys to learn something new. The video project started in September and lasted until December 2002. We met every Friday, with some exceptions, after the boys would come back from school and have lunch. Initially, workshop sessions were provided to teach the boys the basics of filming. The sessions were facilitated by a video professional and we also relied on the help of a research assistant. The research team aimed at creating an egalitarian participation that included democratic decision-making, respect for everybody's opinion, and treating one another courteously. All the participants were treated as equals. The decision to make the movie took place in the summer and Johnson, one of the oldest boys in residence proposed us the title "You reap what you sew". Johnson was considered by the staff and his peers as intelligent and was frequently seen reading, which gave him some status among his peers.

Not all boys were interested in the project, though. Nonetheless, seven out of ten stable residents joined the project. In the beginning it was very difficult to organize the boys. The first struggle was to organize them to come up with a premise to be the basis for the script. The first few sessions did not result in any workable idea. The younger boys who remained in the group home throughout the project – Roger and Az, both twelve years old, and Andre, thirteen years old,

wanted to play cops and suggested several robbery stories. The older boys who resided at the group home during the duration of the video project, Johnson, seventeen years old, Daniel, sixteen years old, and Tyrese, fifteen years old, did not like their ideas but did not present any alternative – Greg, fourteen years old, entered the institution in November and played only a small part in the video.

Then one of the youth counselors, Jerry, took the lead and suggested the robbery of a woman who had just won the lottery. Most of the boys liked the idea and we began to develop the script.

The original intention of the research team was to have the boys write the script. However, with the exception of Roger, nobody else wanted to write. Roger had come to the group home in the summer and was the youngest boy in the institution. Then early in October Az, came to the group home, followed by Jacquan at the end of that month. The presence of these boys fundamentally altered the relations in the institution. Together with Andre, they formed a somewhat separate clique. Their interests were different from that of the older boys, which was visible in their (younger boys) motivation to engage in role-play. Consistent with the Leontiev's and El'konin's perspective, role-play seemed to be their dominant form of activity. One dramatic example of that happened in the Halloween of 2002 when Roger spent three days dressed as Dracula playing tricks with fake blood. In the first day everybody thought that it was cute. However, in the third day Roger's play seemed to have gone overboard and Sylvia, a youth counselor, told him that it was about time he stopped it.

The younger boys became very interested in the video project. For them the video was an opportunity to play and they seized it. Roger and Az were particularly excited about the video and they would eagerly greet the research team whenever we would come to the house, which sharply contrasted with the attitude of the older boys. The latter became progressively less interested in the project. They expressed disdain for the ideas of the younger boys but refused to cooperate and make suggestions. After several weeks of work, the research team decided not to insist on the boys who did not want to participate in the project. The purpose of the project was based on the notion of voluntary participation and as the older boys became resistant to the project we felt it would be futile to insist on their participation. Furthermore, the older boys kept harshly mocking the younger boys' ideas. As the first three scenes were being filmed, Daniel, the boy with highest status in the house (Bobby and Jamal had already left the institution) dismissively categorized the video as "whack". Tyrese was the only one among the bigger boys to participate in the first scenes and he kept on participating throughout the entire project.

The work with the younger boys was going well and they maintained their interest throughout the project. Nonetheless we were not able to rely on them to write the script. Indeed, the script emerged as the boys enacted the story scene by scene. It was collectively decided that Andre would rob his friend's mother who had won the lottery. Then Roger and Az decided that they would be cops. They wanted to play bad cops and it was decided that the thief would look for one of them to offer him some money in exchange for protection. Then the boys

decided that the cops would forge a suspect accused of the robbery and arrest him. This was the original plot and not until November had it evolved into the final scenes. Once the basics of the plot were put together we proceeded to shooting the scenes according to a planned sequence. Based on the rehearsal of the first scenes the research assistant wrote the script of three scenes that required complex dialogues. However, the boys did not read the scenes in advance and a great deal of the dialogues consisted of improvisations.

The video project represented a transitional moment in my practice, which marked a shift in my relationship with the institution. After the initial months, during which I had established a good rapport with the manager, my relationship with him had been strained and, by the end to the summer, he was actively avoiding me – or so it seemed to me. The boys were sent to the park and I would not have many opportunities to work with them. Luckily, I was able to access my own resources and I hired a video professional to conduct the video project and I also had the help of a former student who became my research assistant. Notwithstanding being squeezed by the rigid routine of the institution and by the resistance of the manager (and his loyal staff) and of the older boys, I was able to secure my place in the institution. I had the Fridays for the video project and my presence was tolerated. Fortunately, the young boys' engagement in the project had been so intense, that they were able to draw the other boys into the process. By December, Johnson had come back to the project and played a little role in it. Daniel also gave in and became very participative, especially handling the technical equipment. Greg, who had recently entered the institution, joined in

the process as well. Throughout the project the youth counselors, such as Sylvia, Simon, and Jerry, gave me their modest support. Sylvia actually played a character in one of the scenes. However, the manager completely ignored the project. As we kept on filming, the scenes recorded were being watched by boys and staff. The boys absolutely loved watching themselves and the staff also enjoyed it. The manager, nonetheless, resolutely avoided watching any scene. Every Friday he would leave the institution early in the afternoon as soon as we started working on the project. Nevertheless, the boys were entertained, which reduced the staff's burden of controlling them.

5.4. Monitoring and Supporting Learning: Shifting Institutional Practices

Co-construction of an Institutional Tool

A third phase of my work started in the fall of 2003 when the boys started a new school year. By that time most of the boys with whom I had worked in the previous year, including Brian, Rashid, Johnson, Jamal, Jason, Trevor, Jack, George, Andre, and Az, were gone. At the beginning of the fall 2003 the boys living in the institution were Daniel, living there since 2001, Tyrese, Roger, Greg, Jacquay, and who had entered in 2002, and Jay, Wes, Robert, Brian Smith, and Jacquan who came to the group home in the spring of 2003. Two other boys stayed in the institution only for a few weeks and after Jacquay left, early in October 2003, Robert Black came onboard, followed by Derek who replaced

Roger late in November 2003. After Tyrese left Neil entered the group Home home, followed later by Don. Those were the boys with whom I worked for several months, followed by Martin, Jim, and Adam. The new social worker, Ms. Li, started working in May 2003. At the time we talked about focusing on the boys' learning activities and we both agreed on prioritizing that. Ms. Li was there full-time, which meant that she was in the group home on a daily basis. A next phase of the work began when learning activities started to be monitored systematically on the fall of 2003, which led the boys to seek our help and, consequently, created the conditions for the social worker and me to begin tutoring them. Together, the manager, the social worker and I had agreed on focusing on the boys' studying. We decided to implement a tool to monitor the boys' school activities, which also functioned to strengthen the link with the middle school. This was not a new idea, but rather the revamping of an old tool that was never systematically implemented. The new idea emerged as the Ms. Li and I were talking one day in October 2003. As it had become common, I recorded our conversations, which we used to write our reports for the institution. I will present in somewhat detail our dialogue whereby we came up with this idea to illustrate the collaborative nature of our work, which was the underpinning of the developmental changes accomplished in phase III. Ms. Li had complained to me that she was not able to help them. *"I don't know what kind of things their teachers assign. I can't help them if they don't bring home their textbooks."* Interestingly, that was exactly what I ran into when I came to the institution. I told her that I would love to monitor the boys' schoolwork, but that it was hard

because I was not there everyday. She then explained, *"It's hard to monitor their schoolwork because if they don't do their homework nobody notifies that. The teachers don't go out of their way and say, look so and so didn't do this and this."* Then I turned to Ms. Li and asked her, *"What if we send them something?"* Ms. Li approved of the idea and continued, *"Yeah, we will have to go after them. They have a system right now; the progress notes where every time they go to class their teachers sign it, they bring it back and show it to the manager. But they never do it, Robert loses them all the time, they cut too many classes. There has to be some kind of correspondence."* I then asked Ms. Li how we could do it and she said, *"I've seen kids and teacher send notebooks back and forth, but the kids are going to lose them. They are going to rip the pages that have something bad written."* Then I asked her if we could call the teachers and let them know that we were going to start collecting daily school reports. I told her that I believed the teachers would like that as it would lessen their burden. Ms. Li agreed, *"Oh, yeah, especially with behavioral problems. And I've heard a lot that they call the house and nothing happens. Before I came, the manager was the only person, he can't keep track of everything."* She also said that would also help her communicate with all the teachers and that in the previous year she had not been able to meet them all. Ms. Li also said that she would talk to the guidance counselors. Finally we discussed whether the manager would support the initiative, which would be crucial for its success. I told Ms. Li that I knew that the manager collected those reports, but she said, *"Yeah, but he doesn't really look at them carefully."* I asked her if we could collect them, given the manager's inconsistency and she said,

"Yeah, I don't see why not." Then I told her, *"So let's do those report cards, do you think you can collect them daily. Do you think it's too much for you?"* Ms. Li answered, *"no. They just come home and show them to me."* Then we talked about curtailing the boys' play time before study hour in order to make the transition into study hour easier. Ms. Li also suggested that we needed to talk about the activity room being open only during certain hours. At the end of that day we talked to the manager and he liked our idea. We then proceeded to work on the school report. The next day I came to the institution and Ms. Li had already prepared the new report that was titled school daily report, or the daily as the boys came to call it. The manager approved it and many copies were made. Every day, before leaving the house for school, each boy received his daily, which he needed to bring back home signed by all their teachers. The daily had one column for the teacher to indicate whether assignments had been handed in and another for them to indicate whether the boy had received any assignments that day. Ms. Li also created a daily contest in which the first boy to complete 20 good dailies would be taken out to lunch. Ms. Li told me that *"The incentive for it is really working, to go out. And they are really competitive. They see who they are up against. I also praise them a lot when they get good dailies. Wes brought a very good daily yesterday. All the teachers said good things, that he has potential."*

Constructing Learning Tasks: helping the boys relate to knowledge as a tool by concretely understanding theoretical concepts

The implementation of learning activities on a daily basis allowed me to focus on improving the quality of the boys' learning experiences, which was very much needed especially for the younger boys. For the most part, the boys related to learning as acquiring inert pieces of information to be memorized that had minimal relevance for their lives. Even though the boys would express their belief that knowledge and academic success were important for success in the future, in the reality of their daily activities they were only marginally connected with that belief. In other words, academic success and knowledge did not have a strong motivating force as the boys engaged in their everyday activities. One of the main issues I confronted was how to make academic knowledge meaningful to the boys. This was as much a theoretical as it was a practical problem as I found myself struggling to justify why, for example, I wanted the boys to learn about evolution, physics and earth sciences, as well as critical perspectives on social issues. To my colleagues at the group home, these topics seemed too abstract and they instead suggested more practical ones, such as nutrition, exercising, and independent life skills.

Indeed, in the fall of 2003 the social worker, Ms. Li, took to teaching the boys pragmatic skills such as how to tie a tie and how to eat with silverware. Ms. Li shared with me that one of the youth counselors told her that she should teach things to the boys such as how to eat and vocabulary. Then in December 2003

she gave the boys two pages of bulleted information about table manners as part of the etiquette workshop. At first I did not like the idea and I doubted its learning potential. However, given Ms. Li's enthusiasm, supported by the rest of the staff, I did not express my opinion and joined the group. The session started with each one of us reading a bullet and, to my surprise, after the boys' initial resistance, they seemed to be enjoying the activity. Robert Black, for instance, even though anxious about reading in public, enjoyed the etiquette rules and kept naming which boys would commonly violate some of those rules. Jay also made some comments about not acting "like a group home kid" when they go out to eat, even though he had been resistant when the group session was about to begin. This pattern, resistance followed by engagement, emerged regularly in most group or individual learning activities proposed by the adults. The same happened when I prepared a nutrition workshop in the spring of 2004 at the manager's request. I did not have time to do it in a systemic-theoretic, or developmental teaching, manner. What happened was that the social worker had organized a healthy cooking day with the boys and, before the meal, she wanted the boys to learn basic nutrition information, such as the nutritional value of each food group. The day before I searched the internet together with Derek, who was very helpful in deciding what information to include in the workshop. He also helped me type the material to distribute to the other residents. We printed out some basic information on the different types of food and we read that together at the dining table, just like the etiquette workshop. Once again, this learning task had been created by the adults and given to the boys who, as usual, at first resisted

participating in it. Some of the boys were resistant to participate in the beginning, such as Jay and Robert Black, and it took about 15 minutes to get all the boys at the table and the counselors had to tell Wes and Brian Smith to come downstairs. The counselors had to go after them to have them come to the dining room. However, as I started asking questions the boys became interested in the session. Don and Neil volunteered to read aloud the answers for the questions that were provided to them. I asked them what the food pyramid is and asked a volunteer to draw it. Then all of them decided to draw it, including Jay who was initially unmotivated to take part in the discussions and was actually reading the paper at the table and stopped doing that only upon my request. The boys knew about the basic types of food, but they did not know anything about fibers and became interested in learning about it, especially Brian Smith and Neil. They asked a lot of questions, showing that they were interested in learning. For example, Brian Smith asked us what vitamin K is, adding: "I never heard of this vitamin." The session went well and both the social worker and I felt invigorated at the end. Afterwards, the youth counselor of the first shift, Ms. Norton, congratulated me for the workshop saying that it was very informative. Later on, the manager also told me the same thing. Interestingly, he asked me to plan trips with the boys for the summer of 2004 like the ones the social worker and I had done in the summer of 2003. I was very excited that he took the initiative. He said that money would not be an issue. Indeed, he had asked me two months ago to continue the trips to New York on weekends. These workshops seemed, as well as the sessions watching educational videos and doing other explicit learning

activities, suggested that, despite the boys' protests at initiating a learning activity, they actually enjoyed learning once they engaged in those activities.

However, I was convinced that helping the boys to connect in meaningful ways to different fields of knowledge would have very practical consequences as it could help them change their attitude toward the institutional practices in which they were immersed, toward one another and toward themselves. Inspired by Gal'perin's perspective, I knew that I could help the boys relate to knowledge construction as a useful process, regardless of its level of generality, by framing it as an instrument of meaningful – and historically evolved- sociocultural practices (for a thorough review, see Stetsenko & Arieivitch, 2002). Furthermore, I trusted that to the extent that I succeeded in helping the boys to concretely understand the theoretical concepts underpinning different knowledge areas, which they indeed encounter in school, an important barrier to their motivation for learning would be removed. This led me to attempt to appropriate into my research practice the interrelated instructional principles of systemic-theoretic (Gal'perin, 1969; Arieivitch & Stetsenko, 2000), ascending from the abstract to the concrete (Davydov, 1990), and developmental teaching (Hedegaard, 1990).

Once institutional practices to monitor the boys' school progress were established, I became better equipped to help them develop a concrete understanding of the subject matters they were taught in school by tutoring them and providing supplementary workshops. Tutoring the boys became the most consistent activity for Ms. Li and me beginning in the fall of 2003. Due to the boys' limited skills, knowledge, and motivation, we spent a great deal of time and

effort trying to get their schoolwork done. Typically, there was a struggle between helping the boys complete the tasks they had been assigned versus working on their insufficiently developed knowledge and skills, which hindered their ability to do schoolwork. Ms. Li focused on writing and social studies and left science for me. Thus, a growing focus on science teaching and learning took shape and I also conducted a few workshops in math and science and brought scientific videos through which richer opportunities for learning and collaboration emerged. I also became better able to mentor the boys more intensely, discussing and helping them to articulate a vision for their future as we critically examined social issues such as racism, sexism, inequality, and social justice. Importantly, my relationship with some of the residents had deepened and they were actually 'opening up' to me to a considerable degree. One of the most powerful tools I had a chance to use is critical pedagogy and social theory. Having read Freire with Jay, Derek, and Brian Smith in the fall 2003 and spring 2004 created a context to discuss how each of us contributes to creating institutional practices and, thus, makes it more salient how we can change them. Jay, the oldest resident at the time, had become an important interlocutor as we collaborated in creating practices of solidarity, which became particularly salient in the spring 2005 after Ms. Li left and before the new social worker came onboard only in August 2005. Under my guidance, Jay read, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Erich Fromm's *To Have or To Be*, and many essays and excerpts from critical essayists, such as bell hooks, and Cornel West – the latter a favorite of the manager.

During the last phase I was able to combine the boys' school curriculum with our weekend trips. We visited the American Museum of Natural History on countless occasions where we also visited the planetarium. With those visits I became progressively more able to engage the boys in learning about biology and Earth Sciences. One of my main goals was to help them connect the subject matters that were presented to them in a fragmented way in school. Throughout this research we moved constantly back and forth through the thread from the creation of the earth to the origins of life, evolution of the species, human evolution, and history. I had bought several books with exquisite drawings and pictures as well as several scientific DVDs in order to entice the boys. Following developmental teaching, I worked hard to avoid presenting learning tasks to the boys top-down and ready-made. Instead, I strove to create problem situations that would rouse their curiosity and ignite an inquiry process characterized by constructing and appropriating models and concepts to solve and answer the problems posed.

I present here some examples of how I led learning activities based on the notion of developmental teaching. The adoption of developmental teaching in my research practice was by no means fully realized as there were enormous barriers to single-handedly implementing a new after school curriculum. Nonetheless, the notion of relating to knowledge as an instrument to deal with meaningful cultural practices was extremely helpful in making learning tasks more meaningful.

A) The Physical Earth

In the fall of 2003 I started to talk to the boys about basic concepts in Earth Science and physics. They knew several facts about the solar system but they could not relate their abstract knowledge acquired in school to understand empirical phenomena such as the length of a day and a year and the four seasons. I had brought a globe that we had used for social studies and a lamp to represent the sun. The boys accepted the problem, which they felt they should know. It was as though their ignorance had materialized in my questions and they wanted to overcome that. They took the globe and demonstrated that the earth spins around itself. Then I asked them in which ways the earth moves. Brian Smith, Robert, Robert Black, and even Jay could not put together an explanation. Brian tells me that he knows it is something about the hemispheres. I tease them, "Oh my god! C'mon, you guys. Doesn't the earth rotate around the sun?" Brian replies, "It's the same thing". "No, it's not the same thing," I tell him. Brian continues, "It rotates around the sun," and I complement, "It rotates around the sun and it spins around itself." Then Brian expresses his surprise, "Oh, oh, oh", as if he had finally realized what he was missing. I then ask him whether the other planets go around the sun and he answers affirmatively. I also asked what the closest planet to the sun is and Brian asks me, "Is it Mars?" I tell him that it is not and he says, "the earth is the second one," fishing for an answer. The boys cannot answer and I tell them the order of the planets. I continued the conversation and ask them why the planets rotate around the sun endlessly. Nobody says anything and I ask them if they know they forget that. Brian asks,

“Why?” and I say, “Because you memorize these things, you never understood how this works. Here you have the planets and their paths around the sun is called orbit. Some orbit closer to the sun...” Brian interrupts me, “They get more sun.” Then I ask them how many days we have in a year. Brian attempts an answer, “A hundred and....” Robert remembers that it is about three hundred and I ask why that is so. They do not answer and I ask how many hours there are in a day. Brian says that he does not know and I insist that he does. “No, I don’t know it, Eduardo”, he tells me a bit exasperated and I maintain that he does. I then step back and ask him when the day become the next day. Brian realizes that the day has twenty-four hours, but can not explain why. Then I turn to Robert and I ask him why we have days and nights while I model on the globe the earth spinning around as it is lit by a lamp. Robert tells me what he sees as the earth spins. He shows which side of the earth is day or night based on the light rays it receives from the lamp representing the sun. I ask him what causes day and night. Robert answers, “this movement. The earth moves!” Then we continued and Brian now is able to explain why the year lasts 365 days.

I worked on this topic on different occasions as new boys entered the institution. For instance, in February 2005 I showed Stephen Hawking’s Universe video “The Big Bang” to Martin, Robert, Jay, Neil, Brad, and Wes- the other boys were absent. The video covers major scientific breakthroughs in the history of physics and astronomy and I stopped it several times to make sure the boys understood those conceptual breakthroughs in the history of scientific thinking about the universe. What I thought was suitable about the video was that it

discloses how knowledge was constructed based on distinct, indirect pieces of evidence that the scientists interpreted as confirming or disconfirming what they had suspected. The video reveals how major concepts, such as gravity, originated in the history of science. I thought that the video would help the boys develop a more concrete understand of abstract theoretical concepts they were learning in their science classes. That day, however, I encountered the usual initial resistance. Wes did not watch the video at all. I did not want to force him to watch the video, so I allowed him to leave and told him I would not tell the manager. Brad watched the video for about 15 minutes, but then left for the activity room to play video game with Wes. Brad was acting rude and disrespectful, and he was not interested in the video nor in the ideas we were discussing. He was disturbing the presentation and distracting the other boys who followed his lead and started to play and make fun of every thing in the video. Even Jay went along Brad's "carnivalization". I appealed to Jay on the basis of what we had discussed so many times about him being on my side and being the leader and not undermining my work. The atmosphere had become a little tense as Brad was getting really loud and I knew the manager would come out of his office and yell at them. I wanted to avoid this turn of the events and I appealed to Jay to help me. He finally decided to join me and told Brad to "chill." Jay knew the manager would react with punitive measures had he noticed the situation was out of control. Because the boys were not interested in watching the video, I started putting prizes to questions they answered about the topics in the video. Then they became more interested in the discussion, even though in

the end they all forgot about the prizes. Martin, Robert, and Neil actually became very engaged in learning the content of the video, whereas Jay's interest fluctuated.

The first point discussed was how ancient Greeks realized how the Earth's surface is round, not flat. The first point is that they observed ships rising from the distance, which made them suspect that earth's surface was not flat. At that point I stopped the video to make sure Martin and Robert understood that. Jay, Brad, and Neil helped them grasp that by repeating and rephrasing what was showed in the video. Then an experiment was reconstructed which allowed ancient Greek scientists to prove that the earth was not flat. I explained beforehand what they were going to see: first, a discussion of how they suspected that the earth was not flat based on prior observations, and then how they had come up with a way of proving it. Then we watched a physicist put two sticks apart from one another by several meters on a beach as he measured the length of the shadow cast by the sun on each stick. When asked to explain how the experiment proves that the Earth could not be flat, Robert remembered that "they use the sticks to prove that the shadows ah... the shadows...." Robert said that they saw how much sunlight is cast on both sticks. Jay and Neil grasped immediately how the different lengths of the shadows cast by the sun on the sticks was evidence that the surface of the Earth is curved. Martin and Robert did not grasp that, and I had Jay and Neil demonstrate it to them. Next, the video discussed Copernicus, Keppler, and Galileo. I stopped the video again to create a context for Martin and Robert to understand what would be discussed. I asked

Martin to tell us what the planets in our solar system are. They all wanted to answer that question, but I insisted on Martin doing it. It took him a while to come up with six planets and he could not put them in order from the closest the farthest from the sun. We also talked about their atmosphere based on their position. Neil and Jay knew which were colder and which were warmer because of their position relative to the sun. Robert and Martin did not know that. We diagrammed the orbit of the planets around the sun and I checked with Robert and Martin what orbit means. Then there was a discussion of how heavenly bodies changed their positions in the sky, which conflicted with the notion of the universe as static. I then brought back the issue of Mars reversing its movement in the sky. I had read that before with the boys on different occasions and Jay remembered it. Neil was able to grasp it fairly quickly. Then we modeled on paper the orbits of the two planets around the sun with the earth outspeeding Mars. Finally Martin and Robert were able to describe how the phenomenon of Mars retrograde motion provided strong evidence that the Earth orbits around the sun, which led scientists to disprove the geocentric model of the universe.

The final piece we watched was about how Newton discovered gravity and the story of the apple. Robert and Martin knew of Isaac Newton but not what he had discovered. We stopped the video again to model the problem of gravity. The question was why things don't fall from the earth's surface. We first drew the earth's round surface. Neil did it and represented the North and South poles. I asked Martin to draw a person standing on the surface of the poles. One of them he drew upside down. Martin did not understand the question immediately, but

the others did, including Robert. Then I kept asking Martin why people don't fall from the Earth's surface. I modeled how a table's up side holds things, but not it's down side and then asked Martin why the same did not happen on the Earth's surface. He could not answer it, but understood the problem. Then Jay and Neil told us that gravity is the force that "pulls things towards the Earth". Then we talked about the orbit of the planets and Neil explained that phenomenon in terms of gravity, as attraction between two bodies. I explained why the moon revolves around the earth, the planets around the sun as the pull of the earth and sun on those bodies. Then Neil completed that the attraction goes both ways which is why the moon doesn't fall on the earth. We demonstrated that by me giving my hand to Neil and we both pulled one another toward ourselves until we reached a point of equilibrium and began to rotate.

That topic was brought back later in April as we continued to visit Museum of Natural History. One day I brought place mats that I had seen on the streets with a diagram of the solar system and facts about each planet. I thought the boys would find that humorous and still that would give an opportunity to check what they had retained about our previous discussions. Jay and Neil noticed some interesting features, such as that the day in Venus is longer than a year. Neil said that he knew that, but none of us knew what determines the speed of a planet's rotation. I showed that to Robert and he did not know what rotation and revolution of a planet is. It took me a while to be able to engage him in that conversation because Robert was not willing to try and answer my questions. He seemed to be embarrassed because he was not able to neither answer

questions nor grasp the problems. As usual, Robert's way of dealing with that was through play by teasing me, pretending to ignore or disrespect me (e.g., shouting I don't know!). I succeeded in engaging him by prompting him through questions about the movements the earth makes. I showed to him the facts in the place mat (23hs 56 min for the Earth's rotation and 365 days for its revolution) and asked what those terms referred to. He kept answering that he did not know and I insisted he did know. He mentioned that the earth spins and I asked around what. He answered around itself. I was happy with his answer but frustrated that he still could not answer why the day has 24 hours. Then I brought the globe again and asked to represent the earth's rotation. We marked a point on the globe and did a full spin. I asked Robert how long it would take for a complete spin and he finally got it! I asked him to write it down. He did it and got it perfectly right. Later on I recapped these ideas with Martin. I was also successful in engaging Neil in helping his peers as opposed of ridiculing their lack of knowledge, which was something he would do quite often.

B) Graphic Design as a tool for advertising and activism: A critical and historical perspective

In the summer of 2004 a graphic designer offered to volunteer for an art workshop for the boys. Her initial idea was to teach the boys some basic art skills, which they would use to make T-shirt each as a final project. We accepted her offer and I engaged in a dialogue with the designer about exploring ways to make

the learning activity more meaningful, although we were not certain how to do it. On July 02 we had the first art workshop that took place in the dining room. The designer explained to the boys that the proposal of the workshop was to help them learn some basic graphic arts skills through design projects. She told them that there would be a series of weekly workshops and the final product would be a T-shirt for each of them with their own design on it. The designer then taught a class on the uses of logos and images. She showed them different fonts and asked them with what they associated that. Gradually the boys broke the ice and started to say what the fonts suggested. I was actually surprised that Wes, usually one of the last to engage in our collective activities, was one of the first to participate. When showed fonts that looked like dried out trees and cactuses, Wes told that that they suggested western things. Afterwards, the boys had access to some font and logo books to peruse and they chose the ones they liked the most. The boys then practiced copying logos and fonts with fine pencils and tracing paper. Robert enjoyed that and was very concentrated on the task of tracing images and fonts onto a tracing paper. It seemed that that type of exercise was a good opportunity for him to learn to express himself in a different medium, given that he is not very articulate. Robert Black also enjoyed the exercise and I was happy with that because he is one of the most resistant boys. At times he had conflicts with other residents because they all wanted to use the same logo book at the same time. Robert Black would just take a book from somebody else without taking their needs into consideration. We had to intervene to solve the conflicts and, fortunately, the boys were so immersed in the exercise

that they continued working despite the seemingly chaotic environment that had been established. The manager allowed us to use the copying machine in his office and the boys were having a good time copying logos and creating sentences with them. Many chose gory fonts and images. The second workshop was also very hands-on. We gave the boys digital and Polaroid cameras and they were asked to take pictures of themselves that would be utilized for the art in their T-shirts. They very much enjoyed doing that. Nonetheless, that level of exercise based on technical operations seemed too simplistic for me. I wanted the boys to have a richer learning experience and not just practice a mechanical skill. Moreover, I knew that if they did not get involved in a higher process of setting goals for their activities they would sooner than later get bored with the workshop. I discussed that with the designer and she understood the issue I was raising. Unfortunately, I witnessed other occasions when volunteers would come to the institution offering to help the boys with a particular, limited skill, which many times did not rouse their interest and would seem to further reinforce the notion that those boys were lazy and lacked intrinsic motivation. I had always been convinced that the problem was meaning, not behavior, motivation, nor any other inherent psychological deficit. Thus, I urged the designer to think about something more challenging and interesting that would make the boys want to learn.

For the next workshop the designer suggested to start with the history of design. Most graphic design books start with a poster for the U.S. army from the beginning of the twentieth century to recruit soldiers. I liked the idea of adding a

historical perspective to the workshop and we came up with the idea that we could teach the boys the function of logos and images to sell products. The designer then suggested that we teach how they could also be used as a tool for activism. Then the next section was titled: “the power of image: from branding to activism- design as a developmental tool.” The designer brought her own computer and projector and we had the session in the living room. The boys were completely thrilled and there was little resistance that day. I present below some excerpts from the dialogue that we had with the boys as the image of the poster “I want you in the U.S. army” was project on the wall.

Designer: There was no such thing as a poster. Advertising just didn’t exist at that time. Then they needed to come up with a solution because they needed people to join the army. Then that’s what they did. That was one of the first time someone made a poster.

Researcher: That was for World War I, right?

Designer: What do you think about that? What’s interesting is that this poster really talks to you. The guy is almost looking at you. Do you think this poster would work now?

Researcher: What do you think of this poster?

Neil: It wouldn’t work for me.

Researcher: Who is he talking to?

Neil: Everybody

Researcher: Who do you think it’s intended to?

Neil: Everybody.

Researcher: Everybody? men, women, children?

Designer: Do you think nowadays anybody would identify with that?

Because this guy looks really specific, he doesn't even look American, he looks English. (Neil corrects her- who is actually Brazilian and has an accent- British, Neil says).

Designer: British, yeah.

Researcher: When I saw it, I thought it would not work today. If you that is supposed to be any American men, what do you think may be missing? (Nobody answers then I ask Jay what he thinks).

Jay: People of color

Researcher: Exactly. It tells you how people used to think back then.

Designer: Now, look what I found the other day when I was walking home. (She shows an image with comedian Chris Rock announcing a TV show in the same pose as the poster for the U.S. army. The boys immediately identify the comedian. Other black actors are featured, such as Samuel L. Jackson and Whoopi Goldberg). The designer continues.

Designer: How funny is that? He is using something that was created a long time ago to announce something today. Even though we were not born at that time, this makes this image more appealing because we feel that we know it already. That's how propaganda fixates things in you head because you don't even know it came from something.

Neil: I don't get that, why does it say divided we stand? I thought it was united we stand. (The poster was titled divided we stand).

Jay: They're saying we not united as a nation.

Researcher: It's a joke using that image.

The designer then shows the artsy changes she had made to the pictures the boys took in the previous session and coupled them with the sentences the boys had created in the first session. For example, Robert Black wrote "baby hug me" and the designer project his picture with that sentence written in several different ways, creating various moods through different graphic effects. The designer then calls Robert by his name. Robert then answers in his usual teasing style: "How do you know my name? He asks her. The designer then proposes an exercise: "I would like you guys to do an exercise. Try to come up with a picture of yourself, an image, and associate that with a message. And try to convince that the image needs to go with that message. Like that poster that talks to you. You can talk to people with a poster."

After a two-week interruption, due to the boy's trip one day and the designer's impossibility to come the previous week, we resume the workshop on July 30. Once again the designer brought her computer and projector. The workshop consisted of a lecture on the uses of design as a tool for propaganda and as a tool for public campaigns and activism. The lecture consisted of a historical sequence of the evolution of Santa Claus' image as it was appropriated by Coca-cola, which made big changes to it until its present day look. The designer started off by projecting an old image of Santa Claus, which the boys were not able to identify. The next topic consisted of images and logos making fun of multinational sportswear companies, such as Nike and Adidas. The boys

were intrigued by the humorous images, which created an opportunity to investigate what was behind that. The designer asked them if they knew about sweatshops in developing countries and the boys went to the Internet to do a search on that. At the end the session we discussed inhumane labor practices and the boys were shocked with the allegations they found against those big corporations. Then the designer showed them artistic images calling attention for famine, ecological crimes, and other global perils. After the session was over, Ms. Li was very excited about the workshop. She told me that the boys were so interested in it. "They love this. They are so involved and they are thinking! They need this, to think about those issues". The next section we watched the video 'The Merchants of Cool' that presents a detailed analysis of how corporations study teenagers' evolving attitudes and target those to increase consumption of the products they put in the market. The boys were surprised to see how very little is spontaneous in marketing or, as Jay put, "the whole system is made for us to want to buy things and make the companies rich." Thus, the graphic art workshop had become a tool to learn about societal practices and, the next step, was to create an opportunity for the boys to use what they were learning creatively and make their contribution.

The next workshop consisted of an exercise for the residents to work in teams. Derek watched the class attentively and received the task proposal enthusiastically. The task was to come up with a campaign, which required a message and an image to go along with it. We explained that there would be a prize for the best one. Derek came up with several themes and, eventually,

decided for same sex. He was eager to learn and he made us happy with his contagious enthusiasm. The social worker encouraged Robert to work with Derek because they had constant fights over Robert calling Derek gay. Robert eventually decided to work together with Derek. However, they could not finish the task in one session and Derek had gone home during the following session.

The next session Robert did not want to work with Robert Black and the other residents had already chosen their partners. Robert then decided to work by himself. The designer and I sat with him and we helped him choose a theme for his poster. At first Robert was pessimistic about his ability to carry out the task and told us he would give up. We kept encouraging him and we prompted him to think about an issue he would like to call attention to. Eventually, Robert chose drugs as his theme. Then the designer and I took turns helping him come up with a message as we all flipped through the pages of several magazines. Robert had difficulty thinking creatively and required intense individual supervision in order to complete the task. Together we came up with the conception for his poster but we did not have time carry it out. His poster did not have an image and he did not win the contest for best poster, for which the manager had been the judge not knowing which boys had done the posters. Robert was very angry at the end for having lost the contest and we talked to him about the nature of contests and that we need to learn to deal with the negative emotions that such situations arise. Jay had been one of the first to come up with a theme for a campaign: capital punishment. He and Neil decided to work together. Jay was happy when he heard Greg- who skipped several sessions but had come back for the last one-

protest that Jay and Neil should not be allowed to work together because they are “super smart” and would certainly win. Somehow Greg convinced Neil and Jay not to work together and, eventually, Greg ended up working with Jay. They are the oldest residents and, because of that, we were a little reluctant to let them work together competing against the younger boys. However, they insisted and seemed really eager to work together, so we allowed them to do so. They worked on capital punishment, the theme Jay had chosen last week. Jay provided the main idea for the poster and he came up with the written message. Together they planned the image and Greg was primarily responsible for drawing the scenes they had chosen. They won the contest. The social worker observed that Jay engaged well in the workshop. She commented that “as usual, once Jay decides to be serious about any activity, he makes good contributions to the group”. She also said that Jay “could be more proactive in taking leadership in the workshop as well as in other collaborative activities. We will encourage him to take the workshop more seriously and be self-conscious of his role as an older resident”. Robert Black participated in the art workshop with the other residents, but he was the last one to join the group. He chose to work by himself and spent a long time flipping through the pages of magazines without making progress in his poster. He copied the title and image of an article but could not unfold it into a ‘campaign’. Eventually I suggested that he go back to the theme he proposed the previous week: living healthily. We helped Robert Black find images of fast food in the magazines and associate that with obesity. His poster was chosen as the best in a tie with Jay and Greg’s poster. He had been very resistant to engage in the

contest and needed our support to stay on the task and had difficulty coming up with ideas. Robert Black said several times that he would never win. He required a great deal of persistence and patience on our part. At the end his mood changed dramatically as he won the prize. We took the opportunity to tell him that he should not be pessimistic and give up his work. Wes participated in the contest and he worked with Neil. For the first time, Wes stayed throughout the entire session. Wes supported Neil's decision and helped him write the message on the poster. He also helped Neil to draw and to prepare the collage. He was cooperative and supportive of his partner as he let Neil take the leadership and worked with him until the end. Neil was very upset about losing the contest and destroyed the poster. It seemed that Neil likes the privilege of being considered the best boy in residence, which stems from his outstanding academic performance. Then we talked to him about not always winning, enjoying the process, and learning to be humble.

C) Math

Mathematics was a problem for some boys and I frequently tutored them on that. It was hard to do it systematically because the boys were on different grade levels and they were usually learning different content areas at each particular point in time. One example of how I tried to make math concepts and formulae meaningful took place on February 2005, when I worked with Robert Black who was failing math. In the past I had had a great session with him in which I helped him reconstruct the meaning of positive and negative numbers as

Robert Black struggled with his homework on integers. The task he confronted was to memorize in what circumstances you get a positive or negative number when you multiply them. It was evident that Robert Black had no idea of the meaning of a negative number and could not tell me when that could be used. I created an imaginary scenario in which he had a banking account and at specific dates money was either deposited or taken away from his account. Then I asked Robert Black how he would track withdrawals from deposits. Immediately he put the positive and negative signs to the left of the fictitious figures I used in that exercise. That experience had been very significant for Robert Black as he could realize that there actually was some meaning to abstract mathematical concepts. As a result Robert Black learned that he could come to me and I would help him understand abstract ideas, even though he would do that only on a 'last-minute' basis.

On occasion Robert Black would come to for help. One day as I came to the institution he was waiting for me. He opened the door for me as soon as he saw me and told me right away that he wanted me to help him do his math homework. The other boys were sitting around the dining table. Some were playing cards and all were waiting for study hour to begin. Robert Black brought his math book and we went to the third floor and started working together. He had to solve some geometry problems by applying simple equations (e.g., to calculate the perimeter and area of squares, rectangles, and triangles). At the time Robert Black was in eighth grade and his math book was titled pre-algebra. It seemed that geometry was given as a way of instantiating algebraic principles

and applications. He was working on a section on models representing the perimeter and the area of the rectangle, the square, and the triangle with the respective formulae. Robert Black had to solve problems with the same structure as the models (only the sizes and shapes were different). He knew the formula to calculate the area of the rectangle and he could also calculate the perimeter of all those shapes. However, Robert Black could not generalize from the formulae for the area and the perimeter of the rectangle to the area and the perimeter of squares and triangles. When calculating the perimeter of a square, he applied the formula $4 \times s$ (side) without relating it to the perimeter of a rectangle. Robert Black applied the equations mechanically without considering their meaning. Moreover, he could calculate the area of a rectangle but could not derive the area of a triangle from it. I drew several rectangles and cut them in half (2 triangles) and asked him to determine the area of each triangle formed. He would go straight the equation for the triangle without considering that all he had to do was to divide the area of the rectangle by two. He could see that a rectangle divided in two halves (when cut diagonally) would yield two triangles whose areas would be half the area of the rectangle. For example, if a rectangle were 2x4 inches he would get 8 inches for the area and get that the areas of the derived triangles would each be four inches each. However, when given a triangle he would not know how to calculate its area (he had not memorized that formula yet). I went over this process four times and then stopped because Robert Black was getting frustrated- he was tired and complained that he was hungry. I tried to involve Martin, who was sitting next to us, in this type of

reasoning but he could not follow it. Then Robert came along and I repeated the same process with him. He was interested in learning, but also a little nervous because he was not getting it right away. It took him a while (about four times) to be able to abstract the area of a triangle from the area of a rectangle. The strategy I was using was to make a rectangle off two triangles and then calculate the area of the rectangle. Robert eventually understood why the area of a triangle is $b \cdot h$ divided by 2. Jay had joined us and he told me that what I was trying to do is not how they are taught in their schools. He told me that they are taught to apply formulae. He said that only now he could understand how these formulae related to one another. I said that that way was more difficult and Jay retorted: "No, it's not. All you have to do is memorize the formula and use it." Then I said that the point of learning is to understand, not to memorize, and that if you forget the formula then you are lost.

The following day I decided to have a workshop on multiplication, which I recently had read about how that was done in the curriculum prepared by Davydov and his team (for more details see Schmittau, 2004). I decided to focus on Martin and make sure he would succeed in front of his peers, some of whom used to make fun of him and call him dumb. I counted on Jay and Brian Smith to support my initiative. Before I started, Robert Black came to me and told me that he had gotten an "A" for yesterday's math homework. That gave us further encouragement for the workshop and I had Jay and Robert help me prepare the materials. Robert suggested that I bring soda and chips, so I gave him money to go to the store and buy those items. Jay stayed and helped me think how to do

the workshop. We stapled together several 11x 8 sheets to give to the boys for calculating the area. Then Jay said that they would just count how many I had used. He then suggested we cut a big piece of brown paper so that the relation between that and standard paper would be less obvious. The three of us (Robert, Jay, and I) started to think what shapes we wanted them to use as a unit to measure the area of the big piece of brown paper. We cut the standard sheet into strips of paper, but it was all crooked. Then I thought of giving them something smaller, like 'post its' (sticky notes) and ask the boys (our focus was on Robert Black and Martin who had problems with math) to figure out how many 'post its' would go into the whole big piece. Martin and Robert Black started working on different ends of the paper. Then Jay told them to work together. Robert Black started making a column of 10 'post its'. The boys were telling him it would take forever and that there was a shorter way of doing it. Then Robert Black made a row of 9 'post its' and multiplied the number of these that goes in a column by the number that goes in a row. Martin was confused and we explained to him that we did not have to put all the 'post its' because the result could be anticipated. It was shocking how the notion of multiplication completely eluded Martin. To make matters more visually accessible, I used my arm to represent the columns and went over each one of the ten rows. Each time we would skip count by nine (the "size" of the column) and Martin was counting aloud. Then it was easy to help him establish multiplication as a shortened version of addition. Then an issue emerged. When we multiplied row by column Wes complained that we counted the first 'post it' note twice, as part of the first row and as part of the first column.

He said that instead of 10×9 , the area was in fact 9×9 . Jay and Brad agreed with Wes. I thought about it and told they were wrong. Then we counted the columns again until everybody was convinced we had to count the first piece twice (as row and column). This question was settled. By then the workshop had become really lively and all boys in the house were on the third floor. Then I asked Robert Black and Martin to measure the area of the table we were at using 'post it' notes as unit of measurement. They complained that it would be tedious and then Brian Smith suggested that they use the standard sheet to shorten the work. Jay then told Robert Black that he could figure out how many 'post it' notes go in a standard sheet and then how many sheets go in the whole table. Robert Black grasped this idea easily and immediately used that multiplication to solve the problem. Once prompted, he could think of multiplication in terms of changing units. However, Martin was still confused. At some point Neil said that it was stupid not to know that. All boys were upset and yelled at Neil for putting Martin down. At this point Brian Smith was sitting next to Martin and he was very active in encouraging Martin to think carefully and he went over all the steps very patiently. Jim was angry at Neil and said that that was their problem, "we put ourselves down and call each other dumb. We can't do it to ourselves." Brian Smith was also upset and it was beautiful to see how he publicly expressed solidarity for a peer that was in a difficult situation. After Robert Black had figured out how to solve those problems, everybody was waiting for Martin to grasp the operations. However, Martin was scared because he was on the spot but all the boys were helping him. He was shown how to change the units and eventually he

grasped the three step operation: find out how many of the small unit go in the bigger unit, then count how many pieces of the bigger unit were used and finally multiply the two measures. Martin was happy when he eventually understood it. It was like proving to everybody that he could learn. When we finished the workshop Robert came to me and patted my head and said, "Good job, son". He was happy that Martin proved to everybody that he could learn and praised me for creating that opportunity. I was very happy because I had had some conflicts with Martin as I witnessed how mechanically he used to do his homework. Martin always reacted as though I was being invasive by becoming very emotional and leaving the room. One day he became so upset as I pointed out the many mistakes in his homework that he broke up the pencil he had in his hands. For that reason I had to stop tutoring him for a while until the multiplication workshop.

We had similar projects in evolution, math, art history, nutrition, etc. Throughout the last phase I helped the boys do their schoolwork always attempting to help them see abstract concepts as tools to understand and solve a particular range of problems. For instance, I helped them develop a more concrete understanding of integers by creating everyday situations (e.g., managing a banking account) whereby positive and negative numbers functioned as efficient tools.

D) Evolution

Evolution was a topic that he had come up frequently in the boys' biology homework and in our trips to the museum of Natural History. It was a difficult topic, almost a taboo as some youth counselors, such as Sylvia and later Ms. Hawthorne, were Christians and completely rejected the idea of evolution in favor of creationism. That objection had come up one day as I showed the boys a video from the museum on mammals. Johnson became very upset and started to scream that the idea of evolution was absurd, that we could not have possibly have descended from monkeys. "Monkeys? Monkeys?" he kept repeating. As I talked to him later, I realized that Johnson had somehow interpreted that humankind's close biological tie with the great apes was a way of putting black people down. This was also evident as the boys would joke with one another whenever we visited the human evolution dioramas at the museum of natural history (e.g., they would say that a doll representing an *Australopithecus afarensis* was their peer's grandmother). I tried to turn it around by teaching them that that was not the ancestor of black people alone, but of the entire humankind, which made us all related. One day as Ms. Li and I took Neil and Terry - a boy that stayed in the group home for a few weeks only and then ran away - to the museum of natural history Neil asked me whether I believed in god or in evolution. I told him I do not believe in god but I emphasized that I did not want him to share that with the staff because I did not want any confrontation. Ms. Li asked me why and I told her that there is prejudice against atheism in the community where we work. I added that I was not interested in convincing

anybody about my religious beliefs or lack thereof. She agreed, but said that it should not matter at this point. Due to the fact that some of staff members of the umbrella agency in which the group home is nested are very religious, I wanted to avoid unnecessary conflict. Neil then told me that he had a pamphlet proving that god exists and that believing in evolution is wrong. I explained to him that I see a big difference between believing in god and knowing about evolution based on sound theory and data. I argued that evolution is not a matter of belief because there is much compelling evidence to support scientific claims in favor of evolution. He then retorted that there is evidence of god's existence. Ms. Li interjected saying that there is no such evidence. Neil insisted that there is, "It is all in that pamphlet", he continued. Terry then stated that evolution is wrong and that he knows that because he is Baptist.

Working with the different boys on different occasions after they had finished their homework or when they claimed not having any, I had read with them some passages about how Darwin's theory of evolution had come about. One of the books of the eyewitness series I had bought was precisely on evolution and it presented some of the findings that puzzled early scientists. For instance, one day Robert Black and I read some passages from that book and I asked him to answer some questions about the evidence for evolution. One type of evidence that Robert Black thought was interesting was that fossils of seashells had been found on mountaintops indicating that certain areas had undergone profound environmental changes that forced species to change in order to adapt. Robert Black was also intrigued by the fact that Darwin had found

fossils of extinct animals that looked like giant versions of modern animals (e.g., giant fossils of armadillos). In all the trips to the museum of natural history whereby we had visited the human evolution hall I made sure the boys would pay attention to the material evidence for evolution. I always asked them how it was possible to know that those fossils were not an ape's or a modern human's. This way I prompted them to notice differences in skull size and brow ridges that were halfway between an ape's and a modern human's.

In the summer of 2005 we had a workshop after we watched a video about human evolution, in which Jay, Jim, Wes, and Robert participated. The boys were not happy for having to be in the institution when they wanted to go out and do something fun. Nonetheless, because of their lack of options they watched the video and afterwards joined me on the third floor. Inspired by Hedegaard (1996), I asked them to compare the six species of hominids presented in the video, from the *Australopithecus afarensis* to the Neanderthal. At first the boys were confused and their answers were disorganized. They indicated certain physical peculiarities that distinguished a particular species (e.g., the *Paranthropus boisei*'s strong teeth) or a specific ability they had evolved (e.g., *Homo habilis*' tool-making ability), but it was hard to relate those changes systematically to other changes. Then I told them that we needed to choose some categories against which we could trace the systemic changes a species had undergone. Jay suggested that we look at how they get food and Jim suggested that we look at physical changes. I added that we should also look at their way of living vis-à-vis conspecifics. Then the boys created a table with six

roles representing the different species and three columns for the following categories: innovations, ways of living, and how they get food. Those categories helped them identify the basic relations that form the germ-cell concept of evolution and through the ensuing discussion I probed the boys to think about the material, factual basis upon which scientists made their claims. The boys already knew about carbon 14 method for dating fossils and I prompted them to also make inferences about the evolution of psychological processes based on the evidence provided by archeological findings. Jim was the first to propose that based on the fossil bones, specifically the shape of the pelvis, it was possible to tell that “Lucy’s people” (reference to the famous *Australopithecus afarensis* fossil found in Africa in the 1970’s and on display at the American Museum of Natural History) walked upright. Then Jay said that based on their teeth you could tell what they ate and their skull indicated the size of their brain. Then I asked what else could be inferred about their minds and Jay said that the fact that tools were found beginning with *Homo habilis* meant that they could think, that they could plan in advance. I asked Robert and Wes how come *habilis* had been the first to come up with tools and not the *boisei*, given that they lived during the same time period. Drawing from the documentary, they said that it was because of a severe drought in the African continent that forced them to look for new ways of eating. Due to the fact that all animals were dying and they could not compete with lions, the only thing left for them to eat were bones and they figured they could use rocks to crack bones open and eat the marrow, which is a great source of protein. They explained that *boisei* had powerful teeth and could

eat big roots and were not as challenged by that environmental change. We also talked about comparisons with modern humans and apes also provided clues to understanding those early humans. Then Jim said that the afarensis “fought for food, territory, and women.” I asked how that was different from other animals and he said that they “stuck together” forming a community, a social group. Then I asked how that evolved and they identified a change with Homo ergaster, that they formed families. Jay also noticed that by what was found in graves (e.g., pollen, indicating that they had been buried with flowers) we could tell that they had religious beliefs. Then I asked about speech and he said that their chest revealed which ones could speak. I then asked if they thought that making tools changed the way early humans lived and related to one another. They answered yes and I wanted to know how. They used as an example a scene from the video in which Neanderthals hunt mammoths. I asked them to describe how that activity took place step by step. The boys explained that after they spotted a herd, they had to go up the cliff, observe as the mammoths approached, then several of them worked together to throw a rock down the cliff that killed one animal, and finally a group of hunters was at the base of the cliff with spears to finalize the hunt. From this example we discussed how division of labor emerged and the need for communication as tasks needed to be coordinated. The session lasted for almost two hours (in addition to the two hours spent watching the video). As the boys engaged in the discussion they forgot about their initial resistance and even Wes, who was uninterested in the beginning, actively participated in the discussion.

Motivating the boys: Shared reflections on life and ourselves

I worked hard to engage the boys in a dialogue about their vision for the future and to consider the extent to which they were preparing their future. I actively sought to disclose gaps in their activities and contradictions between their discourses and practices. I would constantly try to engage the boys in conversation about their positioning toward the sociocultural practices in which their lives unfolded and encourage them to reflect on their goals and plans, or lack thereof. This was particularly salient with some of the older boys, such as Jay, Derek, and Brian Smith. For example, one day I gave Brian Smith a sheet of paper and asked him to write down his daily activities, what he does everyday. Brian Smith and I had a good rapport, as he had with everybody else. Ms. Li and the rest of the staff described him as a laid-back guy who does not initiate problems, is good-natured, but lazy and unmotivated. I wanted to call his attention to his insufficient engagement with learning activities, but evidently I did not want to do it in a way that would sound as criticism and would make him defensive. As I expected, the activities Brian Smith writes down revolve mainly around entertaining himself, which I point out to him. He fails to mention going to school and, when asked, he says that going to school is his most important activity, which surprises me. I tell him that it does not look like that way to me. Brian Smith denies that he does not study during study hour. I tell him that everyday I go there he never has homework. Then he tells me: "Just because you don't see me doing homework here, you think I'm not studying. I do school work in school." We also talk about what he does on weekends when he goes

home and it is all about entertainment- having fun. I ask him if he devotes enough time to learning and he says no. Then I tell him that I worry about him because all he does is entertain himself. I ask about his future plans and he tells me he wants to go to college. I ask then if he is doing enough to guarantee his college entrance and he says he is not. I point out these contradictions and the conversation takes another turn. Brian tries to defend his position, but at the same time acknowledges that there is something missing. He asks me what I do and I tell him about teaching, writing and continuously studying. He asks me why I teach and I tell him that I want to help change the world and that through teaching I can influence how people think, how they act, etc. To bring the conversation closer to him, I ask him if all boys in the house have the same activities. He says that they do and I complement by saying that how they do it is very different from one another. I focus on study hour and he agrees that Neil and Robert Black, for instance, are totally different in that regard. He tells me that they have different personalities because of the way they were raised. I ask him what personality is and he says that he cannot explain it. I explain that different personalities are expressed in how people carry out their activities, in their interests and motives. Then I introduce the notion of leading activity as the basis for understanding personality. I explain to him that what people do, what drives them, has to do with their orientation in the world, which forms their identity, or, in other words, what they are up to in their lives, what they are looking for in life. As a case in point, I give the example of the mountaineers of the movie we had recently watched, 'Touching the void'. In the beginning of the movie, one of them

says that they live for climbing mountains. I give a couple of examples of leading activities and go through stages in human development characterized by different leading activities. At this point the conversation has focused on how people create meaningful lives. Jim and Robert Black had entered the room and joined in the conversation. Jay follows them. I tell Brian Smith that everybody has a leading activity, except clinically depressed people. He asks, "what about me?" I laugh and say, with a sense of humor, that actually we sometimes worry about him because we don't know what drives him, that all we see him do is entertain himself. He asks if I like what I do and they all shift the focus to me. They ask several questions about my working there, if I like it, why I work there. I tell them that I love working there. They want to know why and Robert Black asks why I work there. I try to explain that I like to help young people change their world, such as that group home. Before I can continue Jim jumps in and says: "I would change this restriction thing. It doesn't help people with their anger". By then Jay is at the table and actively challenging Jim together with Brian. Both Jay and Brian ask Jim what he would have instead, because some form of discipline is necessary. Jim answers that he would have therapy. I try to explain that therapy is not the best solution, that what we need to do is to help people develop. I say that I do not think discipline is the issue, the issue is meaning.

From the fall 2003 to the spring 2004 I worked a lot with Jay and Derek who were roommates and were older and more mature than the other boys. I would bring them together to read and discuss abstract, advanced ideas as the boys in pattern one would work with the social worker and the boys in pattern two

would for the most part work downstairs. Together we read Freire, Fromm, Csikszentmihaly (about flow) and Derek also read some short stories by Thomas Mann and the entire Arabian Nights. For example, one day in the spring 2004 I went to the third floor with Derek and we read the beginning of the introduction to 'The Evolving Self' (1997) where Csikszentmihaly introduces the notion of flow. Derek kept complaining, in a half-serious way, that that was boring and did not relate to him. He feels comfortable with me and feels intimate enough to talk about his feelings. He told me that the only thing that excites him is a romantic relationship. As a result of those sessions with Jay and Derek deepened their relationship based on mutual respect. Derek actually told me that Jay would only talk to him in the house because in school Jay avoided him, apparently because Derek 'hung out' with a 'gay crowd'. In our meetings Derek talked candidly about being gay and Jay listened to him without prejudice. Jay never made fun of Derek because of his sexual preference, unlike many other residents, such as Robert and Jacquay. We talked about their future plans to go to college and we read some books and poetry together. Jay is very smart and has highly developed reading skills. He can easily comprehend sophisticated texts and has a large vocabulary. He is very fluent when he reads aloud. He acts maturely when the three of us work together, which is not always the case, especially when the younger ones are present.

Preparing for College: changing orientation for the future

In 2004 Jay was worried about aging out of the system and having to leave the program. His plan was to get a GED and move to an independent living program (ILP), which was the typical good outcome for a boy aging out of the system. However, both the social worker, Ms. Li and I thought Jay could do better; he could go to college. He certainly had the academic skills required, even though his motivation and discipline were underdeveloped. Jay was frustrated and he wanted to leave the program as soon as possible as he thought he would have more freedom in an ILP. When the three of us met to discuss his plans he lashes out his frustration at us: "I don't need counseling, I don't need to live with nine other people. That's not necessary. I don't need to sleep in a bed with bugs. I don't need to be told when to eat and when to sleep. I feel I can handle that on my own. That's what this program is about. This program is basically for people who come here with no structure in their lives and this program teaches them structure. I have that already, so I don't need to be here anymore." Then I tell him, "I understand; everything you're saying is understandable. But the point that I am trying to make is that the best that can happen to your life is to go to college." Then Jay explains that he is already seventeen years old and is one year behind in school, which means that he will have to leave the program before he goes to college. Jay gets confused and so does Ms. Li who thought we were just trying to make up the classes that he was missing. But my plans are more ambitious; I want to find a way to expedite Jay's graduation so that he can stay in the group home until he goes to college. I tell them that I was trying to find a way

to do 11th and 12th grade in one year, plus the summer. Together we think about all the possible steps necessary. Ms. Li suggests that he drop all unnecessary electives and take an independent study. If Jay goes to summer school, it may be possible to complete the credits. In the next week Ms. Li talks to his guidance counselor and he vows to help Jay graduate. One obstacle in Jay's way was that he needed Spanish classes in the summer, but none was being offered in the county. Jay wanted to give up every time there was a seemingly insurmountable hurdle, which also frustrated us. Nevertheless, collaboratively solutions emerged and Jay was able to expedite his graduation.

The very last phase of this research was marked by the fact that the social worker left the group home. This led to an intense collaboration between me and some residents, especially Jay, who took on new roles, such as tutoring and being leaders for younger and less academically advanced residents. Lastly, I invested in young adult literature and a renewed interest in reading fiction emerged.

5.5. Data Collection

The emphasis on contributing to institutional and individual development presupposes the analysis of agents acting across different, yet interrelated levels ranging from the individual (clients, staff, directors, managers, etc.) to the institutional and the state of which they are a part. This necessitates collection of a multitude of data in order to capture developmental changes across those

different levels and to account for how they are interconnected. Next I spell out the sources of data I plan to utilize. One important limitation regarding the data collection for the study was imposed by Institutional Review Board regulations. Due to the fact that this study took place in the agency where I was working, I was not allowed to interview the boys under the age 18 because that could potentially lead to a coercive situation. Thus, I could only draw on field notes and archival documentation. The procedures employed consisted of qualitative data, such as interviews and field notes, akin to what usually are the data in an ethnographic study. I collected information from field notes and from interviews with the staff and one of the boys above the age 18, as well as information about the boys' behavior (e.g., institutional records that describe violations of rules and punishment applied) and scholastic achievement (e.g., school reports). The following is a list of types of data I will use:

Researcher's texts and field notes

I utilized all sorts of written texts I have produced throughout my involvement with the agency under investigation. These include evaluation reports, presentations, memos, and personal communication with the director, the manager, and the staff. In addition, I relied on my field notes that I collected as journal entries, from my participant observation and everyday informal conversations.

Archival Documentation

I drew on institutional documents such as reports, job descriptions, memos, records, school reports, portfolios, case management reports, and the

curricula for the institutional practices as a source of information about the transformations the programs have undergone.

Interviews

I conducted one open-ended interview with the following youth counselors, Simon, Peter, and Jerry, at the institution. I also interviewed Jay in an open-ended fashion and I tape-recorded more than ten conversations with Ms. Li. One of my goals was to obtain data related to changes in their positioning in institutional activities and about how they viewed the boys and the institution. Specifically, I analyzed the dynamics of transformation of personal meanings, changing motives and their movement up and down a hierarchy of them. I asked questions about how they view their work, how they contribute to it, and the changes that have taken place in the institution. I also interviewed some boys to get a sense of how their views were changing as they reflected on their shifting motives.

Written texts

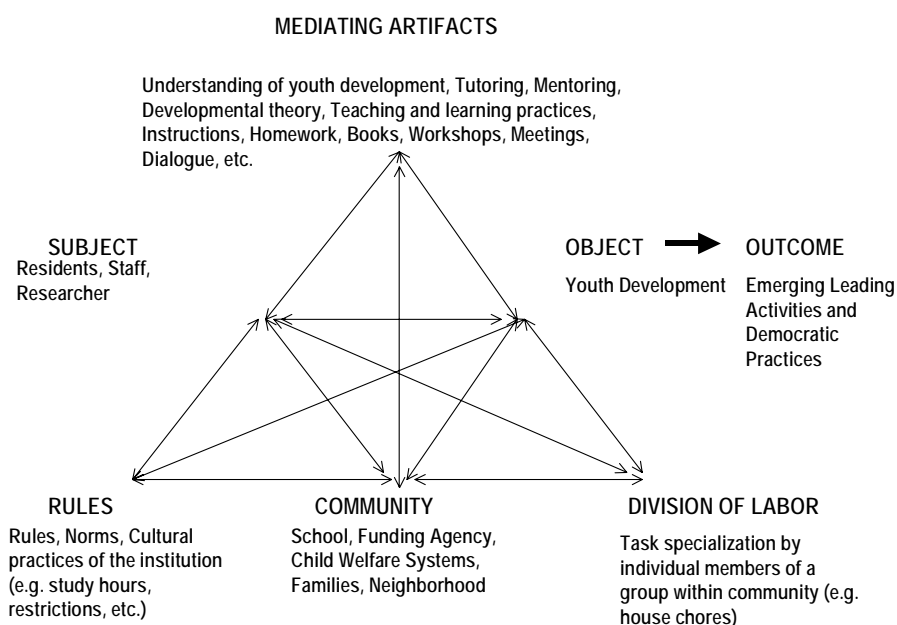
I collected essays and all sorts of written texts assigned to the boys. The purpose was to obtain data on changes in their shifting goals and motives and their positioning vis-à-vis the institutional practices to which they contribute. The content of those texts was analyzed to reveal the dynamics of transformation of personal meanings, changing motives and their movement up and down a hierarchy of them. I also used the materials from the workshops, tutoring sessions, homework assignments and essays produced by the boys.

6. Data Analysis

6.1. Unit of Analysis: The Institution as an Activity System

My unit of analysis is the dynamical, open-ended activity systems in which individual actions and social practices are mutually constitutive (Engeström, 1999). The focus is on how individuals and social practices co-evolve, including how the boys, the staff and myself have continuously transformed one another, the institution, and ourselves. It centers on the development of interrelated activity systems and the dynamics of motives and goals within these systems. Engeström has elaborated a model in which he describes the structure of an emerging activity system with its constitutive components and their internal relations and contradictions (see fig. 1). According to this model, in order to fully understand the social and historical complexity of human activity we need to analyze it in relation to its object, mediating artifacts (material and symbolic), and the rules and division of labor that shape, enable and constrain collective activities in the communities where they are located. Activity systems are conceived as open-ended, hierarchically integrated systems that may continually change as novelty is introduced.

Figure 1. Residential Program as an activity system based on Engeström's model (1999).



This approach reveals the integration of different activities in a continuous process whereby new activities are generated on the basis of transforming previously existing activities. This analytical focus highlights how the dynamics of development evolve through resolving contradictions as new tools are developed and appropriated, which brings about innovations, changes and expands the activity system.

Importantly, my analysis is based on the mutually constitutive dynamic of transformations of activities that necessarily involves both individual and collective aspects. My unit of analysis focuses on transformations in collective activities as individual and institutional goals and motives co-evolve (Stetsenko &

Arievitch, 2004). This analysis includes shifts in how individuals position themselves in the activities in which they participate as they constantly negotiate individual and institutional transformation. Moreover, the analysis focuses on transformations in the activity system as contradictions emerged and were resolved with the elaboration and implementation of new tools. Specifically, my analysis follows the collaborative establishment of tasks in the activities of the group home, focusing particularly on how learning activities were introduced. The movement toward negotiating tasks through a process of setting common goals was crucial in empowering the residents and helping them to avoid construing such activities as top-down impositions. By engaging in actions whose goals bridge different activities, such as my focus on teaching and learning and the boys' focus on play and entertainment, the antagonism in the custodial activity system began to give way to collaborative activities and slowly transform the meaning of our social interactions and relationships. As a consequence, the appealing potential of our collective actions gradually gained strength and became more motivating to the boys. In other words, my analysis follows movement back and forth, or co-evolution, of goals and motives. This dimension of the analysis, pertaining to the motivational dimension of development, ultimately relates to the process of self development, which can be evidenced by how the boys' resistance to working with me and to engaging in learning activities was progressively overcome.

An essential element of my analysis is the mediating role of tools, conceived as not only material objects but, most importantly, as embodiments of

certain cultural practices, crystallized templates of actions, schematized representations of certain ways of doing things as discovered in the collaborative history of humanity (Arievitch & Stetsenko, 2000; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2002).

Power, space, and the components of the activity system: categories of change

The establishment of new goals and the unfolding shifts in motives reflected in renewed forms of positioning and were observable across all the elements of the institutional activity system. These changes were particularly evident as changes in the modes of appropriating available tools. Consequently, the results reflect changes in the physical environment of the house, the use of space and time (e.g., schedule of activities), budgetary and bureaucratic constraints, hierarchical issues, and the rules of the group home and the welfare system as shifts occurred in how individuals gain access to, appropriate, use, and transform those resources. Moreover, changes were also manifest in novel forms of dialogue and discourses, the affective content of relationships, and the subjective experience of the participants. Put simply, these are the dimensions along which change was documented and they provide evidence for the transformations described in the activity system. These changes instantiated changing forms of engaging power relations, with more democratic institutional practices emerging as both the institution and the boys' motives began to merge with learning emerging as their leading activity.

Dialogue and Power

An important aspect of the activities that take place in the house is the quality of the dialogue between staff and residents and among the residents themselves. Power relations are embodied in dialogue, and the way the staff and residents talk to one another reveals how asymmetry of power is achieved and maintained in the group home. I also analyzed how the quality of types of dialogue functioned as tools in the activity system of the institution and how dialogical practices created zones of proximal development. I drew on the work of Cheyne and Tarulli (1999) that examines the role of dialogue in the zone of proximal development.

Inspired by Bakhtin's work on dialogicality Cheyne and Tarulli (1999) propose three dialogical genres to capture the flow of power in dialogue. Specifically, they draw on the notion of addressivity to suggest the presence of a third voice in dialogue. As Wertsch (1991) explains, Bakhtin focuses on utterances as the real unit of speech, which is always produced by a voice. Voices exist only in social milieu and they concern the broader issues of a "speaking subject's perspective, conceptual horizon, intention, and world view" (p. 51). Therefore, the voice producing an utterance always expresses a point of view; it functions as a speaking consciousness. Utterances link the chain of speech communication and they respond to preceding utterances. Thus, utterances are aware of and mutually reflect one another because they are addressed to the other and in particular to the other's responsive understanding (Bakhtin, 1986). However, in addition to the second party, the addressee,

utterances also presuppose a third party, a superaddressee. As Cheyne and Tarulli explain, the superaddressee stands above the particularity of dialogue as a kind of reference and authority (e.g., God, science). Based on my observations and work in the group home I would suggest that the institutional norms and the ideology of the child welfare system, based on conservative psychological notions about the purported intrinsic nature of human psychological processes, combined with assumptions about folk psychology, function as a third voice upon which the staff draws to assert and maintain control over the boys.

In order to characterize the flow of power in dialogue, Cheyne and Tarulli discuss three dialogical genres: Magistral dialogue, Socratic dialogue, and Menippean dialogue. The Magistral dialogue is characterized by a superiority of the first voice (e.g., tutor, parent, teacher) over the second by reference to the third voice. In other words, the first voice draws its authority from the third voice. The Socratic dialogue emerges when the second voice (Child, pupil, apprentice) takes a more active role in negotiating meaning. The Socratic dialogue is thus characterized by greater mutuality of questions and answers allowing for the potential “interillumination among the voices” (p.13). A key aspect of the dialogical genre is an emancipatory interest embedded in the flow of power that takes place in dialogue. Thus, “when the first voice resists the changing status of the second voice, conflict and a deterioration of their relationship are ever present dangers”(p.14) and the Menippean dialogue will ensue. The latter emerges when the second voice starts to mock and cynically call into question the first voice and its source of authority- the third voice.

The theoretical perspective outlined above has been a useful analytical tool to make sense of power relations in the residential program. Based on my observations, as the adults frequently engaged in the magistral genre of dialoguing with the boys, they (the boys) would usually resist the staff's ways of asserting power and engaged in the menippean type of dialogue. This perspective highlights how I attempted to create zones of proximal development by expanding the repertoire of dialogical genres by engaging the boys in the Socratic dialogical genre. In my interactions with the boys I tried to work out asymmetries of power relations by embracing the boys' emancipatory tendencies and validating their right to question authority through discussion. Obviously the Socratic genre of dialogue can only function as a tool to create zones of proximal development when power is genuinely negotiated and the partners jointly establish the goals for their collective actions. This aspect will be further detailed in the analysis of the collective play project whose content was overwhelmingly related to subverting power asymmetries through play. Moreover, the play project was the first type of activity that I was directly responsible for, which means that I was able to control what type of dialogical genre we would engage in. Thus we were able to avoid conflict as we allowed the boys to express and negotiate different ideas and interests. Throughout that project the research team always sought to engage the boys in Socratic forms dialogue, as all partners were treated as equals and everybody had the right to question any decision about the project. I will draw on the theoretical perspective outlined above to describe how the dialogical dimension of my practice evolved.

Mutually embedded Activities

I organized the presentation of the results, the changes in the activity system on three planes: 1) the boys' individual developmental trajectories (self development), 2) my evolving practice, and 3) institutional practices. These planes are mutually constitutive relational activities, such that my practice involves a) researcher- staff and b) researcher-boys activities; institutional practices comprise a) staff-boys, b) boys-community/school activities, and c) group-home- school; and the boys' development in turn is manifest in relation to all these planes. Therefore, these planes are absolutely inseparable and their role is to just provide greater descriptive clarity. My analysis aimed at revealing the extent to which the interacting partners, individual or collective, were engaged in the same activity. Then for each of those planes I document changes in motives that reveal the emergence of novel objects of activity. Changes in all these planes involved the appropriation of novel tools and a change in motives. These changes manifested in different elements of the activity system at different times for different individuals and for the institution. I will summarize the main trends in different phases (see below).

As an emerging form of collaboration, my practice co-evolved along the parallel changes in the boys' and staff's activities, in institutional rules, use of space, etc. Following changes on this plane of analysis allowed me to describe how novel activities were gradually implemented and how all individuals involved contributed to expanding the activity system of the institution. I will discuss how my practice evolved as I interacted with particular individuals in varying

institutional settings and in the context of different activities. I will describe moment-to-moment changes, which disclose important dimensions of my everyday practices, as well as the accumulated changes in personal trajectories and in the activity system over the course of an activity (e.g., specific projects) and over longer periods of time (over the months and years). In order to provide a richer account of the transformations that took place in the institution on the three planes of analysis, I will also present some examples of the boys' activities and discourses in order to capture this developmental process from their own perspective. Due to the unevenness of my relationship with different boys, I was able to get to know some of them more than others. I became progressively closer to them, especially in the second and third year in the institution. As I have already included in previous sections, I will also present excerpts from my conversations with different staff members that shed light on the transformations of the activity system viewed from their perspective as well as the increased diversity of discourses (multivoicedness) in the institution.

This investigation concludes with an examination of a) how processes of human development, such as the self, emerge in the context of institutional practices and how they are mutually constitutive of one another, b) how the self develops, including the formation of goals and motives that emerge in relation to evolving institutional practices and c) how these mutually constitutive processes, the developing self and institutional practices, can be mediated and directed by a new vision based on developmental teaching and learning and thus create a new

context for the self to emerge as a meaningful life project characterized by life-long learning.

7. Results

7.1. Setting the stage

The overarching question of this research project was whether and how an educational approach could have a developmental impact on the residents of the group home. Based on Vygotskian cultural-historical activity theory, I hypothesized that many of the problems faced by the institution would be dramatically reduced if the boys embraced the process of learning as a gateway to get the tools to develop their own endeavors and open up new avenues for meaningful pursuits in the world. Most important, my method (the research practice in which I was engaged), oriented at creating better conditions for the development of the boys and more democratic institutional practices, centered on expanding the horizon of possibilities in the institutional activity system by introducing novel, higher quality cultural tools, such as the theoretical generalizations crystallized in the concepts of evolution, gravity, arithmetic operations that I described in the method section. In this sense, the theory was an indispensable tool that helped me to reflect on my practice and to plan and implement activities. In the next subsections I will describe in greater detail how I sought to introduce new tools into institutional practices, the resistance met, and the strategies for overcoming it. All of that pushed me in the direction of continuous reflection and further development of the tools. This process is what I have been referring to as my evolving practice. I was particularly interested in

introducing conceptual tools. My idea was that another cycle, virtuous, not vicious, could emerge. Inasmuch as different, higher quality tools (e.g., interesting, more meaningful teaching/learning arrangements) would make different actions possible (e.g., more time and effort spent on learning tasks, intent on understanding as opposed to rote memorization of learning materials, etc.), the boys' motivation to learn would grow along the implementation of learning activities.

Following Vygotsky, I sought to impact the boys' development through teaching and learning. In Vygotsky's words "the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it" (Vygotsky, 1962, pg. 104). Therefore, my main motivation was to create developmental practices of teaching and learning, which I viewed as the main tool for personal and institutional transformation, including my own learning of how to teach. The latter, in turn, was based on my further appropriation of activity and critical social theories. This approach reveals an important contradiction in teaching practices. As Lompscher (1999) points out, an essential feature of learning activity is that the acquisition of new knowledge and skill requires certain level of abilities, motivation, and memory structures that are only partially developed to the necessary degree at a particular moment. If they were fully developed, learning would not be necessary; if they were not developed at all, learning would be impossible (pg. 267). Activity theoretical principles were crucial in identifying such contradiction and figuring out a solution to it. Thus, I sought to overcome this contradiction through developmental teaching, also referred to as systemic-

theoretic instruction. This approach is based on the formation of learning activity centered on introducing theoretical concepts to children as tools to help them be oriented in sociocultural practices that emerged in previous generations- such as found in abbreviated, condensed form in virtually all subject matters children encounter in school. A key aspect of this approach is the co-construction of learning goals, as opposed to traditional instruction that presents learners with ready-made goals. This comes close to the Freirian notion of problem-posing education based not on the transmission of knowledge as a gift bestowed upon the students, but on teaching and learning as inquiry (Freire, 1970). These theoretical perspectives were indispensable tools that helped me to overcome many limitations in my practice. In this sense, one of the levels of the results of this research project was my appropriation of such theoretical tools, including gaining knowledge about their potential and limitations, as they were integrated in my practice and further developed. The theoretical insights gained throughout this research project will be presented in the discussion section. As I already described, the workshops on math, physics and Earth science, evolution, and graphic design followed CHAT principles, albeit in different degrees, such as immersing the learners in cultural practices, co-constructing learning tasks, revealing the origins of concepts and ideas through historical evolution sociocultural practices (e.g., Copernican revolution and heliocentric model of the universe, design as a tool for marketing, the development of the concept of evolution, etc), and helping the boys to identify and model the basic relations in a given domain, so that knowledge construction was a collaborative, hands-on

process, meaningful process of appropriating and contributing to sociocultural practices.

In order to present the results of this project in a structured way, which may not do justice to the intricacies of how activities unfolded in real life, I will summarize the main aspects of how my practice fit into institutional practices and the boys' activities by describing typical days and activities in the group home in each different phase. I will also describe particularly important or salient moments whereby institutional activities departed from routinely established institutional practices and engaged the boys in ways beyond what they typically encountered. The point is to capture moments that represented movement within the zone of proximal development, taken here as a collective space where my practice, the boys' activities, and institutional practices co-emerged and changed.

The results section is organized in three phases as an attempt to capture general trends of transformations of the activity system: resistance, change without development, and development. I will first describe the institutional activity system as I first encountered it. For that purpose, I offer a brief history of the program in order to account for the emergence of institutional practices that characterized the group home when I first joined it. My analysis started with my attempt to understand the object of the activities I encountered, the needs behind them and the contradictions in the system. As I already discussed in the rationale and method sections, the dominant activity of the institution when I started working there was to control the boys, which was constantly defied by the residents. Then I trace the changes brought about in the activity system as new

participants joined the system (myself, the social workers, new youth counselors, new residents) and brought with them new tools that were collaboratively and creatively appropriated by the diverse participants - i.e., transformed by the participants through the very process of appropriating new tools. However, the process by which new tools were introduced was far from smooth. Indeed, resistance was a typical feature of the process of change before new tools were accepted and appropriated. With the institutional activity system as the prime unit of analysis, I include the professionals and the residents as part of novel tools in the sense that their actions mediated and contributed to change the dominant activity of the institution.

7.2. Phase I – Control vs. Resistance as the dominant institutional activity

This phase was characterized by my struggle to establish a new type of psychological practice aimed at promoting youth development while at the same time doing the job for which I had been hired. In this section I will describe the characteristic configuration of institutional practices and modes of interaction as they existed when I started working in the group home through the three interrelated planes of analysis described above. I present a typical day during phase I as an analytical device to describe what was going on in the activity system of the institution. Thus I will describe institutional discourses and practices and the boys' discourses and activities followed by my analysis of how

those functioned as tools to accomplish the object of the institutional activity system, which was split into two conflicting objects, control and resistance. Next I will describe how my practice evolved as I attempted to depart from typical practices in order to expand the system. My goal in organizing my data according to a typical day for each phase is to highlight the common activities carried out by the participants of the activity system. Certain institutional practices and individuals' activities extended over the three phases but in order to avoid redundancy they will not be presented together with the data for phases II and III if they were already presented in phase I. Rather, I will describe whether and how their frequency, intensity, and relevance was transformed, which I use as an indicator of their changing status in the institutional hierarchical system of activities. Thus, this analytical strategy follows only a loose chronological order insofar as I present certain data obtained in the second and third years together with data obtained in the first year. The reason for that is that my access to the boys increased exponentially in the third phase of this research and much was revealed to me that shed light on the activities described in phase I. Specifically, the boys were more open to disclose how they construed institutional practices and the ways they sought to avoid or resist them.

Boys' typical afternoon: Learning to resist learning

I will now describe a typical day during phase I, which started in February 2002 and lasted until the fall of that year. The routine of the institution was pretty stable. The youth counselors and the manager were in charge of monitoring the boys' activities making sure they carried out their responsibilities in order to keep

the well-organized structure of the group home. Everyday the boys would go to school until 3 PM when they returned home. Even though I was there three afternoons per week, the days were all very much the same. As I already described the boys would come back from school between 2:30 and 3 PM and were supposed to start their homework at 4 PM. Before study hour the boys had a chance to relax. Commonly they would play video games or, as the weather started to get warmer they would play football or basketball in the backyard. Some would take naps. Then they were supposed to do their schoolwork until 5 PM when they would have snack and then leave for the community sports center. The routine of their lives - from the group home to school and back and in the evening to the sports center or the park - was so stifling for many of them that they started to be interested in participating in the activities I was making available, as I will describe later.

Switching activities was difficult for the boys and the transition from play to study hour was far from smooth. The boys would resist the youth counselors' call to start study hour, which was a source of conflict. Many times the boys would continue playing, defying the staff's call. Then the staff would start threatening to write the boys up. The boys had different strategies to deal with the staff and continue playing. Rashid would act cute and playful asking the staff to allow him just another minute playing video game. Brian was more sarcastic and defiant. He would try to make fun of the staff and, after being chastised, would start cursing them and would end up on being written up. He was by far the champion of restrictions. Jason and Trevor would remain in their rooms. Jason would fall

asleep after school and the challenge for the staff was to bring him downstairs to the dining room table where study hour took place. The counselors would call him a few times and he would end up written up when he failed to get up. Johnson was always the first one at the table. Daniel and Bobby would not create problems for the staff either. Jamal and George would come home late and I would see them sporadically. Later on, Tim and Andre would act similarly to Brian, with a mix of playfulness, sarcasm, and defiance. Tim was always on restriction and, according to the staff, he had “a mouth”, which meant that he cursed a lot and heavily. On his part, Andre would get in trouble for “playing too much”. The staff seemed to be unanimous in their particular complaints about the boys.

The boys used to spend a significant amount of time playing, especially video games and sports, and some liked to draw. They also spent a great deal of time “hanging out” with each other. When they hung out with each other, they would listen to music or watch TV together (invariably rap and hip-hop) or play in the form of teasing and cracking jokes on each other. Their participation in teasing each other functioned as a measure of their status and power in the institution. For example, one afternoon on March 27th 2002 we were working with the boys on a collage made with the pictures Rashid and Johnson had taken with my camera (they did not have one available) when we went to the city when Jamal picked a close-up of Johnson’s and started to make fun of him. Jamal wanted to keep the picture and take it to school to mock Johnson, who was getting increasingly upset and wanted his picture back. I had to intervene to get it

back to him. The boys would play jokes on one another and many were 'mama' jokes. "Your mother is so stupid, she thinks a quarterback is a refund" was one of the jokes I remember hearing from Johnson. He loved those jokes, which he would play on his peers that he felt inferior to him – he would never try jokes on Bobby or Daniel, for example. A common incident would ensue after one boy cracked a mama joke on another:

"Mother fucker, don't talk about my mother."

"Shut up. Don't talk to me like that. Mr. Wallace (or Jerry, Peter) he is cursing." Thus, a common source of problem was a conflict between residents that had escalated into a loud argument or even a physical confrontation. Usually the staff person would intervene at the point where he or she witnessed the conflict and the boys would be punished. However, many times the boys would complain that it was a peer who started the situation, that they had done nothing, and therefore did not deserve the punishment. On some occasions a boy would feel outright disrespect and his sense of having suffered an injustice would turn into rage. Typically they would curse at the staff that punished them, which could add to their restriction time.

Homework was done exclusively at the dining room table with all the boys sitting together, talking to one another and playing with each other. There was constant movement in that area, which is also where the door to the manager's office is located. That is one of the spots where a great deal of the interactions between the manager and the staff and between the manager and the boys takes place. They typically talked very loud, which made it hard for one to concentrate on his schoolwork. Exchanges between staff and boys would

frequently escalate, which would cause the manager to leave his office and intervene. At the table, the boys would do whatever they could to avoid studying. For the most part, they would talk to each other, play jokes, and read magazines or entertainment books until 5 PM when study hour was over. A common practice was to put a magazine inside their schoolbook, which they were pretending to read. There were several books in the two bookshelves in the dining room and often some boys would pick a book to read, almost always an adventure or action book, which paralleled the types of movies they like to see. Given that they were not allowed to do other activities during study hour, even if they claimed to have finished their work, the boys would pick up one of those adventure books to read. They also had many books on African-American literature and tried to read those with them, but they did not show much interest. Drawing was another common activity and the themes of their drawings were typically similar to dark comic books with lots of warriors, weapons, and bloody fights. Johnson was the master of drawings and he would teach other boys how to draw. For instance, when Roger, a much younger boy, came to the program, Johnson would devote most of the study hour teaching Roger to draw. Roger loved drawing dark, bloody stories and that is how he would spend his time during study hour. Every now and then a staff would question why a boy was not doing school work, to which the boys would reply saying that they either had already finished or had not been assigned any that day. Typically the staff would pursue the conversation asking the boy, "Don't you have other things to work on? What about the homework you had yesterday, did you finish it?" Or they might remember a particular project the

boy had been assigned or an upcoming test and remind the boy to work on those. The boy would typically say that would do it the next day, which led the staff to reproach them for procrastinating.

Depending on the boy's status their work would or not be checked by the staff as often. Johnson, Jamal, Daniel, and Bobby were not challenged whenever they stated having finished or not having been assigned homework. This was not true for Brian, Andre, and others in the lower ranks. That was a source of conflict between them and the staff. They would point out that their peers had not been working so why should they. Accusations of staff favoritism were common and added to the tension in the institution. As an attempt to show off in front of their peers, these boys would "act smart" with the staff by making fun of them when chastised about not doing their work. The most common disciplinary measure was to put the boys on restriction, whose severity varied according to the severity and/or frequency of the infraction. The first step was "to write the resident up", which meant to report the incident. As a resident kept being "written up", his chances to be put on restriction increased. If the infraction were considered severe enough, the resident would be put on restriction immediately. Most of the time the duration of the restriction was determined right away, but many times serious violations, such as being suspended from school, resulted in restriction with an indefinite duration. All youth counselors had the power to do, but the manager had the power to overwrite the counselors' decisions. It was also the manager's prerogative to take the boys off restriction. There was a constant battle between boys and staff on the issue of restrictions. Almost every day there

would be at least one resident complaining about having been put on restriction unfairly. It seemed that the staff used to “write the boys up” at their own discretion and the criteria seemed to be somewhat arbitrary, although the staff would argue that the boys knew very well what they should and should not do. The boys seemed to have their favorite staff and they frequently complained of favoritism, double standards, and inconsistency across staff in applying institutional rules.

Whenever discipline issues accumulated or involved several boys at the same time, the manager would call a house meeting. Those meetings also served to make announcements and to me they were particularly revealing of the culture of the institution. The most evident function of house meetings was to control the boys, and how it was done and how the boys positioned themselves in those meetings was very interesting. The meetings would take place in the living room after study hour and before they left for the sports center to talk about problematic issues. In my first year there these meetings were frequent, sometimes more than once a week. The meetings invariably revolved around violations of institutional rules and the penalties that would be applied. All incidents reported to the manager by the staff (or by some boys, identified as ‘snitches’ by their peers, although I only learned about that much later) were brought out by him in public and ‘degradation ceremonies’ would ensue. For instance, two very frequent types of incident were the cursing of a staff and stealing personal items from other residents. The manager would name the boys caught in the wrongdoing (e.g., by the staff, a teacher) and would tell them in

front of everybody what their punishment would be and even threatened to discharge them in case the violation had been too severe. When some item was missing suggesting it had been stolen, the manager might put all the boys on restriction until the item was returned. Such one-size-fits-all, collective type of punishment was very frustrating to some boys and it used to lead to tensions among them. Some boys would be harassed by the others for putting them all in trouble. A common source of collective punishment was a report by the evening or night staff that the boys had done something wrong (e.g., staying up past sleep time, engaging in rough play, fighting, etc.) without specifically identifying which boys were involved in the situation. In those cases the manager would ask people to identify themselves otherwise the entire house would be on restriction. This strategy worked well when the boys involved were not the tough ones. Weaker boys would be afraid to anger their peers and would admit their wrongdoing in public. Depending on the nature of the infraction the manager might get very angry and yell at the boys, and he could make them feel really humiliated in front of their peers. However, the manager was very charismatic and he was very skilled in using humor to embarrass the boys in front of everybody. He knew how to talk to the boys, how to get their attention, how to put things in a way that they would understand. For example, he might make fun of some boys' school issues and imply that they would be so ignorant that when they went out with 'their ladies' they would be dumped because the girls would not want to go out with someone that sounded so stupid. The boys would crack up with the manager's jokes and it was clear from their behavior in those

meetings that many had the manager as a role model. For many, the manager was a real cool, tough, successful guy.

The ways different boys participated in house meetings was very interesting. Perhaps what was most revealing about house meetings was that many boys tried to get the manager's attention (or 'kiss up to him') during those meetings when, behind his back, they would complain to me how much they hated him. Some boys were inconsistent to the point that they would turn in a peer to show to the manager that they were superior. Johnson, for instance, was very good at that. However, that usually worked to his disadvantage as that would not impress the manager and he would still cause anger in his peers. It's worth noting that Johnson would never do that to Daniel, Jamal, or Bobby, the toughest residents, but only to younger, weaker peers.

At least twice a week the boys had also to perform a series of chores in the house as well as do their laundry. The chores rotated among the boys and they all had to adapt to this clear routine, which for the most part functioned smoothly. However, neglecting chores was a common source of conflict with the ensuing punishment. For example, Jay explained to me that his issue with performing a cleaning chore was a constant source of conflict with the staff. One day Jay told me, *"Some things are so meaningless and they make such a big issue of it. Like the chore. OK, I have a chore. Not only was I sweeping the activity room, but also at the same time I was helping Robert with his chore. And I didn't pick outside the trash. There's reasons why I don't pick up outside. First of all, that shit feels degrading. I don't want to run around picking up on the*

sidewalk just because the sidewalk is in front of our house. I understand it's necessary to keep it clean, but I shouldn't have to pick up other people's shit. People walk by, eat chips, and throw it on the sidewalk. I have to pick up that shit, those bags of chips, because it's in front of our house. It's not that I can't do that, that I am so much above that. I just don't like picking up bloody rags from the floor." Fortunately for Jay the chores change every week. Jay had constant power struggles with the manager and the staff, which I will present in greater detail later.

In my first years in the group home, the boys' rooms were sometimes dirty, which was also one constant conflict between staff and boys. The boys would bring and sometimes forget food in their rooms, which cause sanitary problems. Jason was constantly written up for that and for neglecting his hygiene. He also kept his hair long and was constantly threatened by the manager to have it cut. Indeed, after Jason no boy was allowed to have long hair and once a month a barber would come to the house and cut the boys' hair very short with a machine. Later on some boys had hygiene issues and sometimes had to be reminded to take a shower. Bed bugs were also a common problem with which the manager had to constantly struggle. Late in 2003 many boys were complaining frequently of bed bugs and the social worker told me that some were sleeping on the floor. By that time the boys were already engaged in their schoolwork to an unprecedented degree and both the social worker and I felt strongly about advocating for them. However, this was a sensitive issue and the manager had told me that he had brought the exterminator many times just as he had replaced

mattresses numerous times. He said he had gotten tired of wasting resources given that the boys' hygiene was bad. Still the social worker explained to me that the wooden beds the boys were sleeping in were old and should be replaced. I asked Jay about the issue, "could it be that people are not clean enough and that they have stuff in their rooms?" This is what he answered: *"Of course that's what he [manager] is going to say, Eduardo. He is going to say people are dirty and that's why I'm not calling an exterminator because I call them and they always come back. What he fails to realize is, I can't stop no one. I'm not supposed to suffer because A, B, and C are dirty; because I'm clean. I take two showers a day and they don't shower, they don't wash clothes, and now I have to have bugs because they want to be dirty. I can't control them. Basically, what he might as well do is discharge all the dirty kids. That's how it comes across to me. Maybe I'm misinterpreting what he is saying, but that's what I hear him saying, that he's not calling the exterminator because people are dirty, because people keep bringing food upstairs. I don't eat no food upstairs. I eat downstairs, there's no reason to bring food upstairs."*

Conflict would also commonly arise as the boys borrowed clothes and hygiene items, such as soap and deodorant, and recreational items, such as CDs, from each other and might forget to return or might return it damaged. Indeed, to avoid such problems there was a house rule that prohibited them to borrow from each other. Evidently, that rule was difficult to enforce and they boys kept borrowing articles from one another. They would justify that by saying that they were short of what they needed. It was very common to hear the boys complain

that they did not have soap, deodorant, tooth paste, etc. The manager would say that they wasted everything and that it would be impossible to give them the items at their will. Another common source of conflict related to violating the house schedule, such as staying up past their sleeping time at 10 PM or failing to get up in the morning on time to go to school. Despite their conflicts, staff and many boys had a close relationship. The boys for the most part felt comfortable in the group home, even though many boys were discharged as their relationship with staff and/or peers deteriorated. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of both staff and residents were African-Americans and some of the boys were Latinos, which helped them to maintain a sense of common membership in a larger cultural group. The boys constantly played and, except for very brief transitional moments when they had just arrived in the institution, I never observed a boy being depressed. As I had a chance to observe the boys in the neighborhood park, it became clear that they used to get along well with their peers with whom they used to play sports. In that setting, I could observe how the boys related to each other as family members. They were protective of and cared for each other each other. This seemed extremely important as some of them, like Johnson, lacked any contact with their families.

Despite the great degree of consistency in the activities carried out daily by the boys in the institution, some days of the week had additional activities. On Tuesdays Daniel, Bobby, and Johnson had independent living session with a counselor arranged by the CPS agency. Their meetings would take place in the living room and they would learn basic skills related to paying bills, organizing

meals, having a budget, etc. Fridays were slightly different in that study hour was not enforced so strictly.

When I came to the institution, most boys resisted working with me and they rejected my offers to help them. Moreover, they would make it impossible for me participate in that process by not telling me what they were studying, not showing me their books, notebooks, or assignments. Moreover, there was not a place conducive to studying in the house. I was at the institution three times a week, which also made it difficult for me to keep up with their everyday school life that was indeed very eventful. Everyday something happened, such as a boy cursed a teacher, acted out in class, was involved in some incident, got suspended, etc. Their schoolwork was systematically incomplete, late, or missing (or varied combinations of these) and, in addition, some boys frequently skipped classes, were involved in arguments and fights and other forms of misconduct, such as petty theft. I did not have direct access to the school and would become knowledgeable only of a fraction of the incidents the manager, the staff, or the boys shared with me. Not being in the institution everyday made it very difficult for me to help the boys with their schoolwork, which required systematic monitoring given their insufficient self-motivation for it. Before the social worker came onboard, my access to the boys' school affairs was indirect and inconsistent. Nobody in the institution was systematically monitoring the completion of schoolwork, although the manager had control of the boys' school attendance, behavior, and grades. The everyday academic life of the boys was a matter that was up to their own responsibility. Many times the school would call

the program, but my access to that information was only indirect and accidental. I was not in the agency everyday and the calls were directed to the manager. The manager would tell me when the boys had a particular problem in school, but it was clear to me that we needed to intervene in a preventive fashion. Many times the manager would interrupt the boys' activities at the dining table during study hour to publicly reprimand a boy for acting out in school, cutting class, being suspended, etc. I knew the boys' schoolwork needed to be closely and consistently supervised in order for us to help them. It was crucial to know in advance what projects, tests, essays the boys would have to do and also what topics they would cover so that it would be possible to help them with the content as well. It was frustrating because the boys would not tell me about their schoolwork. Whenever I asked what they were studying, I would only get vague answers. When I offered to help them I would hear excuses such as "I forgot my book in school", "I didn't get any homework today" – a terrible lie, given that kids do get homework on a daily basis-, "I didn't understand what the teacher told us to do." I did not matter if I pressed them. "What do you mean you didn't understand what the teacher gave you? Didn't you write it down?" was a question I got tired of asking. The answers, the usual "The teacher wrote in on the blackboard, but I didn't copy it" or "nobody in my class got it, that teacher is really bad". Eventually, I would hear about disappointing report cards. However, the institution was still consumed by negative behavior in school, such as cutting classes, fights with peers, cursing out teachers, etc.

Given that I had very little access to the boys during study hour and because my job was characterized in clinical terms, I was asked by the manager and staff to talk to the boys that were having particular issues, as I described above in relation to Jason and Trevor. The manager also instructed me to talk to all boys once a week, which was met with a lot of resistance. At 5 PM study hour was over and the boys would get ready to eat and go to the sports center. The time allotted for study was only one hour, which is very little compared to the amount of homework youth is usually assigned.

Riding the House Van

I learned a lot about the boys' musical taste and cultural sensitivities during off work hours when for example I got a ride from Mr. Washington, the older youth counselor with whom the boys related as a type of uncle. Mr. Washington was in charge of driving the boys to the community sports center and he kindly would give me a ride on the program's van to the train station. Those rides were particularly long in my initial weeks as Mr. Wallace would drop me off at a central station far away from the group home because I was still learning my way around their neighborhood to which I had a long commute to and from my house. The van was an interesting space where their status was constantly played out. Conflict was common as the boys would argue and fight for the front seats. Mr. Wallace would allow the boys to listen to rap music loud and the boys would sing along. Johnson knew many long rap songs by heart and, like many other boys, enjoyed performing it. Those van rides were cathartic moments and I appreciated being included in their culture. On the van I felt like they were letting me into their

world and it seemed that my literal foreignness further enhanced their performances. In my mind it seemed as though they were saying to me, 'look, Eduardo, this is who we are and we welcome you into our world'. Mr. Wallace generously supported their performances and it was on the van that he and I would talk to the boys. Mr. Wallace would bring up what was going on with a particular boy, an act of misbehavior, a bad grade, etc. and we would collectively discuss it. The van was a freer space where it was OK to carnivalize, albeit within constraints. For instance, Mr. Wallace would not allow the boys to curse and would discourage them from using the 'N' word. In the first year I would hear the boys calling each other nigger all the time, in a joking way. Actually, Rashid and Quayad would also call me that way, which it felt as a compliment, as a sign of initiation into their culture.

On the van I also could talk to the boys about issues that were going on in the world beyond their community. For example, one day I got a ride from Mr. Wallace as he was taking the boys to the park. On the way I told them I had seen Fahrenheit 9/11. Greg was very interested and asked many questions about it. Jay at first made clear he was not interested in talking to me about that. However, as Greg became gradually more engaged in the conversation with me, in which Mr. Wallace also became engaged, Jay changed his attitude and began to demonstrate interest in the movie. Jay usually behaves that way in front of his peers. He will resist participating in activities and talking to me unless his peers show interest. Then he will quickly change his mind. Derek, Neil and Robert also attempted to participate in the conversation. Derek asked if I had seen the movie

'super size me' and stated that he wanted to go see it and was followed by Neil. Robert mentioned that I had promised to take him to see 'shaolin soccer' and I reminded him that that did not happen because he was on restriction for many weeks.

Boys' Typical Discourses

As I attempted to establish my practice in the institution I not only observed carefully what the staff and boys were doing, but I also listened carefully to what they were saying. One common theme in verbal interactions between staff and boys and among the boys themselves was race. As Jerry and I became closer and exchanged our critical views of institutional practices he started to share his views on the boys' problems. One day Jerry startled me by saying that I was the only person who could make a difference there because of my advanced background and my lighter skin color. "Black boys", he told me, "have an inferiority complex, and they will respect you more because of your light skinned". Evidently, this way of putting things felt disempowering in the sense that whatever I would do, however hard I tried to work to change things around, at least partially, the credit would go to my skin color- In Jerry's eyes, of course. As to getting the respect of the boys, it is hard to tell if my skin complexion protected me, given some of the "fuck yous" they yelled at me. By the same token, being Brazilian and Latino did put me in an in-between zone in the racial spectrum, somewhere between black and white. One of the boys, Johnson, told me right away that Brazilians are OK. "Brazilians, Puerto Ricans, they are OK, but white people, white...nah", he said to me indicating how he discriminated

white skinned people- or at least that was his discourse. Racially prejudiced discourses were also a tool commonly used by the boys to rebel against Jerry and Peter, especially against the former. Jerry would constantly try and enforce institutional rules and, when confronted with resistance, would raise his voice, threaten to 'write the boys up', or call the manager. Commonly the boys would get angry at him and would call him 'African monkey' and say things to him such as, "who do you think you are, you're from Africa, what do you know about America?" They also used racial discourses to question the legitimacy of my work with them. As I talked to Devon one day in the park about my idea of a collective project, he asked, "*about what, life in the ghetto?*" Then he started to tell me that he was going to make it. "I'm not going to be poor", he said, "even if I have to sell drugs." One day Joe explained his failing math grade by accusing his teacher of being racist. He said that in the van, which provoked immediate response from Jay. "Joe", he asked, "how many black kids are there in your class? Aren't you all black? Is your teacher failing everybody? No. So how can you say he is racist."

A recurrent speech device used by the boys was the N word used amongst them. That word seemed to vary its meaning in the context of their interactions (what Vygotsky referred as sense, or the particular situational meaning of a word). It would be used to offend and insult (e.g., shut up you stupid N) or as a term of endearment (e.g., what's up, N?). The manager, Sylvia, Jerry, or Peter would never use that word, although sometimes Mr. Wallace and Simon would use it playfully with the boys. Interestingly, sometimes Rashid

would call me with the N word, which I took as a sign of willingness to accept me into his culture, however unorthodox it may be. Although the staff would not, for the most part, endorse the use of the N word, the boy's usage of the term was never addressed as a problem, unless used in an overtly insulting manner.

During the collective video play project a former student of mine who is African-American, worked as a research assistant. He was shocked about how liberal the boys were in using that word. I remember him telling me that his mother always would always say that people should never use the word because of its history. Our conversation certainly changed my perspective on the issue, but Andrew, the research assistant, did not succeed in preventing the boys from using the word despite his warnings to the boys.

The use of the N word or curse words was common practice among the boys to deal with conflicts from simple situations (e.g., "get up from my chair, bitch") to overt confrontations. The same would happen toward the staff, although the likelihood of being put on restriction was far greater. Using foul language as a tool to assert power was very common and it often included insulting the interlocutor's mother (as a curse or as a joke). Misogyny was also common in their discourses, which was reflected in hip-hop and rap songs. Referring to women as bitches and whores was very common in their jokes, arguments, and the songs they listened to. This used to drive Sylvia mad, who would constantly ask the boys if they did not have mothers and sisters. These discursive devices were frequent in the boys' play, as when they 'free styled. He is one example of

Rashid's rap:

*I'm sitting here in this
 Door room comin through
 Talkin to girls Like
 They Broom niggas don't
 Want to see me all I
 Know is I'm about to
 Go stealth mode when
 I come through it's like
 All hell raises comin
 Come throw like I'm John
 Blazes*

Rashid's rap songs did not change much and he kept repeating the same ideas every time he 'free-styled'. The other boys' raps also contained similar ideas, such as that they are tough and they get the girls. They enjoyed creating rhymes, which they used ad nauseum in their songs. Rashid for example had learned the word sophisticated in school and he rhymed it with decapitated in all his attempts to 'free style'. Brian in turn would repeatedly rhyme ready with spaghetti. The content of their free styling was very consistent. It basically consisted of venting their anger at a generalized enemy, society, which relentlessly challenged them and elicited from them a tough identity that served as a form of redemption and revenge. The message seemed to be, 'OK, I have had to go through hell, but I have emerged strong and I will continue to fight. And in the process I am getting the girls and I am having fun with my friends.' This message seems to be ubiquitous in the world of rap and hip-hop, which these boys were keen on emulating. Interestingly, the staff did not encourage the boys' identification with rappers, although they would not try and stop the boys from doing it. Silvia, who was a youth and substance abuse counselor during the first

and second phases, was very critical of the influence of rappers, and the media in general, on black boys. She particularly opposed the misogyny so frequent in the lyrics of some rappers that portrayed women as sexual objects and a prize for the toughest guys. She would always ask the boys if they – and the rappers – did not have mothers and sisters and if they would like others to relate to the women in their families in that way. I will explore this further in the next section as misogyny was included in the play of some boys.

Staff's Typical Discourses

I learned a great deal about those boys through my conversations with Jerry and Peter. They explained to me that Bobby, Jamal, and Daniel formed a clique and they had power over the other residents. Jerry and Peter did not have a close relationship to the manager as the other youth counselors and they were critical of them. Jerry told me that the staff had their favorite residents, which disempowered the work he and Peter were trying to do. Jerry told me that the staff did not work as a team and that other counselors did not support his work disciplining the boys. Jerry was very sensitive to the fact that the boys enjoyed making fun of him and Peter because of their African background. He used to get very upset that the boys would call them monkeys and other derogatory terms. Jerry and Peter were very critical of the boys and attributed their “ignorance” to American black culture. Jerry told me *“black boys have an inferiority complex. They are dumb because they don’t realize that you need to get an education, that that is the only way you can have a better life. They want to have money, to go out, have nice clothes, but they don’t understand that you have to work hard and*

study.” Jerry did not tolerate the boys’ provocations and he would often “write them up”. Jerry had particular problems with Brian, the most outwardly defiant resident at the time. Their dialogue was Brian was often very disrespectful toward Jerry and he enjoyed making fun of him in front of the other residents who would laugh at Jerry. There was a constant battle between Brian and Jerry, but Brian also had frequent problems with the rest of the staff. Regarding the ‘clique’, the manager and the staff told me that Jamal, Daniel and Bobby usually “behaved well” and did not create problems with the other residents. That meant in practice that it was not so necessary for me to insist on working with them. My help was most needed and my work more useful in talking to the residents that were creating serious problems.

Communication between school and the program would take place mostly in cases of suspension and other incidents of misbehavior, such as ‘cutting classes’, bringing alcohol to school, etc. The program had been chronically confronted with very low scholastic achievement and this problem is still usually framed by the staff in terms of individual children’s capacities and abilities, such as lack of intrinsic motivation. A quote from a dialogue I had with the manager a few months after I started working there illustrates well the institution’s viewpoint. He told me: “Mr. Eduardo, you will waste your time trying to help all these kids. Some of them don’t want to be helped. There is nothing you can do. Each individual is different.” Alternatively, the staff also resorted to the boys’ allegedly insufficient intellectual capacity to explain their developmental shortcomings. I was told that “some of these kids are not very bright”. Thirdly, there were virtually

no educational activities in the house, except for the study hour that was under loose staff supervision and seemed to be, for the most part, fictitious. Most boys had absolutely no interest in studying and a few were indeed practically illiterate. As a result, most of them had failing grades in school. Usually, when the manager receives complaints from the school, the staff takes punitive actions to ensure that the boys do their schoolwork and behave according to institutional rules. Rebelliousness was a common response adopted by the boys when they feel forced to study or read.

Researcher's typical day at the Site: Departing from the typical day and the resistance met

A typical day at work for me started when I proceeded to commute to the group home. I was usually ignored when I entered the group home, with a few exceptions such as Rashid who was always friendly and Brian who, depending on his mood would come to the door to greet me. The other boys would never take the initiative to talk to me, including Johnson, who was nice to me only when his high rank peers were not around. Given that the boys would consistently make it difficult for me to approach them, I would feel anxious about being around them during study hour when they could easily 'gang up' on me and undermine my efforts to engage them in learning activities. Thus, for some boys I was an easy target for their attempts to subvert power relations that would come out in their teasing and mocking me.

My initial interactions with the boys occurred mainly in two rooms, the dining room and the activity room. As I explained, the boys sat at the table in the

dining room for snack and for study hour. I found it very difficult to relate to them in that context, as I felt excluded from their peer culture that seemed impenetrable to me. Nevertheless, I often sat there with them and observed what was going on. It was uncomfortable to be there, as some boys would relate to me in mennipean form, which further indicated that they saw me as another adult that was there to control them. I hoped that with time and no counter resistance on my part their mennipean provocations and moves to subvert power relations (e.g., trying to make fun of me, using heavy slang, etc.) would soon be displaced toward more Socratic forms of dialogue.

For all those reasons my practice in the beginning consisted of group and private conversations with the boys on week days, movies on Fridays, and later on trips to New York City on weekends. Group conversations were difficult to organize as well as it proved impossible to have fixed schedule for seeing the boys. My everyday practice was marked by a great deal of improvisation and I was constantly feeling that my practice was literally out of control. The boys would be sent to the sports center, the park, or to therapy, without my previous knowledge. Likewise, an urgent issue involving a boy would require attention making me change my plans. I was never informed in advance of anything and would only know of whatever incident upon arriving in the institution. There was no formal communication system; we did not use email to communicate nor was I called to be informed about anything. Many times I felt the atmosphere tense because of a conflict involving a resident or our activities had to be interrupted because the manager had called a house meeting. Moreover, I was never

informed of a boy being discharged or running away. Sometimes I would come prepared to work with a boy on something just to find out, upon arriving at the institution, that that particular boy was no longer there. This situation got worse after the manager practically stopped talking to me in the late spring of 2002. One of the most difficult things to me was not to have access to a space where I could work with the boys.

The public character of the living room made it highly inadequate to support schoolwork. For this reason, I made successive pleas to have access to the third floor, which only occurred in the early spring of 2003, about a year after I had started working in the institution. As I came to learn it, the use of space was an important element in how power was enacted in the institution. In my first year working in the program, my access to the rooms in the house was very restricted. I was denied access to the third floor that has three rooms, which were unavailable to me or to the boys. The only space I had access to that was conducive to a different type of interaction with the boys was the activity room. Regarding my practice, the issue of space first emerged as the manager expressed his doubts about my ability of working alone with the boys without permitting them to violate institutional rules and he even indicated he had concerns about my personal safety. That was actually his reason for discouraging me from working with the boys on the third floor, which severely limited the possibilities of working with the boys individually or in small groups. The only space I could carry out individual and small group sessions was the activity room located on the first floor, next to the front door. The activity room is

not furnished to afford learning activities as it has no tables or desks and its location next to noisy areas (i.e., the vestibule and the living and dining rooms) further constrained the possibility of carrying out learning activities. This room is located to the left right next to the front door and it was there that I started to talk to the boys individually and in small groups. It is comfortably furnished with a sofa, two armchairs, and some pillows. Those pieces of furniture were donated to the institution several years ago, such as most of the furniture in the institution. Even though some boys complained about the style of the furniture, the activity room was cozy and allowed for private conversations. The Venetian blinds were always down (a rule determined by the manager whose meanings I never really knew), which blocked the outside world and contributed to a more intimate ambiance. In the next section on I will describe some of the conversations I had with the boys in the activity room, which were my first unique contribution to expanding institutional practices. This room also contains two TV sets, a stereo, and it is there that the boys play video games. Some conflicts emerged between me and the boys vis-à-vis the use of the activity room as they sometimes wanted to play video game as I needed the space for other activities. The activity room is supposed to be locked during study hour, although the staff overlooked that rule on occasions. Before and after study hour the boys would flock to the activity room to play video game, which limited my use of that space. Many times I had to take the boys outside the house to talk to them in private. One day in June of 2002 I sat with George in the backyard where we read and discussed passages from *Sophie's World*, a novel written for high school students in which the history

of philosophy is introduced. Sometimes I had to talk to the boys on the porch too, as other spaces were not available.

Despite my success in implementing alternative activities that expanded the possibilities in the residential program, I started to become aware of the limitations of my practice in bringing about a significant change in the activity system of the institution. I was definitely getting closer to some boys, especially as I joined them in the activities already established in the program. In the spring and early summer I went to the community park a few times with the boys. At the park I could play sports with the boys and hang out with them. Actually they could not believe I had never played football before. I explained that I am from Brazil and we do not play football there. The boys were thrilled to teach me how to handle the ball, how to throw it, etc. Johnson was particularly nice, which seemed to confirm that he would rather be in a teaching than in a learning position. I also had a chance to talk to the boys about different things. I was struck by a conversation I had with Devon, a sixteen year-old boy who had just recently come to the program. Devon had no idea where Brazil is and he asked me if it is close to Afghanistan and if I knew Bin Laden.

What Transpired: interpreting institutional and individual activities

Institutional Practices: Control as development

As I attempted to establish my practice centered on promoting learning and met considerable resistance to it, I began to observe what was going on in the institution. From the point of view of my own activity I began to understand

the power struggles in the institution, which revealed a clash of activities between the boys and the staff. I already described this situation in previous sections in terms of the dichotomy control versus resistance, which corresponds to what Polsky (2001) termed custodialism. The institution, as I first came to know it, was characterized by what Polsky defined as custodialism (1962), or “an interlocking them-us struggle between staff and residents, and the violent and manipulative control of peer youth leaders over their followers (Polsky, 2003, foreword). This power asymmetry resulted from a focus on control exercised by punitive and restrictive measures. In this sense, control and rebelliousness constitute the same, albeit opposed, collective activity that comprise institutional practices. Power struggles were instantiated in the tools used in the institution and in the rules defining the conditions for their use. House rules and the schedule of the program were decided by the manager and the boys did not have a say on that. He not only controlled how the resources were distributed in the program (time, money, space, etc.), but he also had the power to overwrite any decisions made in the institution. For the most part and it was not easy to change things around the house because everything had to be communicated to the manager, who many times was unavailable, not only physically, but also emotionally. In fact, the manager was sometimes in a bad mood and everybody avoided him in those days. His control over the program was very strong and even to momentarily take off pictures from the walls needed to be dealt with carefully.

The use of space was also an important tool to enact power in the institution. For instance, in the summer of 2004 there was a series of graphic art

workshops and in some sessions the graphic designer volunteering the workshops brought her computer and a projector, which could only work in the living room. We needed to remove a big picture frame from the wall and for that we needed the manager's permission who gave it but with some reluctance. Moreover, the boys were not allowed to hang or post things on their bedroom walls, although that was common when I started working there.

Being there I witnessed how those institutional practices of control were limited in promoting the boys' development. Yet, I was aware that the staff was committed to their task of promoting the boys' development by helping them to control themselves. In order to control the institution and enforce discipline a system of restriction had been in place for many years whereby a resident who committed an infraction is not allowed to leave the premises. Typically, minor infractions (e.g., a chore did not get done) result in a few days' restriction whereas more serious ones may result in many days or even several weeks (e.g., school suspension, car theft, etc.). Despite its immediate impact, the efficacy of such system is severely limited and even detrimental to the boys' development. As I witnessed in many occasions, the boys' restriction time had so rapidly accumulated that the end of the punishment would be farfetched to them. Instead of encouraging them to change their attitude, this would in fact contribute to the continuation of undesirable actions. As the social worker expressed in a conversation about one of the boys in the fall of 2003, "Robert has been on that roll for so many weeks. He's been on restriction so much, and for so long, that he feels there's no end in sight for him. And he gets frustrated by that." Needless to

say, such punitive system has negligible impact in promoting desired developmental outcomes, such as motivating the boys toward high academic achievement. Despite their basic needs being met (clothing, food, shelter) and reasonably frequent opportunities for sports, play and leisure, many residents were unhappy and many complained to me of boredom. In the context described above, issues of learning and academic success were not the priority of the institution. This is not at all surprising and corresponds to the general orientation of child welfare practices as the literature reviewed indicates.

Boys' Activities: Development as Resistance

The boys' resistance toward institutional rules was very evident. It manifested in racial discourses, the use of foul language and the presence of taboo and prejudice words in the boys' verbal interactions were all part and parcel of their attempts to subvert power relations with adults or to impose their power over the peers. This was evident in the typical dialogical genres as these linguistic resources were enlisted whenever the boys' voice (second voice) attempted to resist the staffs' (first) voice leading the interaction into the menippean realm. An interesting phenomenon occurred in the boys' interactions with me. As a representative of the staff, I was a tool for them to escape the staff's magistral voice and engage in the menippean genre of dialogue. Indeed, the boys were constantly attempting to escape institutional power and they would assert their agency by violating house rules. Brian was the menippean king, always trying to subvert power relations by subjugating others to his sarcasm. In Freire's terms he seemed to be trying to oppress those he perceived as his

oppressors – or those who seemed to be allied with his oppressors, such as myself. One interesting aspect of their emancipatory struggles was how the boys related to one another by establishing a hierarchy whereby the toughest boys would oppress weaker ones, especially in front of the staff, although they also formed alliances and demonstrated solidarity toward one another in several occasions. I most often witnessed a high degree of inconsistency as the boys moved from one pole to another depending on what the situation called for given the resources (tools) available to them. For example, Johnson might be telling me how much he resented the manager and later, in a house meeting, he would be allying himself to him.

In this context where the boys' agency was not acknowledged, studying was seen as just another rule imposed on them. The boys' lack of engagement in school learning was glaring in my first year in the institution, with a few notable exceptions. Curiously, even though the boys, when asked, would say that school learning is important, and notwithstanding the fact that they used to admire their few peers who did well in school, they rarely took the initiative to complete their schoolwork satisfactorily or in the adequate time frame. It also seemed true that some boys did not aspire to having careers that require college degrees, such as carpentry and law enforcement (e.g., police officer).

In general, it seemed that many boys did not know exactly what they wanted for their future in professional terms. It was not easy to know how the boys thought about these issues because for the most part they would simply refuse to talk to me about themselves. However, it seemed that part of the

problem had to do with the fact that they did not have much of a vision of the future. The boys seemed to be captured by their present activities in a way that worrying about the future (and making sure they were taking the necessary steps toward achieving their dreams) was not a present concern. At any rate, planning to go to college was not part of the boys' aspirations, except for Johnson, who wanted to go to art school and was the only boy taking his studies more seriously.

Despite having succeeded in helping Jason and Trevor avoid the 'disruptive' behaviors they were engaging in, my role as a psychologist carried with itself a threat for the boys. I was only intuitively aware of that when I started working in the residential program and I thought that I would be able to convey to the boys that I was not a traditional psychologist and that I shared their critical view of mental health services, which was how they framed my role. Thus, an important limitation in conceptualizing my practice was that I underestimated the boys' resistance toward me. Soon enough it became clear to me how my title of psychologist automatically raised the boys' resistance insofar as they saw working with me as confirming that they had mental health issues. Thus, to resist working with me was to resist being 'pathologized', which is a typical risk for youth in the child welfare system. In other words, their resistance toward me, the psychologist, can be read as their resistance toward being 'acquired' by the system, to paraphrase McDermott (19xx). In practice, I faced a major challenge in carrying out the task posed to me by the institution, as most of the boys refused to talk to me. That made the contradictions in my practice all the more

salient. At the same time, their resistance forced me to consider alternative ways for establishing my practice.

The boys' resistance constituted an important aspect of our relationship. In the beginning only Rashid would voluntarily talk to me. He was the youngest boy and occupied the bottom of the rank status in the institution. He had nothing to lose talking to me and he was not concerned about my role as a psychologist. Moreover, it seemed that he was not reflecting on the broader connotation of receiving the services of a psychologist, which seemed to be part of the problem I faced with the other boys.

In the beginning, the boys construed my role as that of a counselor, which is how I was introduced to them. Thus, in addition to negotiating my role with the staff, I had to negotiate my role with the boys. I was sympathetic to their resistance toward counselors and therapists, to which many were referred to by their CPS worker and usually without their participation in the decision-making process. The fragmentation of the services they received and the high degree of bureaucratic procedures involved in coordinating different systems, such as child protective services, the judicial system, youth programs, therapeutic centers, etc. further contributed to the boys' feeling of disempowerment. They resented having little control over their lives, which seemed to fuel their frustration. Moreover, over the years I could observe a pattern in terms of younger boys not being concerned or embarrassed about living in a group home or receiving mental health services. Many of them were embarrassed by the fact that their families were in disarray, which in the later years some confided to me. One manifestation of this was that

younger boys were open in their school (junior high) about where they lived and did not mind being seen with the social worker. This was not at all the case once they moved to high school or for the ones already in high school. When they were in elementary school, Az and Roger, just like Omar, were open about they lived. In contrast, the boys in middle and high school actively avoided disclosing anything about their personal lives in school, although they would only tell me in the last years after I had become closer to them. Derek for instance told me that Jay avoided talking to him in school. One dramatic manifestation of that was the fact that in the Spring of 2004 a new resident, Omar, was beaten up by other boys for having disclosed in their school that he and other residents that attended the same school lived in a group home. Especially in the beginning, the boys were very protective of their families and they either refused to talk to me about their families or they would limit themselves to describe the positive aspects of their relationships with family members.

Another dimension of the boys' resistance was their neglect for their studies. As I entered the institution learning was not a goal they had established by themselves, but rather a rule they had to follow in order to stay in the program. This was particularly evident in the way the neglected their studies and used their time mostly to play and hang out with their peers. Gradually, I began to realize that to resist studying was part of a larger system of activities. Indeed, the boys were keen on resisting a great deal of activities they were expected to carry out. Typically, those activities were decided by the institutions where their everyday lives unfolded (group home, school, child welfare system) without involving their

participation. Furthermore, their choices were further constrained as they were materially deprived and deprived of family protection. Their sense of agency was constrained, which contributed to their feeling oppressed. Thus, to resist was intimately connected with their struggle to assert their agency. In sum, to resist was part of their selves. Andre', confessed to me in a private conversation that he did not do any schoolwork. I was actually surprised with the honesty of his answer to my question about how many hours a day he spent studying after coming home from school. It was also a shocking revelation when he answered, "zero."

Psychology as tool for control: Expectations for my practice

One theme that frequently emerged in my conversations with the staff, and that was present in official documents of the institution, was the role of psychology in helping control the boys, often seen as deviant teenagers, through clinical work. It was taken as shared knowledge by the staff that the boys' failure to conform to rules, their lack of discipline, and rebelliousness were manifestations of inner psychological conflicts and emotional issues. This was present in their discourses about their professional tasks, as I have already illustrated in previous sections. The boys' putative psychological conflicts and emotional issues were viewed as natural consequences of having been removed from their families, their histories of been victims of abuse and neglect, and not having had a structured environment. Given my job title, psychologist, it was all but natural to the staff that I would contribute to the institution by talking to they boys about their emotional issues and psychological issues. In that sense, the

institution expected that my work would contribute to achieving the overall objective of the institution, which conflicted with my own expectations about the work. My expectation was to implement a developmental approach based on teaching and learning and not to focus on mental health issues. This is evident in the job description handed down to me, however vague it was (see table below).

Table 1. Job Description

Part-time psychologist responsible for the following but not limited to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a relationship with all residents and when necessary provide emergency individual counseling and services. • Collaborate with team members to establish the appropriate plans for the residents and their parental figures. • Provide staff with clinical assistance and support when necessary. • Provide leadership for the staff support group • Weekly case record documentation

Teaching and learning were completely absent from the job description. Psychological work was seen as an instrument to achieve control by means of professional dialogue (i.e., counseling) with the boys. Despite the clinical expectation about my work, I was able to articulate a critical view of traditional psychological practices and discourses. Due to the contradictory view of the role of psychology and mental health, my view was accepted by the manager and by Sylvia, the counselor that I was closer to because we worked together in a program that was part of the overall organization where the group home was

nested. Both of them were critical of pathological diagnoses and of current societal practices that emphasize psychopathology. They both viewed that as a tool for the pharmaceutical industry to make profit. The manager was very clear about that. "These kids are not mentally ill, they don't have mental issues. They know what they should and what they should not do. They understand everything. Their problem is that they want to do what they have to do," he told me on several occasions. For Silvia, a youth and substance abuse counselor who is a member and advocate for the narcotics anonymous (NA), mental "diseases" are not biological conditions, but moral weakness stemming from not accepting Jesus into one's heart and falling prey to Satan. For her, control had an additional religious connotation. Her position was at the same time critical and conservative. Critical in that it rejected biologically reductionist views, especially as diagnosing problems as disorders is perceived by her as a way to bring profit to the pharmaceutical industry. At the same time, her view was conservative in that only Christian faith is seen as capable of solving people's problems. Notwithstanding their rejection of psychological labels, they both construed my work as that of a counselor who would bring about change intrapsychological in the boys.

The staff's expectations about my role as a psychologist seemed to corroborate Rose's contention that the 'psy' disciplines play an important role in government and, thus, they constitute practices of control (xx). In the custodial context of the activity system of the group home, I was expected to join the staff in their task to control the residents and curb their acts of rebelliousness. The

executive director's original plan for me was consistent with her clinical view that the boys had behavioral and emotional issues that needed to be addressed through therapeutic interventions. Many times she told me, "*Eduardo, you and [the manager] have to put in place a behavior modification system*". As a clinical social worker, she had knowledge of many psychological theories and approaches, all of which did not place teaching and learning at the center of development. In consonance with child welfare discourses and practices, development was not an explicit topic of discussion. Instead, behavioral control and the extinction of psychopathology were seen as the objective of the institution. Once such barriers were removed, the boys' developmental trajectories would unfold in healthy ways, which meant that they would finish high school, get a job, and find a place to live. The fact that the outcome goals for the boys when exiting the system did not seem as particularly bothersome to anybody, except me. Indeed, it seems that my insistence on higher education was perceived as being out of touch with the reality of those boys. That came out consistently in the remarks from the manager and other coworkers. The social worker for a sister agency that had direct contact with the executive director and the staff of the group home told me on many occasions, "*Eduardo, it's nice that you want those boys to succeed and achieve higher than anybody expects of them, but you got to be realistic and start where they're at.*"

Similarly, the manager and the executive director would constantly suggest that I helped the boys with independent living issues, such as finding housing, looking for jobs in the paper, etc. Later on, when I was actually

preparing workshops for the boys, the manager would propose those topics time and again, not fully believing the value of more theoretical, abstract, and school-like topics I selected. However, with time I was able to gain the boys' trust and the growth of my relationship with them helped gain the trust and respect of the manager who, despite our differences, never questioned the content of my work. Most visibly after the first year, I was fortunate enough to have his approval to carry out the workshops I wanted. In fact, the manager was my biggest ally and supporter when it came to fighting mental health diagnoses and labels. Unlike the executive director and the first social worker, Ms. Li, he does not believe in pathologizing the residents and sees that as an instrument of repressing minority kids that constitute the overwhelming majority of youth in the welfare system.

The focus on mental health and the conspicuous absence of higher educational plans in the discourses and practices of the institution reflected their absence from child welfare practice, policy, and research, as I described in the rationale section. It is not that the people at the group home opposed the idea of preparing the boys for college. On the contrary, they were very much in favor of that and genuinely wished that that would happen. The problem is that insofar as the boys had not internalized learning activity and were far behind in their school grades, going to college, for example, just did not seem as a reasonable outcome; especially when the time for aging out of the system was approaching. When I asked the executive director and the manager directly about preparing the boys for college, they welcomed my initiative but did not believe this would be possible for most of them. They both thought this was a great idea, but at the end

of the day I was by myself in trying to come up with of making that happen. In my first months working in the group home only two of the six youth counselors, who were college students at the time, were able to offer some help tutoring the boys with their schoolwork. However, those two counselors were constantly frustrated by the boys' lack of motivation for studying.

In hindsight I can see how naïve I was in overestimating the openness for change among both boys and staff. I also expected that I would be more involved in planning and evaluating the program, but I was an outsider who was alienated from any process of decision making that extended beyond my direct relationship with the boys. Staff meetings were rare and I never participated (because I was never invited) in the agency meetings where goals were set for the program. This prevented me from having more power in the institution, as I was kept alienated from any decision-making process. Participating in those meetings would have been an opportunity to raise my voice in public. Moreover, curriculum issues were not included in official discussions, with the exception of state mandated training sessions for the staff.

In sum, my position in the institution was very unstable. At the same time that I was there offering my services and could serve as a tool, I was also under the impression that I was seen as a threat, somebody to be watched out and. On the other hand, by coming up with alternative activities I would 'give a break' to the staff in that I would keep the boys busy alleviating the pressure on the staff to discipline them. Therefore, on several occasions I was unsure how to act in specific situations, even though I knew the overall direction I wanted my practice

follow. My initial idea of implementing learning activities then turned out to be quite elusive and, as I already described, I had to seek for alternative ways of carrying out my research practice.

7.3. Phase II– Opening Zones of Proximal Development: From learning to Play to playing to learn

As I described in the methods section, the objective of this research was to help the group home to create adequate conditions for the development of the boys and I sought to introduce learning activities as a developmental tool. However, this was virtually impossible in the beginning. Thus, I had to devise forms of activity that functioned as tools in facilitating the emergence of learning activity. My challenge was then to come up with ways to bridge the boys' interests to include learning activities to help them take their studies seriously and carefully consider their future orientation. This only became possible after other types of activity were first established. Thus, I began to search for a common ground between the boys' activities, institutional practices and my goal. This section examines how the implementation of the collaborative video project opened collective zones of proximal development as the boys and the research team learned to how to create a play project that extended over five months role of play in the youth the development of the boys at the group home. By collectively enacting a collaboratively written story, it was possible to embed a range of learning tasks in the boys' play, including some that resemble the tasks

the boys encounter in their school, such as writing a story, as well as how to operate technical equipment (e.g., digital video camera, lights, software), aesthetic operations (e.g., lighting, staging) and to establish and follow rules and guidelines necessary to conclude the project.

The video project was also my first victory in the institution as it was the vehicle through which I established myself as a key player in the group home. As I already described, by the summer of 2002 the manager had boycotted my work with the boys. However, I was able to access my own resources to put together the video project. I had started talking to the boys about it and we had Johnson's idea for the theme. On a Friday, August 01, 2002 an incident occurred that marked a change in my positioning in the institution. This is what happened. The problem started when I wanted to get some work done around the video project. The manager was absent and I was sitting at the dining room table I with the boys. It took me a long time to get them all organized and I wanted us to write some stories. The boys were rowdy. Jack, Brian Smith, and Daniel were trying to disturb the meeting. Brian kept saying that no one wanted to do that. I was telling them that they did not have to be there, that it was not mandatory to participate in the project, that it was optional. Nonetheless, they did not want to leave the table, they wanted to stay there. Suddenly, Daniel and Tyrese get into a physical fight. Daniel was very aggressive. He jumped over Tyrese on the table and started to choke him. Simon had to come and separate them. Afterwards, Daniel threw a plastic cup of water on Tyrese's face, which hurt his forehead and he started to bleed. Things calmed down a little bit, but none of the adults said anything.

Actually, Simon wanted me to stop the group and take the boys to the park. I told him I wasn't going to do that. I told him he could take the ones that were not interested in working on the project, but the ones who wanted to stay would stay and I would work with them. That was an interesting moment because the boys had to position themselves. Joe was all the time very quiet, sitting to my right. He said he wanted to stay; Tyrese also wanted to stay, and Johnson, surprisingly, said he wanted to stay. That was unusual because he usually did not want to take a position that went in a different direction than Daniel and the other boys who were at the top of their hierarchy. Actually Jerry was telling me that if I wanted to get to "these kids" I would have to get to Bobby and Daniel. "Those are the kids the others look up to", Jerry told me. Andre, who had been difficult that afternoon, also decided to stay. In the end, most of them decided to stay.

Bobby's positioning was interesting because he alternated taking one step toward participating in the project and one step toward being defiant. But in the end he was with me. It was Daniel, Jack, and Brian who were really against me. Jack was usually nice to me and his actions surprised me. Interestingly, the boys' attitude changes whether they are with me one-on-one, with a small group, or with the whole group. When they are all together in a big group there is a lot of showing off going on. The activity that takes place in such contexts is a contest for who's the toughest, who's the coolest. In those contexts Andre, for instance, acts out. He acts defiantly, disrespectfully; he joins the crowd in trying to insult and humiliate the staff. Whereas when you work individually with him, he is a nice boy.

I order to avoid confrontation with Daniel, Brian, and Jack, I go to the activity room to work only with those who want to be involved in the video project. However, the other ones break into the room and I tell them to leave. They refuse to leave. Brian is being very, very disrespectful toward me telling me to shut up and go fuck myself. Daniel also comes to the room and turns on the TV. They get on the sofa and chairs and keep yelling at me and the other boys. I tell them that we are working in that room and at some point it becomes so impossible to work that I decide to call the manager and the executive director. I leave the room and go straight to the phone. I do not have the manager's cell phone and Simon and Jerry refused to help me. The boys look at with awe and disbelief. Nobody ever dared to call the executive director. Then they all stop. I can not reach Ms. Taylor and I leave a message with her secretary. Soon after Silvia comes in and she starts yelling at the boys, telling them to shut up. Then the executive director calls, hears Silvia screaming with the boys and asks to talk to her. In the end the manager calls and he is very upset that the executive director was involved. He wanted to know who called her and I said it was I. I explained to him that I did not know what else to do, that I do not have direct access to him and that Simon and Jerry were not helping me at all. To my surprise, the manager did not start yelling at me, which is what I thought he would do.

That incident was very emotional for me and I could not stop thinking about it the entire weekend. In my journal I wrote the following interpretation of the event:

“Today I believe was sort of a turning point in terms of how I position myself with the boys. I think I showed a different side and I hope that from now on I am not going to put up with their disrespectful attitude. In the end Jerry was talking to me and he told me that from that moment on I would be more respected by the manager because I dared call the executive director. Actually, the manager told me that next week I am meeting with the boys on the third floor, which is something that I have been requested for months but he never granted it to me. This is going to be a big step forward because I will be able to be in a room with the boys who want to work with me without being disturbed by the ones who don't want to work with me.

In September we started working on the video project and we did not have any other incidents. By that time Jack and Brian had been discharged after stealing and crashing Jerry's car, which left the vehicle badly damaged and gave Jerry a big headache trying to convince the agency to pay for his loss. In fact, the video project was a great opportunity for me to interact with the boys in ways that would not fall into the traditional pattern of 'them vs. us', or authoritarian forms of dialogue. Due to the fact that the boys were intrinsically motivated to take part in the project, it was possible to engage them in more balanced types of dialogue. Conflicts emerged, and quite often, among the boys over who would play what part, who would operate the equipment, and also when some of them wanted to bail out on the project. However, there was a collective commitment that allowed the research team to negotiate compromises between the boys. The video professional and the research assistant were very committed and thrilled to be in

the project. We had a great time together and this seemed to have directly impacted the boys' emotional reactions. That allowed me to explicitly address with them the need to establish forms of interaction among all partners based on mutual respect. All of this was facilitated by the boys' strong desire to carry out the project. They were having so much fun with this play that they were better able to compromise and listen to others and change the direction of their actions. This flexibility and willingness were much less frequent in negotiations involving their routine activities such as schoolwork. In sum, this collective project allowed for the adults involved to guide the emotional development of the boys through dialogical negotiations. Over the course of the collective project power was became more fluidly distributed. The boys had a true opportunity to determine the direction and content of their activities and that was the basis for us to establish a different relationship. My role for them had changed after the project, which opened up the way for learning activities.

What Transpired

Power as Abuse: The Content of the Play

Below I present the transcription of a key scene in the boys' story where two cops interrogate an alleged suspect for the theft of a woman's money. The story begins with Sylvia hiding a shoebox where her character put the money she received from winning the lottery. Andre was the thief but he bribes the cop played by Az who, in turn, misleads the other cop involved in the case to search for another man, played by Tyrese. An interesting racial dynamic emerged in their improvisations of this scene, which was not present in the original script. In

the first scene when Roger, who is white, searches for Tyrese, who is African-American, the latter inserts race into the mix by saying, “You guys just can’t leave the black man alone,” to which Roger retorts, “shut up, don’t argue with the white man.” He is how the scene unfolds. The underlined parts emerged while shooting the scene and were absent from the original script. The scene was shot inside the van and both Tyrese and Roger had the script on their hands from where they read their lines.

Roger: You sure as hell think I’m stupid because I’m a cop, huh? Well, let me tell you what I know. I know for a fact that you had something to do with Sharon being attacked two days ago. I know for a fact that the money she won from the lottery was the reason why you abducted her.

Tyrese: Listen, you have to be joking, right! Listen, I don’t know anything about no abduction or no money. That’s my word! Listen, I finally have a steady job and a steady girl. (After reading the script, Tyrese turns to the cop and tells him in a soft voice suggesting intimacy between the two) You know who she is right? that hooker down on 24th street? . Listen, I’m trying to make my life into something better. Why the hell would I want to rob some old lady for some pocket change? C’mon, man!

R: So you do know about her winning the lottery, huh?

T: I told you, I don’t know anything about no lady being abducted. Why the hell am I talking to you all in the first place? I want to see my lawyer.

(Az comes in and Roger fixes the page so he can read more while he acts).

T: Listen, can you just turn the page on the so-called rights to see if I can see my lawyer?

R: Let me turn to your rights. All I have to say is that so far you are to be taken to the state prison.

T: Listen, but what I see in these papers it says that I can see a lawyer.

R: Now, what I say is that you get a lawyer if I say you could. Now if you start smart smacking me with your smacking mouth I'm gonna make sure you don't get a lawyer.

(Tyrese turns to Az and shouts angrily)

T: Who are you?

Az and Roger speak at the same time

A: Why do you want to know?

R: And you don't you to talk to my partner like that, all right?

(Az turns to Roger signaling that he will take control over the suspect's insubordination.)

A: (To the other cop) Don't say nothing. (Now turns to the suspect) Was I talking to you? So how come you jump on me like that?

(The suspect is about to reply but Az continues)

A: No, don't say nothing. Don't say nothing. Just don't jump on me like that.

T: I hate you all man. All you cops.

A: Shut up, shut up!

T: Don't touch me, don't touch me yo!

(Roger pretends to beat the suspect several times).

R: All I say is stop cursing at us and don't yell. I'm about to put you in the state prison if you keep talking smack here.

A: I think he (inaudible)

R: I think he is waiting for that, cause I'm gonna get his girl and put her back on 24th street.

A: She's letting him get his ass hooked in a juvenile house. She's letting him get his ass hooked.

R: Juvenile house? He is going to the state prison! (to Tyreses) Look, don't play with me. I know what you did and I know what you are doing. So stop being a fool and tell me what you know and I'll see to it that you get out in five.

T: I want my lawyer.

R: You sure you know what you're doing? I'll advise you to think very carefully before you seal your faith.

T: I want my lawyer.

The following dialogue is a complete improvisation where Az and Roger patronize the suspect.

Az: See, that's what you want to go through if...see, you can't be running on the streets doing all that gang banging, whatever, whatever. See, me and him, we're just doing our job. That's what we are supposed to do. You gotta respect that, you gotta respect that just like we respect you.

R: if you stop getting hookers off the streets, doing drugs, taking needles...I bet you're on drugs right now. Stop smoking joints. I bet you just smoked a joint.

Az and Roger tell Tyrese to shut up.

A: That's the reason why I don't like my job, cause you don't respect me.

R: I don't like you niggers, Negroes, gangsters, popping cracking shit, get this little popping cracking shit out of this town.

T: Listen, all of you Caucasians, Haitians, and the rest of you all can leave me alone.

R: And you can shut the fuck up and get your drug ass, alcohol bitch out of here.

Then Tyrese tries to stop the escalation of violence by saying that he does not like the cursing. Interestingly, at this moment it is Tyrese, not the character who seems to be speaking. Up to that point Roger and Az, much younger and shorter than Tyrese, had dominated the interaction. Despite Tyrese's comment Az and Roger keep telling him to shut up. Tyrese repeats a few times that he does not like being cursed. Roger and Az pretend to beat him up. This is how the scene ends:

T: I hate this penal system. Penal system is a bad thing cause once you get in, you just can't get out.

R: Shut up! You don't argue with this white man; this white man is doing his job. And you ain't doing shit, except for cursing us out, bitch!

(The impromptu proceeds with the cops, especially Roger abusing the suspect).

R: Shut up! Answer me. I'm a fucking cop; I'm going to shoot your ass. I have a license to kill!

Interestingly, Johnson, Roger and other boys were invoking a racial discourse to negotiate power which surfaced on their play in the video. An intimate connection between race and power is explicitly portrayed in the video, especially in the scenes where the white cop harasses the black suspect. Roger, as the white cop, speaks from a position of power in which one's right is openly asserted based on racial superiority. Furthermore, the cop addresses the suspect (second voice) from the position of an authoritarian first voice (Magistral dialogue) by reference to racial dominance that functions here as the third voice. Racial discourses in play echo the use of racial discourses as a tool to resist power in the institution. During the month of October Roger was on the epicenter of some changes taking place in the house. Roger had been criticized by his peers for being privileged by the staff because he is white. Johnson told me that Roger is a whiner. "He likes to play, but when you play with him he cries. He is spoiled. The staff here protects him because he is white. Nobody messes with him. People were just poking and playing", Johnson told me. Sylvia disagreed with that. "What they call play, somebody else can consider that abuse." The fact was that Roger was very cooperative, used to do his chores and always respected the staff. Roger comes from a different cultural background and positions himself differently towards the staff. He is significantly less confrontational than the other boys. In order to have more power with his peers, Roger cooperates with the staff and, in turn, gets their protection. That seems to aggravate some of the other residents whose struggle for power is usually characterized by defiance and insubordination.

Many of the scenes express how critically the boys view social institutions such as child protecting agencies, the judicial system, and the police. The scenes transcribed are saturated with a negative view of adult society. In their play adults are portrayed as morally corrupt, deeply engaged in drug use and drug dealing, prostitution, and conniving. Discrimination, degradation and humiliation of others are the most common mechanism used by the characters to negotiate and impose power. In the play, the powerful invoke prejudice and racism to impose power, whereas the powerless, lacking other resources, resist them by resorting to satiric comments through which a Menippean dialogue emerges. The dialogical nature of their play, especially the asymmetry of power with the dominance of the first voice and the second voice's emancipatory tendency, seems to reflect reality of power relations in the institutions of which they are a part (the group home, school, child protective agency, penal system, etc.).

The analysis of the content of the video project also reveals a great deal about their understanding of their social world and their aspirations, given the types of adult roles they chose to portray. This echoes what some boys told me about their aspirations for future occupation, which is discussed in greater detail in the discussion section. An important function of such play activity was to provide an opportunity for the boys to voice their critical view of society and to subvert relations of power. In play, the boys enacted characters that shared many similarities, although divided into two competing camps. For both camps they depicted tough characters trying to impose their sense of justice, either enforcing the law or resisting and defying it. The characters in their story act in

the context of a dynamical, hierarchically arranged social system, in which the actors struggle to defeat their rivals. Interestingly, this parallels the custodial system described by Polsky (2001) and corresponds to my interpretation of the residential institution as I first encountered it. In their fictitious world, not unlike the institutional world where they live, dialogue is for the most part a clash between the first, magistral voice, and the second voice that either silences or rebels through the menippean genre. In the boys' story the characters dialogue not for mutual illumination, but to impose authority and subjugate rivals, not unlike what happens to them as they interact with the professionals of the child welfare and educational systems.

Power as Collaboration: The process of the play

The collaborative activity of the play project unsettled some established routines in the home and created opportunities for me the emergence of a new type of dialogue in the institution. My intention has been to move beyond the recreational function of the video project. In the context of the video play, the staffs, who were variously involved in the process, did not have to impose their authority over the boys because the activity was self-initiated. This dynamic emerged one year later when Simon began to coach Robert Black, Joe, and Wes in the football team and, eventually, created the group home football team. Indirectly, leadership to the staff became possible through the collective activity of the video project. For instance, when conflict ensued the research team took the initiative to resolve it and Simon, Jerry, and Sylvia did not need to yell at the boys. In order to complete the project the boys had to master several new tools-

ranging from handling technical equipment to weaving a narrative-, which in turn promoted self-mastery. For instance, writing and shooting the scenes required collaboration, responsibility, discipline and concentration. All of these psychological functions seemed to be insufficiently developed in the context of other activities, most notably while the boys were studying. Through the video project we were able to organize the boys' play in ways that we could address the areas in which they needed to improve. For example, Roger would sometimes get impatient and be unable to control his temper, especially when his suggestions are rejected or simply not listened to. In such occasions he threatens to abandon the project and he might actually stop participating in the process. I would then go talk to him about the nature of collaborative projects and that he needed to learn how to negotiate and even compromise his wishes, which he would eventually.

Importantly, when the older boys bailed out on the project, it was the commitment of the younger that made the project possible. It was the younger boys who devoted themselves consistently to the project and worked on it systematically. Thus, as Vygotsky suggested, in play the boys were a head taller than themselves (1978). Moreover, the video project offered the boys an opportunity to unsettle power relations among themselves and in relation to social institutions. For example, by incorporating a character, younger boys, such as Roger and Az, were able to confront older ones and subvert the usual balance of power in the house. Therefore, it can be concluded that video project opened zones of proximal development not only for the boys, but for institution practices

and for my research activity (as well as personally). One instantiation of the changes brought about by the video project was my expanded access to space. Whereas up to that point I only had access to the first floor, while shooting the scenes for the video we had almost unlimited access in the house, including the third floor and the basement. By the end of the fall of 2002 I had access to the third floor where I started to carry out learning activities with the boys.

Playing Learning: A different typical day

In order to illustrate how the video project contributed to expanding the activity system, I will present a novel week typical day that emerged in the context of my practice. The institution had changed its face, literally, as many boys were discharged and new boys came in. Az was gone and so was Andre. I was sad when I learned that they were gone, which happened while I was on vacation in January 2003. The turnover was particularly high in the fall of 2002 and many boys also left in 2003. The video project took place on Fridays during the fall of 2002, but what about the weekdays, were they affected by the project? The answer is yes, but gradually. The typical day described in phase I was still enacted and boys such as Daniel and Johnson continued to act as they always would. However, the fact that the younger boys were coming to the third floor to work with me changed the dynamic of the system. For one thing, it was easier for the staff to control five boys, as opposed to ten. Thus, as my relationship with the younger boys grew in the context of the video project, I was able to bring them to the third floor where we would hang out, listen to their music, and, gradually, read and teach and learn. Roger had become a lot more open. He would show (and

sell) me his drawings and would talk about his family and his family. Roger would always play CD by “Eminem” and sing along. He memorized the words of the songs and was proud of that. He told me some people say he is the next “Eminem”.

In the spring of 2003 I continue to meet with the boys on the third floor. Roger, Tashan, together with new the residents Robert and Jacquan would come to the third floor during study hour. We formed a study group that they titled ‘learners of the world’. It was an inconsistent and short-lived initiative, but it meant immensely to me. During that semester trips to museums were happening frequently. Jacquan was thrilled about his first trip. “C’mon, man, I’ve never been in a museum in my life”, he told me. The boys loved the museum of natural history where they became familiarized with the dinosaurs, Lucy and other early humans, and the planetarium. Sometimes we brought the video camera, which added to their enjoyment. The boys loved a room where they had access to live insects and computers, as well as monitors registering the entire seismic activity of the Earth. Back in the house they had access to books that they had seen in the museum shop. We also visited the Metropolitan museum where I emphasized history. I was attempting to give them a coherent view of the subject matters they encounter in school, which I tried to do by linking it to our museum trips. For instance, I would always bring a camera and they would take pictures in the museums. Back in the house they would assemble them into collages that I used to decorate the rooms on the third floor. By contrasting the pictures they took of medieval and renaissance paintings we talked about perspective and

Leonardo Da Vinci. As usual, Jay would come upstairs out of sheer boredom and join us. At first, he would be completely unenthusiastic but gradually he would shift his attention toward the content of the group's activity and would become involved, helping the other boys, showing off his intellectual superiority, and asking me astute questions. "I know what perspective is," he said, "We did that on 9th grade." I asked him about the changes in content from medieval to renaissance art and we read about the cultural, political, and economical changes during that transition. Roger, Robert, and Jacquan were very interested in the "class". They wrote down notes in the binders I had given them. We had many other moments like that one, but it all depended on their mood. Robert was the only one who always wanted to work with me. In the good days, the young boys would come to the third floor and arrange the furniture in a way that resembled a classroom. We were playing school.

Limitations: same place, same selves

The video project sprang from the boys' interest in role playing (cops and criminals). In Elkonin's scheme, the function of role-play is to pave the way for explicitly aimed learning. However, this transformation did not occurred fully and learning did not become the leading activity of the boys. Carrying out learning activities systematically in the group was still a challenge. Learning activities had been successful but only as isolated episodes. Depending on the mood of the boys I may have a good session with them in which we read, write, and discuss. However, each I would go there I could never predict whether or not I would be able to carry out the intended activities. The boys' main interests were still not

connected with explicit learning. Rap and hip-hop, sports, hanging out with friends, dating, and playing with each other would still rank over learning.

In phases I and II I developed my relationship with the boys and I learned a great deal about them. However, I was experiencing a feeling of frustration because the activities I was developing were not having the impact I expected on the boys in the longer run. In the beginning, elements of the phases I and II were still present alongside the changed routine of the institution. During the year 2003 many boys were still discharged and some boys stayed in the institution only temporarily- Johnson went to college in the fall (Art school), Bobby aged out, Az and Andre were discharged early and Al and Jacquan were discharged in the fall. In the fall of 2003 things changed dramatically as learning became the focus of the institution. Not all boys were able to adapt to the changes in institutional practices, especially the ones who had entered the group home in 2002. For instance, Roger's problems continued to increase and, after several incidents, including several fights, punching his stereo, breaking the window of his room, and breaking into the social workers' office, he was finally discharged. The manager had proposed that he, the social worker, and myself had a conversation together with Roger and he put him on a contract in which he agreed to improve his behavior, which happened for two weeks but then he went back to violating house rules, neglecting his school work, cursing at the staff and arguing and fighting with his peers. During September 2003 Roger was coming back home from school really late because he would go to friend's house where he stayed until six or seven PM. Some of his teachers consistently complained that he was

not completing his homework. Jacquan was also having a hard time adapting and also discharged after several fights with his peers. Jacquan had been beaten up a few times by his peers. It was difficult to keep track of those conflicts and to know who and how they started. Jacquan usually held back this type of information and my main informant during the year 2003 was Roger. Roger had entered the group home when he was eleven years old. The entire staff loved him at first. The manager told me that he was cooperative and Roger had been given an individual room, the only in the group home. However, throughout the year 2003, as Roger started in middle school, his behavior began to deteriorate. One day in September 2003 we had a long private conversation and Roger told me that the staff sometimes were not nice, which was a common complaint. That day Roger was on restriction, which had become common for him, so much so that Roger missed several weekend trips to New York City with me because he was on restriction. I asked him about his anger, specifically about the day that he hurt his hand after punching his stereo and the day he broke the window of his bedroom. Roger told that he did that *“cause Brian Smith hit me and I got really, really, really angry. And the manager did nothing about it.”* Roger continued, *“I don’t know why he hit me. We were playing and he hit hard my ribs, I could hardly breathe. I told him to stop; he did it again. I was really angry, I broke the window.”* I asked him why he did that and he said, *“Because Roger can do that.”* Then I asked him, *“and Roger can’t do other things?”* he answered yes and I asked what he could do. He then replied, *“break the window if he wanted to.”* I then asked him if he thought that that had been worth it and he said, *“pretty much,*

yeah.” He also said that he would do it again because he was not scared of the manager. Roger told me, *“he [the manager] thinks he puts fear in me. I’m going to show him I’m not afraid.”* I asked Roger if that was really a smart thing to do because the manager took his money (from his allowance and money for clothes) to pay for the broken window. Roger then said that the manager did not take his money that the CPS agency had paid for him. Then he said that he did that to prove the manager wrong and that it had made him feel good. Roger had become very stubborn, sarcastic and confrontational, although he would still act cooperatively and playfully. It was very sad for me to see Roger going down that path. I used to feel very close to him since we developed a good relationship during the video play project. Roger was such a little boy when he entered the group home, very sweet, innocent and always ready to play. Now he had acquired so many of the bad habits of the older boys, including a defiant, individualistic, and prejudiced attitude as well as sexist discourses and a certain level of vulgarity. One day we were talking and Roger brought up the issue of sexuality in the most inappropriate manner. He was bragging about having several girlfriends and told me, *“I have two girlfriends. One is named Aisha, the other is named Michelle...I call her Nene. I’m about to go out with this other Puerto Rican girl named Carmem. Let me ask you a question, is it fun fucking your girlfriend?”* I asked Roger what kind of question was that. *“Just a question,”* he replied. I then asked him why he used the word ‘fuck’. Roger laughed ironically and continued, *“Ok, did you ever bump her?”* I asked him if he really expected to have a conversation about sex in those terms. Then Roger asked

me if I had sex with my girlfriend, if we had babies, and if we wanted to, and why we didn't have babies. I told him that we wanted to have a child when had the conditions that we needed to raise them. Then Roger asked, "*So, you use condoms?*" I reminded him that the use of contraceptive methods is a private matter, but that we could talk about that in general. Roger was giving several demonstrations that he was ready to become a macho chauvinist, which showed frequently in his discourses. One day as I was coming to the group home when I ran into Roger coming back from school. He was chasing a girl, trying to kiss her (he had just recently turned thirteen). I asked him if that was his girlfriend and Roger replied, in front of the girl, "*That's my bitch.*" Evidently I told him that that was a horrible way to refer to women. We had had conversations about his derogatory attitude toward women, which used to surface in his raps. Sylvia constantly talked to Roger about sexism, but that seemed to be increasing in parallel with his level of frustration in the group home. The saddest thing was that some days Roger would work well with the social worker and me, especially as he began to stand out among the younger boys because they were getting a lot more engaged in they studies. Some days Roger would sit in front of the computer and he would work on his assignments, usually from his language arts teacher (poems, stories, etc.).

7.4. Phase III: The emergence of learning activity as the leading activity

Phase III started in the fall of 2003 when the boys started a new school year when learning activities began to be monitored systematically. I present below a typical day during phase III followed by a summary of the changes that occurred in institutional practices, the boy's activities, and my practice. During the fall of 2003 the boys were still causing problems for the institution. Robert was suspended from school more than five times, including the day when he and Jacquan stole a car from their school parking lot and were caught by the police. Robert's and Jacquan's grades, as well as Wes' and Robert Black's were mainly Cs and Ds. That year Robert stayed back on seventh grade, which was a big disappointment to him because Jacquan, not a better student than Robert, was promoted to eighth grade. The only boy who got good grades that year was Greg. Jay would get by, but his grades were way below his potential. The older boys took longer to adapt to the changes and most of them would not bring their dailies signed. Daniel was the exception, although he would prefer to stay downstairs and do his homework at the dining table. Greg, Jay, and Brian Smith were not consistent with their dailies, but that changed over time as the younger boys' new routine crystallized. Their daily school reports improved gradually, even though most of their grades were still Cs and Ds for several marking periods. With time, however, suspension decreased significantly as well as inappropriate behavior. Cutting classes, as common problem in my first years in

the institution, has now disappeared. Slowly, instances of 'acting out' and fights in the institution have had a marked decrease.

By the end of 2004 the changes were evident. Neil left the institution in the September 2005 to go to a boarding school after being selected by his school's principle to apply to a scholarship, which he received. In September 2005 Neil left for a boarding school after winning a highly competitive scholarship. Later that year Robert and Adam made it to honor's roll, which had been happening for Greg over the years and Jay was accepted to four colleges. All boys passed their grades and there was a dinner in June 2004 at the group home to celebrate the boys' graduation from middle school and Jay's college acceptance. The principal of the middle school attended the dinner together with several teachers as well as the executive director and her boss.

Typical day: Learning as the dominant activity

A typical phase III day would start with the boys coming back from school. I would be there Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays and would get there before the boys. Usually I would say hi to the youth counselor and then go straight to the third floor where the social worker and I would sit in her office and discuss the boys' progress and make plans to deal with current problems and to move on with our agenda. Between 2:30 and 3 the boys would start coming back from school and most of them would go straight to the third floor to talk to Ms. Li and give her their dailies. Greg was the exception. He had basketball practice and would come back home only after we left. Three new boys had come to the group home and were key players in the new system, Neil, Don, and Derek.

When they came the daily was already implemented and they fit smoothly into the new routine.

We tutored the boys on a range of basic operations ranging from using computer programs to expanding their vocabulary, practicing spelling, outline essays, etc. They also needed a lot of assistance organizing their assignments and planning their tasks in a series of steps. Likewise, the boys needed help comprehending the assignments and the texts they had to read. Usually, their assignments were done without the necessary time and they also needed emotional support in order not to give up. Interestingly, the study hour that in the first phase seemed to last forever, now was not enough, even as many of the boys would start to work before 4 PM, the official time. We began to negotiate with Mr. Wallace asking him to wait a little longer before taking the boys to the sports center. The boys also began to complain about having to go to therapy and other mental services they received as these were always scheduled in the afternoon and took them away from their schoolwork. Sometimes the boys sent away the staff of the institutions that came to pick them up for those services.

In phase III the boys' actions could not be characterized as homogeneously as in phases I and II. There was more diversity in terms of their activities which manifested in their positioning vis-à-vis learning activity. Interestingly, these differences materialized in the use of space. Typically, the boys who were interested in learning and took their studies seriously would go to the third floor to work with the social worker and myself, whereas the boys who resisted learning preferred to stay downstairs and work independently at the

dining table where the youth counselors would not monitor the quality of their work.

Pattern 1: High motivation and high ability for learning

This pattern was characterized by a commitment toward learning. This manifested in these boys high motivation and high ability for learning not only in school, but also in the group home and elsewhere where learning opportunities were available, such as in trips to museums, watching documentary and foreign movies. This pattern became the norm in the institution once phase III was established as it included the majority of the boys in residence at any given time during the last phase. This pattern represents a group of boys who were motivated to learn and performed well academically. This was a big departure from phase I whereby only Johnson was positioned this way toward learning. This group consisted typically of younger boys, 13 and 14 year-olds seventh and eighth grades, such as Greg, Jacquan, Neil, Robert, Don, and later Adam and Jim. In phase three these boys would bring home good dailies and would start working as soon as they came home from school. Nobody needed to ask them to do their work and they were motivated to get good grades. They participated in all workshops with interest, enjoyed the trips to museums, and movies, and read the books I would bring them. For instance, Neil was eager to learn, had exceptionally high grades, and became the role model for the other boys. Robert was always the first one to go to the third floor to talk to us. He worked diligently and was very motivated to do his work. In my last year at the institution I had introduced Robert to young readers literature, which became a habit for him and

some other boys, such as Adam who came to group home late in 2004. Robert, Neil, and Don would work in Ms. Li's office together where they completed their homework. Don was somewhat of an exception initially because he was having problems authority issues in school, such as cursing at his teachers. Robert was also an exception in this group to the extent that his ability was below the other boys. He had a less rich vocabulary and his performance on school tasks was unstable and needed to be much supported than that of his peers. It would usually take much longer for Robert to grasp abstract concepts and comprehend tasks. However, that would be compensated by his diligence and desire to learn. In fact, Robert would appreciate every opportunity to learn, although sometimes he did not want to let his weaknesses show in front of his peers.

The boys in this group did not have frequent problems with the staff as they were busy doing schoolwork. They typically respected the adults and did not curse, although every now and then Robert or Adam would have an incident with the staff. Actually, those boys used to work beyond the time of the study hour and would become upset if Mr. Wallace or Simon rushed them to stop working in order to go to the sports center. They cared to complete their work and would sometimes argue with the staff to let them finish working. Those boys were usually in a good mood and it was very pleasant to work with them. Likewise, they work in collaboration with one another even though sometimes Neil like to show off his highly advance knowledge. We sometimes talked to him about not being arrogant and putting his peers down. Nonetheless, these boys were much less frequently on restriction.

Pattern 2: low motivation and low ability

This pattern was characterized by resisting learning, which manifested in for learning. This form of positioning toward learning represented the minority of the boys in phase III, although it was the typical pattern for phase I. In phase III this pattern represents also seventh and eighth graders, such as Robert Black, Brian Smith, and later on Martin. The early Wes could also be included in this group. These boys were more difficult and they needed to be persuaded to start working. Many times those boys would tell us that their homework was done, but when we checked it was not true. Typically they would only take the initiative to search for our tutoring help when they had a test or assignment due the next day- or close to the end of the year and they feared staying back. They would work only during study hour and would not care to ensure the quality of their work. Usually those boys would not stay on the third floor and begin their work early, but he would only come after Mr. Wallace or Simon went after him. In fact, making sure all boys were doing homework had been incorporated into the practice of the youth counselors. Robert Black was always lazy and his poor reading, writing, and math skills and his weak knowledge of most subject matters made it all the more difficult for him to engage in learning activities. He was constantly in a bad mood as he dreaded learning activities. To study was a burden for him and he was not really interested in participating in the workshops. Nevertheless, when under pressure he would overcome his resistance and we had some great moments when I helped him understand abstract concepts. Two remarkable examples happened when I helped him understand Newton's 3 laws,

aided by Jay, and see a connection between positive and negative numbers and everyday sociocultural practices, such as banking.

Martin, on the surface, seemed to be different from Robert Black because he always started study hour on time and never disturbed institutional practices. If one never looked closely into his work it would seem that he was a good student. However, Martin had internalized only the mechanics of school learning. His work consisted mainly of mechanically copying textbooks. Wes was also reluctant to work with us. Differently from the other boys, his performance increased significantly over the three years that he remained in the institution. When he came to the institution he was on 7th grade and he used to get bad grades and his academic skills were poor. He was reading below his grade level and his math teacher complained about him. However by the end of 7th grade he improved significantly. One day his math teacher came to the group home and met with us. This gentleman was also teaching Robert and Jacquan and he was happy and surprised with the changes in the boys' academic performance. The teacher told us to continue doing whatever we were doing because it was working. By 2005 Wes had become a lot more committed to his studies and he actually made it to honor roll too.

Pattern two boys had a less positive attitude toward the staff, especially when reminded of their schoolwork. Robert Black in particular had constant issues with me and the social worker as we reported his behavior to the manager. Those boys had more frequent problems with the staff and the transition from play to study hour was difficult for them, just as it was for the boys during phase I.

Like their peers in phase I, Wes, Robert Black, and Brian Smith would go to the activity room to play video games and would have a hard time leaving it. On Fridays, when we used to watch movies in that room, we had some conflicts as Wes and Robert Black refused to give us the room. Despite their resistance toward learning, those boys still did their work to a degree that would not happen in phases I and II.

Pattern 3: High ability, low motivation

This group consisted mainly of high school boys, such as Jay, Derek, and Jim. These boys could do their work independently and they would do it pretty quickly. That would give them enough time to hang out, even though many times they would be under stress from having waited until the last minute to do their work. Derek was responsible, smart, but he always complained about being bored, just like Jay. Jay was very smart and could learn very fast. His problem was that he used to procrastinate his schoolwork and because of that would get bad grades. These boys had a deeper understanding of social life and they were open to discuss their paths in life. They were preoccupied and anxious about their place in society. Derek one day surprised everybody when he communicated that he was gay. He became very interested in gay issues and he found his own group among gay and lesbian students in his high school. That was his main interest, which set him apart from the other boys. Later in 2004 Derek was adopted by a man he called his uncle at age 16 and moved to Pennsylvania where he was going to attend a private school.

Jay was my most constant partner and best interlocutor. Jay used to read voraciously and I would keep him satiated by feeding him book after book. Jay read “I, Claudius” and “Claudius the God” by Robert Graves in less than two weeks, which the executive director doubted. Jay was extremely well informed as he read the paper on a daily basis. Jay had formed his opinion about both events and he positioned himself politically in relation to societal events. For instance he opposed the war in Iraq, which he would dismiss as the government’s attempt to control oil production in the Middle East. Indeed, this was the opinion of all the other boys, which they discussed with their teachers in school.

What Changed

Institutional Practices Integrated around learning

The daily report became an important tool to integrate institutional practices around learning, which led the boys to seek our help. I was concerned about how the boys would react to that, given that this would tighten the control over their academic performance. Interestingly, the daily report was a success and the boys started to bring them back home everyday signed by each of their teachers. Very often some boys bring home ‘bad dailies’ with missing signatures or complaints from their teachers, which allowed Ms. Li to talk to the teachers and keep the manager informed. The teachers’ response was entirely supportive. They embraced the daily, which became a consistent link between them and the group home through Ms. Li. The teachers not only filled out the basic information required in the daily, but they also immediately began to inform us about the quality of the boys’ work, whether it was submitted on time, and they also began to report on the boys’ behavior in class. Especially in the beginning, the boys

attempted to disregard, violate, or force signatures in their dailies, but the manager was serious about it. Institutional practices changed dramatically and schoolwork had now to be taken seriously. Whereas before the boys would not be written up for failing to complete their homework, the manager now was stricter about that. Likewise, study hour was more closely watched and all the youth counselors joined the new practices. The boys' activities had to change accordingly, but their change in activities lagged behind institutional practices as many resisted the changes. In the spring of 2004 I talked to Ms. Li about the new institutional practices anchored by the daily report. "It's going really well," Ms. Li told me. She told that the manager being behind that really helped, "because if you don't bring the daily you are going to be on restriction."

This phase gave me a great opportunity to look closely into their learning and their difficulties became salient. We were able to identify the challenging areas for each boy and address it, such as the poor literacy skills and huge gaps in their knowledge base, as expected for their age levels. An interesting sign that learning activity had risen to higher priority status within the boys' system of activities occurred when the social worker left the group home. The absence of everyday tutoring affected the boys' schoolwork and the program's ability to monitor academic performance and keep a consistent communication channel with teachers. However, the boys continued to bring home daily school reports. I was amazed by the fact many boys were indeed doing homework, even though the quality was sometimes poor- e.g., mechanically copying parts of text and applying procedural rules without trying to understand them. It was clear how

most of them had internalized the need to do schoolwork, as they took the initiative to start their work and search for help.

Learning as Development: changed trajectories and a new self

The boys' changed positioning toward learning affected their positioning toward other activities as well. Their interest in learning prevented them from engaging in activities that violated program rules and societal laws. The boys stopped cutting classes, and incidences of disrespecting teachers, defying staff, violating house rules had all markedly decreased. Another salient change was the marked decrease in the boys' interest in video playing, with a few notable exceptions, as described earlier. The boys' range of interest expanded and they became more open to learning different things. The changes in the boys' positioning also manifested in their positioning toward the activities I had implemented earlier, such as watching movies and trips to the city. Throughout the years I kept expanding the boys' taste for movies and we watched a wild variety of movies and videos, from documentary to foreign to artsy movies, although the coming of age genre was definitely the easiest to please them. In sum, they had become more open to different genres, including dramas that invited deeper reflection on social issues.

The boys' personal trajectories changed as learning began to rise in priority in the system of their activities. Two dramatic examples were the fact that after the fall of 2004 Jacquan and Robert were no more involved in stealing and fights and started to take their studies seriously. In fact, when they entered the institution, their positioning toward learning was typical of pattern II, which

gradually changed to pattern III by phase III. Another dramatic example is Jay's change of course. When he came to the institution Jay's goal was to get a GED and go to independent living. He had been to a drug rehabilitation program and used to drink and smoke pot. However, as the possibility to expedite his graduation began to crystallize, his attitude and motivation began to change. Jay begins to realize that his possibilities for the future are more open than he had imagined a year before, which thrilled and scared him at the same time. The following note he wrote in the spring of 2004 reflects that: "Today for some reason or another I feel the urge to write. While I am typing this seems like a perfectly logical way to pass the hour until lunch. I have so much going on in my head right now it is unbelievable, thoughts of graduation, the EOF [equal opportunity fund] program and even college race through my mind endlessly. I have a chance to make something of myself to be successful, the way I have always pictured I would be later in life, the problem is there is so much pressure I do not know if I will be able to live up to the expectations that I have of myself. I have to change my mindset completely in order to function to my full potential, my worst fear is that I will not succeed in college or life in general for that matter. The time has come for me to start acting like the man that I am and let the adolescent that I was drift away. In order for me to do this I must maintain perspective, know who I am and who I want to be, and what I have to do on my part to get to that level. I know for a fact that with my life as temporary as any other I wish to make a difference while I have the opportunity. Sometimes I think what difference will I make what difference can I make I and one man in a world

of billions. This may be the reason that I can see my self as a prosecutor, because to me this is a very clean, clear cut example of making a difference, and at this point in my life it seems like a very compelling field to pursue a career in. I hope I made the right choice as far as college goes. It just seems as though I was ill-prepared to make such a decision, I read in magazines how most potential candidates for colleges take college tours and decide based on the people they meet and their opinion of the campuses they view. I have chosen to attend MSU, although I have never even had a tour of the campus, due to the location, as well as the fact that it is a college with university status. Life is a world of choices and decisions and at this point I find myself at the summit of all this wondering, how will it workout for me?"

Interestingly, the boys' discourses and preferred dialogical genres changed. Socratic dialogue became the norm and curiously the use of racist and sexist terms, common in phase I had virtually disappeared. For instance, I stopped hearing the N word being uttered in the institution, not even as a term of endearment as was common before. Another change occurred in the boys' discourses about the future. During phase I, despite their lack of interest in learning activities, the boys would nonetheless express their dreams for pursuing careers that require college degree without articulating a plan to go to college. During phase III, all the boys expressed their desire to go to college, even though most of them do not know exactly what they want to study. Neil and Don want to go to law school, but Greg, Robert, Wes, Adam, and others want to go to college

and are maintaining good grades despite not knowing what field they will pursue.

8. Discussion

8.1. Reconfiguration of the institutional activity system

When I started my practical work, the residential program consisted of an activity system that could be characterized by describing control of the residents as its object. The custodial configuration of the residential program channels the boys toward resisting adult norms and societal conventions making them susceptible to establishing resistance as their leading activity- or it promotes conformity on the part of the residents. In phase I (resistance) I described clashing motives that manifested in staff-boys relations, centered on control vs. rebelliousness, which also manifested in the relation between the boys and their schools. The staff conceived of their task as promoting the boys' development through teaching them control and discipline. That in turn corresponds to how they positioned themselves in relation to child welfare practices. Clearly, the staff was open to give the boys access to different experiences, but they lacked the resources (tools) to do so in a systematic manner. That was clear when I began to propose alternative activities, which were all well received and supported by the staff. Exposure, was the word I kept hearing, which meant that there was room for changing institutional practices, albeit indirectly. Interestingly, the idea that the boys needed to be exposed to a variety of cultural tools and sociocultural activities echoed the perspective of their teachers. However, even though these

two motives were part of the staff's activities, control was prioritized over introducing new tools insofar as the latter were still insufficient in the beginning.

My presence in the institution aggravated the contradictions in the system as I placed more emphasis on empowering the boys through the introduction of novel tools and failed, in the beginning, to exercise my authority over the boys, which was expected by the staff and created tensions in my relationship with them. My motives also clashed with the boys' resistance as my role as psychologist fit the typical role of the adults in program, i.e., as an agent of control. At first, I did not realize how the meaning of my presence to a large extent was independent of my activities, which themselves were perceived in light of my role as psychologist. This was probably reinforced as I tried to engage the boys in learning activities, such as doing homework, reading etc. Moreover, the collective alternative activities I was implementing, such as watching movies, called for a degree of control of the boys' carnivalization, which led me to position myself in opposition to the boys thus reproducing the 'them vs. us' typical of the custodial arrangement. For those reasons, my practice was unstable and it was creating instability in the institution. The new activities departed from established routines to the extent that it allowed more room for the boys' emancipatory tendency to emerge and, consequently, disrupted institutional practices. Yet, I was able to embrace their anger, especially in our conversations away from the other staff, which led the boys to break away from their resistance and transformed the meaning of our interactions and, consequently, helped deconstruct their perception of me as an agent of control.

Despite inconsistencies in my practice, I was engaged in a process of critical reflection of my practice, which led me to propose alternative activities to the boys, thus initiating a dialogical process in our interactions. Unlike other staff members who would frequently exercise their power over the boys (e.g., to enforce institutional rules, magistral form of dialogue), I sought to establish my practice in ways that respected and engaged the boys' agency. Thus, the implementation of alternative took place through a dialogical process whereby all participants negotiated tasks and collaboratively established goals. I sought to engage the boys in a process of dialogue in which their voices were respected and they were free to express whatever they felt like, including their anger or disdain for me and my work.

Throughout the first phase I focused squarely on engaging the boys in transformative activities and could only work with the staff indirectly. This reveals the place I occupied in the dynamic of power in the institution. The executive director thought and wished that I had more power in the institution, but I used to feel very disempowered when it came to proposing changes to institutional practices. I had to conform to the limited place I was allowed by the manager, both in time and space. In addition to not having access to other rooms in the house, I only had two to three hours to interact with the boys. Even though I was able to engage many of them in a range of activities to which they ordinarily did not have access, and despite great changes in the course of our interactions, those changes did not generalize in a significant way to other contexts.

8.2. Perturbation in the System: repositioning and the mutual embeddedness of activities

To a large extent my presence in the institution was an anomaly and it perturbed the everyday life of the institution. My being there was in itself a departure from the typical day in the institution. The novel, emergent activities I was carrying out in the group home called for a repositioning of each and every individual that participated directly and centrally in that activity system – some youth counselors would not work directly with me due to their shifts not coinciding with my time in the institutions in the afternoons. This was particularly evident in phase I as my presence in the group home necessarily affected all the boys. Even the boys who most fiercely resisted interacting with me, by doing that were positioning themselves in a novel way, insofar as the type of professional I embodied was new to the institution. Moreover, the boys' positioning toward the activities I was initiating inevitably had a public, social dimension inasmuch as their attitude toward me was visible to all given the small institutional setting. The staff had expectations about my work and if the boys resisted working with me that would be counted against them as another violation of institutional rules. Thus, the boys', the staff's and my own positioning vis-à-vis the activities taking place in the program were all inextricably connected.

Individuals position themselves as they set goals and act in activity systems. In the initial phase, the boys mostly did this as resistance, which most of them consciously performed against me. However, I identified a few processes

that made them let go of their resistance. One was low rank in the hierarchy of the peer group. Another was sheer boredom stemming from the material deprivation and scarcity of opportunities to engage in meaningful activities, which led them to accept the activities I was implementing. As the results of my work with them began to accumulate, the boys could know more about what my motives were and what I stood for, I started to overcome their resistance more systematically and we were able to engage in more open, collaborative activities. Their acceptance was the hallmark change in their positioning toward the activities I implemented in second phase and, by the last phase, most of the boys had become interested in participating in the activities I initiated. Their motivation had reached a new dimension and the clash of activities characteristic of phase I gave way to a collective positioning toward active participation in learning activities, which had become the dominant activity in the institution and the leading activity of most of the boys. This developmental path corresponds to the principle of the co-evolution of goals and motives, which is the connecting, essential link between self development and social change.

Merging goals through collaborative activities was a key aspect of my evolving practice and the results of this work include the social constitution of a new object for the activity system of the institution that emerged through, and simultaneously paved the way for furthering a dialogical process of deciding what activities to engage in. On my part I had to be patient and creative as I sought to implement activities within the interest range of the boys and to gradually embed learning objectives in them. My strategy was to introduce the boys to activities

that could be both entertaining and learning-oriented. In other words, I sought to implement activities within the boys' zone of proximal development. In the sense that I did not know exactly how to do this within the time and spatial constraints of my practices in the institution, through my interactions with boys and staff I was also creating zones of proximal development for my own professional practice.

The second phase of this project could be characterized as change without development. The hallmark of this phase as the convergence of goals between me, the boys, and the institution that materialized in the video project. This process did not happen uniformly, but rather at a different pace for different individuals. Insofar as different groups of participants were still motivated toward different objects, it can be said that they were engaged in different activities, even though they did come together in particular actions. However, there was an expanded level of engagement in Phase II, which can be characterized, from the participants' subjective experience, by greater tolerance, acceptance and mutual compromise, as opposed to phase I (resistance), that was characterized by tension and conflict. In phase II dialogical genres shifted from Magistral and Mennipean to Socratic, which created the conditions for the emergence of phase III. New discourses and practices emerged during that phase but were limited to the context of the new activities did not spill over routine institutional practices. For instance, rules and the use of space changed in the context of the activities connected with the video project (i.e., on Fridays) but remained the same in the context of other activities (the rest of the week), such as study hour. Finally, phase III could be characterized as development. A new object for the

activity system had emerged that was shared by all participants. In other others, clashing activities had been transformed and the gaps and contradictions between the three planes of activity analyzed- institutional practice, boys' activities, and researcher's practices, had converged toward a shared object, the development of the boys. In phase III learning activities acquired a new meaning. From a rule imposed on the boys' it was transformed, albeit at varying degrees, as a tool to promote development. In this new context, the subjective experience of the participants changed with the emergence of higher degrees of solidarity and mutual care among the participants of the activity system.

In the last phase of this project, when the boys had already appropriated learning activities, my method emerged as inquiring activities through which I challenged the boys to confront their incomplete knowledge about the world, both physical and social-historical, and our place in it. Through this process I hoped to shake the boys' mind and make them see that without advancing their knowledge of several different subject matters they would be excluded from taking part in a range of sociocultural activities and societal practices, including making strides toward the careers they professed to be interested in pursuing, such as architecture, law, art, etc. This further strengthened the appropriation of learning activity, which by the third year, with the help of a full-time social worker and all the staff, had risen to the number one priority activity in the institution and for most of the boys- although a few boys still resisted it. This was the immediate result of this research project; the boys changed their leading activity. Importantly, during this appropriation process other activities lost their prominence and the

problems confronted by the institution when I started working there had dramatically decreased. As I described in the results section, in the last phase the boys were no longer cutting classes or being suspended from school. Likewise, fights in the group home had become uncommon and the use of racist language markedly decreased.

8.3. New Tools, New Motives: The dialectical unity of affect and intellect in development

One of the main tools for the emergence of teaching and learning as a meaningful activity was the developmental teaching method. In tutoring and in the workshops I followed developmental teaching principles, which oriented my practice in the direction of helping the boys connect abstract notions with concrete phenomena as they engaged in learning activities. This last aspect was critical in transforming the meaning of formal learning from a rule imposed on them toward a tool for self-consciously aimed development.

As I expected, increased diversity of tools and access to higher order conceptual tools led to a wider range of possible actions. Particularly, the boys' learning goals expanded. This in turn expanded the boys' motivational sphere and opened up new possibilities for their positioning in the web of sociocultural activities that comprise their lives. Thus, access to cultural tools was an essential aspect of self development as novel tools embodied different opportunities and allowed individuals to make different choices, commit to certain ideals, develop

new goals, and establish new priorities. In this process certain activities gained prominence and began to play a leading role in the course of the boys' positioning in institutional everyday practices. Put simply, a new self began to emerge through the dynamics of the co-evolving goals and motives, which was noticeable in the shifts in the open-ended hierarchical system of activities that constitute their lives. A new, intensified, qualitatively different motivation for learning, seen now as a tool for self development rather than as a rule to follow, emerged, which displaced other motives to a less priority place (e.g., play, hanging out, etc.). This new self, which emerged at varying degrees and at different moments for different boys, embodied transformations in the boys' positioning in the institutional activity systems where their lives are situated, self development and institutional change are inextricably linked.

8.4. Mutual transitions in activity: the co-emergence of tools and results

Shifts in how individuals position themselves in the activities mark of for the co-evolution of goals and motives. Those shifts, catalyzed by the introduction of new tools (including new participants such as myself), unsettled established routines (practices), enriched the institution's multi-voicedness, and accentuated its ambiguities, and thus sharpened its potential for transformation by initiating a renewed cycle of positioning toward institutional practices. Shifts in individual's positioning, in turn, materialized in what and how tools were appropriated by

individuals as well as in changes, or mutual transitions, among other elements of the activity system, such as division of labor, rules, use of space, etc.

As the emerging activities began to resolve contradictions, they created the conditions for other contradictions to come to the fore in a continuous process of co-emergence of tools and results. Thus, the results of this research project correspond to the emergence of new activities in the institution that unfolded as interrelated changes taking place in the activities of the participants of the institutional activity system. Given the inherent contradictions within and between activity systems, self development invariably involves the work of resolving and dealing with conflicting motives that arise in particular circumstances in which we must make choices and establish priorities. This principle brings to the analytical fore shifts in how individuals position themselves in the activities in which they participate as they constantly negotiate individual and institutional transformation.

8.5. Reflection on Method

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation I have described a multitude of interrelated changes that all involved in this work went through. My analysis included the impact of my presence in the institution, which added complexity to this activity system and unsettled certain aspects of power struggles. By implementing novel activities, I introduced new tools that disrupted some established routines, expanded institutional practices, and allowed for the

emergence of new goals and motives. By consciously reflecting on the potential of my practice in bringing about institutional change through novel and expanded collaborative activities, I was able to further develop my practice and the theoretical understanding of it, which further deepened my collaboration with the institution. The notion of activity system allowed me to analyze how this research practice departed from the initial contradiction created by my insertion into the activity system of the group home that emerged between two clashing objects of activity; namely, the institutional focus on controlling the residents and my commitment to transform institutional practices based on developmental teaching. My analysis followed the process by which I negotiated with the institution my position as agent provocateur and devised forms of transforming that into collaboration. In the results section I discussed the extent to which these conflicting objects of activity merged and were shared by all participants in this study, including staff and residents.

In the process of carrying out this research I have learned how to better collaborate with others despite having encountered their resistance at some points. By focusing on the importance of developmental theories in guiding practice, I began to appreciate more deeply how developmental views are connected with one's vision of social change, which, in turn, is connected with the available tools. Deficit and pathological views coupled with essentialist views of self, identity, or personality, stifle change and rob the capacity for imagining and committing to social change. I have witnessed how the implementation of teaching and learning activities in the institution have created zones of proximal

development not only for the boys, but also for the staff as they began to shift institutional practices in this direction. In this process I also expanded my zones of proximal development as my practices became more efficient. By working with others I often times disagreed, I learned to collaborate in the presence of conflict and to accept the limitations of the transformative potential of my work as I incessantly sought to expand it. This has been a rewarding experience for all involved, which suggests that this type of scholarly action research can be a powerful tool for professionals and interested citizens to actualize a developmental approach to youth growing up in conditions of adversity and oppression.

In order to devise collective activities that successfully engaged the boys and captured their interest, I had to observe their activities and reflect on their interests. By consistently drawing on activity theory, I was able to pay attention to their actions and interpret the motives behind them. My initial observations of the boys, together with our conversations, allowed me to identify the main activities they engage in and to get a sense of what motivates them. Understanding the boys' motives made it possible to negotiate the implementation of tasks that expanded their zone of proximal development. This was certainly a learning experience for me, especially given the conditions under which I carried out this work. I was alone in the institution thinking about activities that at the same time were interesting to the boys and learning oriented. This process took place through continuous negotiation involving compromises on both sides. Implementing activities beyond the boys' current interests was a challenge for me.

Many times the activities proposed were just outside their interest and led to frustration on both sides.

Despite my attempts to help the boys with their homework and to tutor them in the subject matters they needed to learn, they consistently refused my offers with excuses. Thus, I could not answer my research question. However, my attempts to engage the boys in learning activities, met with considerable resistance by them, led me to question why the boys were so disidentified with school learning and to seek ways to overcome that. I actively experimented with alternative activities that could bridge our diverging interests (the boys' refusal to study and my insistence on it) and through these shared activities we began to negotiate goals until we established common ones. During this process I learned a great deal about the boys' motivation (the activities that actively seek to engage in) and, ultimately, their self. Paying attention to self development processes helped me to understand the choices they make or fail to make (e.g., studying harder to pass a class) and how to influence them to make certain choices (e.g., to pay attention to school learning). The boys would systematically prefer to play (mainly video games), draw, hang out with their peers, play sports, or even read pop fiction books (common when they got bored) instead of engaging in more effortful reading (including virtually all subjects related to school subject matters). I struggled to understand that. Were the boys not interested in knowing about the world or did they simply not see learning school subject matters as particularly revealing of the world? Based on critiques of our contemporary educational system, I assumed that the latter was the most plausible answer. I then sought to

learn about which aspects of the world the boys were actively involved in learning, what activities they devoted their time and energy into.

Ultimately, my research question became how to motivate the boys to want to study, to take initiative to learn the subject matters in school. Gradually, I developed a method in collaboration with the staff of the group home, who were very supportive of my initiative and let me take the lead in terms of proposing activities with an educational content- provided that I did not fail to come up with activities that were interesting to the boys. Inspired by Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development, I sought to engage the boys in activities that were meaningful to them and yet a little bit beyond their interest or ability. I made many mistakes, for example bringing movies that failed to capture their attention. However, I was gradually able to engage the boys in activities in which learning aspects were more salient. This came about as my relationship with the boys grew stronger. Since the beginning some boys saw me as a tool to accomplish certain goals (to manipulate the staff, to get some change, to go out of the house on the weekend, etc.). With time, they learned that they could count on me as a tool for certain immediate objectives and I started to use that as leverage to negotiate my objectives. One shared goal was trips to Manhattan on weekends in which I privileged visits to museums, alternative movies, and plays mixed with pizza and billiard - concessions that I began to make in order to pursue my goals. Importantly, in my second semester in the institution I was able to engage the boys in a collective video project based on a collective play. Building my

relationship with the boys helped me to create a context to engage them in more organized learning activities, such as reading books and doing some homework.

The conditions for implementing alternative activities changed when the first social worker came onboard in the late spring of 2003. I enjoyed a period of intense collaboration with her when we tutored the boys and monitored their school progress. The social worker was there on a daily basis, which allowed for a consistent attention to the boys' schoolwork. Moreover, the social worker strengthened the link with the school. In this context I could focus on my goal of engaging the boys in meaningful formal learning activities through workshops, reading books, science videos, trips to museums, etc., which helped them master their school curricula. The activities implemented gradually led to an expansion of the repertoire of activities to which the boys were exposed. This will be addressed later when I discuss phase III of this research.

Recently, action research has emerged as a powerful approach to conducting research that responds to issues of human development. This approach to research rests on epistemological foundations that can be contrasted with traditional positivist and interpretivist approaches (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Recently, some authors have framed action research within their search for a turn to reflexive action that "offers new understandings of the relationship between ideas and practice" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. XXIV). Reason and Bradbury offer a working definition of action research as: "a participatory, democratic, process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory

worldview. Similarly, Reason and Torbert (2001) propose that a satisfactory basis for action research can only be attained by “taking an ‘action turn’ to studying ourselves in action in relation to others” (p.2). This new epistemology emphasizes the importance of practical knowing in conjunction with participative relationships, experiential grounding, and normative theory. Action research is geared toward generating knowledge that is useful for members of organizations and, thus, it is future oriented, collaborative, and must focus on our awareness and inquiry into the present relationships among the ‘in-here’, subjective world, the ‘among-us’, interactional world, and the ‘out-there’, world we take as our reality. This type of research is a form of social practice that entails changing oneself and one’s interactions with others while pursuing organizational transformation toward democratic practices and human flourishing. Thus, in consonance with Reason and Torbert’s call for the action turn in social science, this study includes three strategies for research as transformative social practice. Those strategies include the following: first-person research/practice, which relates to engaging one’s life in a process of inquiry; second-person research/practices that engages a face-to-face group in collaborative inquiry; and third-person research/practice that attempts to establish inquiring communities beyond the immediate group to engage with whole organizations, communities, and countries (Reason & Torbert, 2001). These strategies can be integrated into the notion of dynamical activity system and my methods consist of devising and implementing collaborative actions through which change at these three levels came about. Importantly, cultural-historical activity theory and action research

contrast the positivist tradition in which modern science is “idealized as a dispassionate process carried out in reflection” to instead embrace transformative research/practice as a “passionate embodied and emotional process (as well as an intellectual process) carried out in the heat (or cool) of action” (p.15).

Similarly, many scholars have called for an integration of developmental research with actions that address pressing issues concerning human problems. For example, Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberger (2000) have written about applied developmental science (ADS), which they define as a science for and of the people, whose objective is to promote civil society and to enhance the life chances of diverse individuals, families, and communities. They point to ADS as a way to merge scholarly and community interests, especially in the context of higher education institutions striving to become the vehicles of community engagement and make value-laden contributions to community life. Together with others, the authors view such “outreach scholarship” as a means to bring together the voices and concerns of children, youth, and families with those of research scholars to address a myriad of social problems of historically unprecedented scope afflicting American society- ranging from poverty, crime, and violence to drug and alcohol use and abuse, unsafe sex, and school failure and dropout.

Inspired by these ideals, this research was carried out through continuous reflection upon institutional practices, including my own, whereby knowledge about how to improve the institution and create better conditions for professional

development (including myself) and the residents' development was continuously generated. The knowledge produced in this continuous process of theoretically based reflection of institutional practices, including my own, sheds new light on the potential and limitations of developmental theories in informing psychological research, developmental interventions, and child welfare practice, research and policy. This research investigation converges with ADS scholars' focus on scholarship oriented toward addressing social issues. Inspired by the Vygotskian project and critical pedagogy and social theory, this research explicitly address issues of social development and social justice and is motivated by a political commitment to use my expertise in developmental psychology to bring about changes in institutional practices in order to create more and better opportunities for children to develop. The clear political agenda of this study clashes with traditional versions of scientific psychology characterized by presumably objective and unbiased search for causal variables. As many have argued, this is epistemologically misguided as it obscures the dynamic and complex nature of reality (Rabinowitz, V. & Weseen, S., 2001).

9. Conclusion

This research project consisted of a form of social practice aimed at functioning as a catalyst of change in a residential child welfare program. The point of departure of this work was to implement an alternative approach to a child welfare program that shifted from a deficit-disease model toward a developmental approach based on teaching and learning. Following Vygotsky, my approach conceptualized teaching and learning as a developmental tool par excellence and the initial phase of my work served as an assessment of the extent to which the boys were appropriating the activity of learning, the obstacles to this process, and what needed to be done to overcome those. Throughout this process I drew on cultural-historical activity theory and critical pedagogy and social theory as theoretical tools that allowed me to analyze my practice and to conceive and implement activities conducive to the emergence of teaching and learning as the dominant form of institutional activity. Thus, my method emerged as a form of socially shared and theoretically mediated activity focused on overcoming the challenges to implementing collaborative teaching and learning activities. By employing the notion of activity system (Engeström, 1987), I analyzed the transformations of the activities performed at the group home as all individuals involved interacted with one another and contributed to those activities.

As a form of collaborative activity, my research practice evolved as it expanded its ability to engage the residents and the staff in negotiating collective

teaching and learning activities. The growth of dialogue and the establishment of common goals were the first level of it the results of this work concerning the establishment of more democratic institutional practices that respects and expands they boys' agency. This process was instrumental in creating the conditions for the emergence of teaching and learning as the dominant form of institutional activity. As learning activity progressed as a form of self directed activity on the boys' part, the need to for disciplinary measures decreased, which contributed to shifting the activity system of the group home away from the custodialism typical of residential programs. On a second level, as the growth of this collaborative research practice catalyzed the integration of school activity into the activities of the group home, forging a stronger link between these two institutions. Importantly, the meaning of appropriating learning activity, and therefore its impact on the boys' lives, varied for different boys as it helped them develop different qualities in the system of their life activities. For some, appropriating learning activity was primarily connected with developing the ability to grasp abstract scientific concepts. For those boys, a key transformative aspect of my work was to help them see hidden connections underlying theoretical concepts and to help them realize the practical relevance of theoretically mediated forms of reflection for understanding and contributing to the world around us, including its multi-layered sociocultural practices. This was also my unique contribution the collective enterprise of promoting the boys' development. For other boys, the challenge was mainly about developing the appropriate motivation to carry out learning tasks and they needed our (the adults)

assistance to initiate such tasks. An interesting result of this work was that the number of boys on college track -as they approached the age of exiting the child welfare system- increased and became the leading concern. At the initial stage of this work, this motivation was rather the exception than the rule in the institution. This had deep consequences in the institution as all participants expanded their vision of the boys' potential, including themselves. By appropriating learning activity the boys de fact expanded and deepened the possibilities of realizing their dream of having a high paying, respectable profession in the future and thus fulfill their human potential of becoming contributing members of their societies.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to explore ways to create alternative institutional practices in a child welfare residential program by integrating the insights from Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology and critical social theory and pedagogy as guiding tools. My aim was to reveal the central role of teaching and learning in the dialectics of youth development and social change. Specifically, this research was based on three years of practitioner research in a group home for boys where I collaborated with both residents and staff to implement collaborative activities geared toward promoting learning and development. In this process I have witnessed the enormous degree of alienation and disconnection those youth experience in their schoolwork. Thus, this study examines how inadequate schooling and low quality of instruction create further impediments for the development of youth in the child welfare system. Thus, It is not at all surprising that most of the boys lack the required motivation to perform

extremely abstract and, for the most part, meaningless tasks they are given in their schools.

Placing developmental teaching and learning combined with critical social theory at the center of this intervention was vital to creating a more favorable context for the boys' development. Interesting changes have taken place that reveal the mutually embedded nature of individual and social processes as well as the unity of identity transformation, knowledge construction, and institutional transformation. Thus, this study reveals a) how inadequate assumptions about human development, closely tied to a pathological view of children and adolescents living in difficult and oppressive circumstances, serve as barriers for change in child welfare practice, research and policy; b) how those barriers are enhanced by the separation of psychological from educational processes in various levels of theory and practice related to child development, advocacy and protection; c) the vast transformative potential of the cultural-historical theory of activity and critical social theory and pedagogy in overcoming the pitfalls in bringing about social change; and d) the fundamental role of ideals of social justice and equality supported by a dialectical historical view of human development in orienting theory, research and practice.

Following this perspective, an indispensable component of my results was to understand what motivates the partners with whom my collaborative practice evolved (boys and staff), which was open to my observation (at varying degrees) as I participated in the institutional activity system and communicated with the boys and the staff. The more my practice evolved, the more access I had to boys

and staff, such that at later phases I had learned a great deal more about the boys, including how to motivate them to formal learning. Ironically, what was expected of me as a psychologist –i.e., to get the boys to “open up” for me- eventually happened, albeit at varying degrees for different individuals, but only as a result my practice having reached a certain level of dialogicality in which my commitment to the development of the boys had become clear to them- they actively tested me on several occasions. In Freirian terms, this was only possible as I became simultaneously the teacher and the student of the boys and they, in turn, became my students and my teachers. As he put it, “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the- teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 1970). In other words, the boys started to “open up’ for me when they de facto felt that they could trust me, which meant that I had become more open to change my practice in response to their needs – and move on from there. In practice that meant that I had to make compromises. One common compromise was to witness a boy violating an institutional rule (e.g., smoking cigarettes outside the house, which Jay used to do in our first outings). The change in our relationship, one of the results of this project, was simultaneously a tool for further change in that it helped to promote the appropriation of learning activity. Genuine friendship, which emerged at different levels, was most evident in the expanded range of

topics that became incorporated in our conversations, including taboo topics such as use of drugs, sexuality, confessions about misdemeanors in school, lack of effort in preparing for school tasks, etc., all of which remained inaccessible to me in the first phases. Dialectically, the process whereby I was able to gain knowledge about the boys (their activities and motives) implied the very transformation of their activities and motives. This says a lot about data collection in action research and points to issues of commitment and social responsibility in social research, which I will expand on the discussion section.

A change in motives and, consequently, shifts in the activities prioritized is the cornerstone of development, which signals that the self has changed. This was the main result that I sought to achieve in practice, which required the transformation of the institutional activity system insofar as the self evolves in the context of institutionally situated sociocultural practices. As I indicated in the research questions section, my inquiry specifically addressed how to bring about changes in institutional practices. This led to take on a contradiction in the form of a vicious circle: institutional practices need to change to create the context for individual development (which implies change), but individuals have to do different things in order to change institutional practices. The research question was how to break the cycle. Following the activity theoretical claim that activity systems are open-ended, I sought to identify aspects of the system most susceptible to change. Given the power configurations present at the institution when I started working there, I focused on working directly with the boys, which was what I perceived as the only viable alternative at the time- because I initially

perceived the staff as not being open and was not myself open to understand the contradictions in their practices.

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