



PLAY

Play Pedagogy and Playworlds

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Introduction

This paper introduces play pedagogy, a novel approach in early childhood education, and Playworld, an educational practice that is inspired by this approach. Play pedagogy has been developed by Swedish scholar Gunilla Lindqvist¹ and is being currently disseminated in Sweden, Finland, the United States and Japan.

Subject

Play pedagogy advocates forms of adult and child joint play involvement that are respectful of the child's culture, creativity and spontaneity, in a way that promotes her emotional, cognitive and social development.

The founder of play pedagogy, Gunilla Lindqvist, grounds her educational approach in a lesser known work of Vygotsky, entitled "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood."² Lindqvist embraces Vygotsky's cultural approach to children's play and argues for a play-based pedagogy. In a practical realization of this approach, she and her students worked together with 3- to 8-year-old children to create Playworlds, an educational practice that includes adult-child joint pretense and dramatization of texts from children's literature combined with the production of visual art. Playworlds are dramaturgical classroom interventions that focus on emotional experience and aesthetic relation to reality through involving children and adults in staged as well as spontaneous pretend play. Children and adults bring a piece of children's literature to life through scripted and improvisational acting, costume and set design, and multimodal rehearsal and reflection.³

Problem

At the end of the 20th century, in many Western societies, young children's life and play became "segregated" into specifically designated areas of nursery rooms, playgrounds, and theme-parks. At the time, many educators and parents believed that children's play needed to be spontaneous and free from adults' guidance and influence. They recognized the developmental significance of play and assumed that play- and child-dedicated spaces would ensure that children's play was nurtured and protected and that their development was

optimized. However, in the absence of parents and educators, children's play spaces became depleted of cultural resources. Commercial toys and other objects of material culture that replace adults' presence are increasingly seen as detrimental for children's creativity and imagination.

In contrast to this trend, play pedagogy advocates adult and child joint play, in which adults provide a variety of social, emotional, cognitive and communicative resources to enrich and support children's play. Children bring to this joint play their expertise in pretend play and symbolic imagination, which help adults revitalize their playfulness and improvisational competence.

A related issue that play pedagogy also addresses is the marginalization of play in early childhood education. Despite the fact that play and other representational activities are widely seen as beneficial developmentally, the major trend in public education in industrialized countries has been to focus on teaching specific academic skills and preparing children for state-wide testing. This has led to the relegation of play and art to a minor role in K-1 curricula. In contrast, play pedagogy considers play to be a vital developmental activity in early childhood and places it in the core of preschool and early elementary school curricula.

Research Context

Playworlds translate basic tenets of play pedagogy into collaborative educational interventions that include educators, students, and consultants such as academic researchers, whose participation reflects their different yet compatible interests and agendas. Educators typically seek to expand traditional venues of their professional development and to cultivate their knowledge of and experience with drama, visual and plastic arts, and literature. Children have appeared to be motivated by the opportunity to engage in the popular activities of play and artistic creation, and to make sense of their experiences through joint involvement with adults. Academic researchers use Playworlds to better understand and examine some important questions in their area of study, such as child development, early childhood education or communication. Although guided by similar basic tenets of play pedagogy, different Playworlds have been developed to meet the specific needs of teachers and children in particular schools and particular countries. They also reflect the different theoretical and methodological orientations of participating academic researchers who come from various disciplinary backgrounds.

Key Issues and Recent Research Results

Lindqvist and her students conducted several research projects that focused on exploring how Playworlds help children to cope with intense emotional states such as fear and anger.¹ Lindqvist's work has been carried on by her students and other scholars in Sweden and elsewhere.⁴

In Finland, for example, Playworld researchers explore the intersection between play, narrative learning and school learning. The practical concern there is the transition from preschool to formal schooling, where play is abruptly minimized and segregated from learning. Finnish researchers view Playworld as an "intermediate" form of activity where the interaction occurring between children and adults promotes the development of narrative cognition that serves as an important resource when these children enter school. Currently the empirical analysis of data from various Finnish sites focuses primarily on the sense-making process in learning, and the development of initiative and subjectivity (agency) in play interaction.^{5,6}

In the United States, researchers have focused on examining the impact of Playworld activity on the development of children and adults. Four projects have been conducted so far. The 2004-2005 Playworld was based on C. S. Lewis's novel "The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe." This project differed from other Playworlds in several ways: all of the researchers played major roles in the dramatic performance; it was staged at a school on a military base at a time of war; and the documentation of the entire Playworld was extremely extensive, and included the use of many different media. Finally, this study combined a pre- and posttest quasi-experimental design with participant-observer ethnography. The project yielded empirical evidence that children's participation in Playworld activity led to higher levels of narrative competence in comparison with the control group.⁷ Ethnographic data were used to identify the conditions that were conducive in facilitating social and emotional development of adults and children, specifically their understanding and management of conflicts.⁸

Japanese Playworld projects have taken place at a kindergarten in a rural area. Their main purpose was to challenge the recent tendency of Japanese educational policy that marginalizes play. Japanese projects have differed from the other Playworld projects in their emphasis on artistic activity as the medium for play. A major contribution lies in illuminating the relationship between pretend play and art activities. Another important contribution is the explication of the internal process that teachers undergo in order to be able to connect with children in Playworlds, which is closely related to the "*Kyozai-Kaishaku*" doctrine.⁹ According to this doctrine, teachers should be able to link their own lived-through emotional experiences to the topic being taught. Within the Playworld projects, educators' deep emotional engagement has resulted in art pieces and play that were collaboratively produced by children and adults, and that were reflective of their diverse points of view.

Conclusions

Playworld projects have successfully addressed two key issues of contemporary childhood: the segregation of play and the marginalization of play.¹⁰ Playworld projects have been conducted internationally at multiple levels of education, from preschool to K-1 and second grades classrooms. Many researchers have found that Playworlds are highly engaging activities. Both children and adults were able to retain their motivation for the duration of the project, often as long as over months and years. Although previous research has demonstrated that Playworlds can be carried out with children from various cultures and various social situations (e.g., preschoolers in a rural setting; K-1 classroom at a military base, etc.), further research may identify additional populations for which Playworlds can be beneficial (e.g., special education students, children with mental health problems, etc.).

Implications

Children necessitate and seek multiple forms of joint involvement with adults. It is not enough for parents and

educators to secure children's play spaces and to provide toys and other objects of material culture. Adults can and should play together with children. Playworlds provide a venue for children and adults to creatively interpret a text from children's literature, through visual and plastic arts, pretend play and oral narration. Research has established that Playworlds promote the development of literacy skills and foster children's interest in books and reading. For this as well as for other reasons, Playworlds and similar play-based educational interventions should have a place in early childhood curricula. Although organized by adults, Playworlds are respectful of the child's culture and her expertise. Playworlds enable adults to connect with children and provide guidance, without imposing authority, fear and hierarchy. It is not surprising, therefore, that Playworlds have proved to be a useful tool in teachers' in-service professional development and in teacher preparation.

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