ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Play Pedagogy and Playworlds

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Introduction

The cultural perspective on play offers us rich ground for developing play pedagogy, as this perspective shows how play and culture are connected. This entry focuses on one play pedagogy within the cultural perspective on play, which is of particular interest because it builds off a unique reading of the work of L. S. Vygtosky, one of the foremost theorists of children's play within the socio-cultural perspective, or any perspective, on play. The *creative pedagogy of play*[1] was developed by Gunilla Lindqvist, whose reading of Vygotsky's work breaks ground by integrating his ideas about art with his ideas about play, culture, creativity, imagination, and development.

Specifically, we will focus on the key component of this pedagogy, what Lindqvist called the common denominator of play and aesthetics forms: *playworlds*.[1] Playworlds can be described as a form of adult-child joint play in which adults and children create a common fantasy that is designed to support the development of both adults and children.[18,25,26] This adult-child joint play is often structured around a piece of literature or another work of art. Adults and children work together to 'bring the literature to life' through drama and play.

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Playworlds are in widespread use in both Sweden and Finland. Playworlds are growing in popularity in many other countries and are now taking place in early childhood education and care classrooms (and senior centers) in Japan, Serbia, and the US; with related but distinct pedagogies, such as Conceptual Playworlds[2] and current Narrative Learning,[3] being practiced and studied in Australia, Indonesia, China, and Lithuania, as well as in other countries. This entry is written by members of the International Playworld Network (IPWNW), a group of scholars who have been studying playworlds together since 2003,[4,5] and is expanded upon in two recent books by IPWNW scholars and colleagues.[4,6]

Subject

Lindqvist[1,7-14] was interested in how children make meaning in play, and particularly how play can be inspired by various aesthetic forms of expression.[15,16] The playworlds that Lindqvist created with preschool teachers can be described as fantasy worlds that children and teachers create, enter, play in, and exit, together; or as a form of adult-child joint play in which play is combined with art or science. Teachers become emotionally engaged in these playworlds and, thus, they are not the forms of play that one typically sees in preschool, where the teachers may become "extras" in children's play, participating with their bodies but without their whole selves.

In her study of the aesthetics of play,[1] Lindqvist takes a critical attitude towards understanding play from withing a developmental psychological approach. She does not concur that there is a well-defined progression in children's play. Instead, Lindqvist advocates for understanding play as a social and cultural activity that depends on aesthetic, cultural, and social conditions.

It is worth noting that not all playworlds derive from Gunilla Lindqvist's work. For instance, some Japanese playworlds originated before anyone involved in these playworlds had read Lindqvist's work, and the US playworlds are heavily influenced by the work of the preschool teacher and author, Vivian Paley.[17] Playworlds have evolved through a combination of practice and theory that has remained local; and practice and theory that has had an international influence.[18]

In all playworlds, children contribute with their expertise in playing and adults with their experiences from the adult world (art and science). In Lindqvist's playworlds, the point of departure is usually a text, such as a children's book, poem, or fairytale, but it is a text that ties in with a theme that the teachers consider appropriate for the specific class, for instance the

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theme of clouds or of escaping war. The classroom becomes the world found in the text and the characters come to life as they are embodied by the participants.

Problems

Playworlds can be described as collaborative acts of creation or ways of being.[19,4] Playworlds are not instructional methods or techniques, although teachers and caregivers who create playworlds find that playworlds help them a great deal as they teach and care. As such, playworlds promote the development not only of children, but of teachers, caregivers, artists, imaginary characters, and university researchers as well.

Broadly, playworlds are designed to include all who wish to join.[33,34,40,44] They support all participants in feeling some combination of welcomed, valued, cared for, and caring. Because of this, members of our group of playworld scholars understand playworlds to be a part of the struggles, which are more prominent in some of our nations than others, but are important to all of us, to end the oppression via exclusion of children and the elderly with special needs, and also those who are often excluded because they are emergent bilinguals, undocumented, Black, Indigenous, queer, neurodivergent, or members of excluded groups that are present in some but not all of our nations, such as Latinx participants.

Furthermore, playworlds have been sustained in a variety of settings. For instance, in Finland and Sweden there is widespread support for the human right of children to play. Playworlds have also been sustained in publicly funded schools in the United States, one of the few nations that has not ratified the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child, which contains Article 31, declaring the right of children to play.

Research Context

Lindqvist[1] developed her creative pedagogy of play based on Vygotsky's theories of play,[20,21] imagination and creativity,[22,23] and art.[24] Lindqvist's interpretation of Vygotsky's theory of play emphasizes the importance of understanding imagination as an aspect of reality, rather than something other than reality. This means that fantasy and reality, or as Vygotsky puts it, imagination and realistic thinking, are not two independent processes.

Instead, invention and artistic creativity require realistic thinking and imagination: in these processes, “The two act as a unity."[22, p.349] With this understanding that adult invention and artistic

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creativity, like play, include imagination and realistic thinking, Lindqvist was likely to appreciate children's creative potential in play. Playworlds, as a common denominator of play and art, can, thus, offer us new and potentially important ways of relating to children.

Vygotsky writes that imagination is an integral part of realistic thinking, that no cognition of reality is possible without imagination. He explains why the everyday perception that imagination is separate from reality, is not correct.[23] Imagination, according to Vygotsky, is closely linked to reality, and he describes imagination and creativity as parts of one cyclical process.

Imagination and creativity are, therefore, both necessary for thinking, and for human growth and development. The process that combines the two is characteristic of all people, including small children, says Vygotsky. Furthermore, he argues that this can be seen particularly clearly in play, writing that children's play is "imagination in action."[20, p.79] Play is embodied imagination and creativity. A child's play is, thus, not a reproduction of what is experienced, but is a creative reworking of impressions and experiences: "… the creative processes are already fully manifest in earliest childhood."[23, p.6]

In Lindqvist's creative pedagogy of play, children's play is visible and develops in such a way that it can more easily be seen and understood by adults to be an early form of the artistic and scientific endeavors of adulthood, and, therefore, to produce new and intrinsically valuable insights that can be of value to people of all ages. This understanding is in contrast with contemporary Western European and American biological, psychoanalytic, cognitive-developmental and cross-cultural psychological theories of play. In all of these theories one finds assertions that children's play is fundamentally different from adult activities, and that adult knowledge, experience or developmental stage is a teleology for children's play.[25,26]

Key Research Questions

Playworlds are powerful tools for studying development, including the development of play, from a greater number of perspectives and from traditionally excluded perspectives. Playworlds enable an important form of what is called participatory design research (PDR).[27] They are a means of including young children and their teachers,[28] people with dementia and their caregivers,[55] artists, and imaginary characters[54] -- all of whom are often excluded from designing even play research, despite their play expertise -- as research designers.[4,6,29]

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Key Research Results

Teachers and caregivers who have participated in playworlds explain that playworlds allow them to listen to children and seniors in new ways.[19] As did Lindqvist,[1] other researchers have been able to show that teachers who have participated in playworlds have had opportunities to develop new and useful approaches to working with children and new ways of understanding their role as teachers.[30-34] Researchers have also shown that teachers change their ways of relating to their students and to each other, in ways that they consider to be important to their teaching and their personal growth, through their participation in playworlds.[4,6,25,31,32,35-37]

In relation to children, studies have shown that participation in playworlds promotes a wide range of developmental changes. On the one hand, children experience important changes in their social, cognitive, and emotional development.[25] At the same time, research in Finland has shown that children in playworlds are given the opportunity to become subjects and agents in their own growing and learning, and that playworlds can create conditions for teachers in classrooms to recognize and deal with contradictions, dilemmas and difficulties that arise when trying to support children's agency and engagement in classrooms in institutional settings.[32,33,38-40] This then creates more possibilities for the multiple manifestations and development of children's agency in classrooms.[41-43] Also in Finland, playworlds became popular due to their having been shown to support children during their transition from preschool to school.[3]

There are examples from several nations of the ways that playworlds allow all the children in the classroom, particularly those who might typically be left out of classroom activities, to participate actively and in leadership capacities.[19,25,34,40,44] Studies have also shown that children's participation in a playworld can promote their narrative competence.[45] (Narrative competence is a literacy skill that is often neglected in current discussions of literacy in the US, although it is highly predictive of academic success.[45]) Researchers have also shown that participation in a playworld creates "zones of proximal development"[21, p.86] in which children and adults can mutually support one another in developing.[30]

Research Gaps

All of the areas of study discussed above merit further study. Particularly promising and much needed is the further study of the ways that playworlds create conditions for teachers in classrooms to recognize and deal with contradictions, dilemmas and difficulties that arise when

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trying to support children's agency and engagement.[32,33,38-40] There is an understudied potential in playworlds to develop and change educational institutions, and to understand and explain the dynamics of such change processes requires further study.[32,34,42] Researchers based in universities have also developed synthetic-analytic methods for the study of development through their participation in playworlds.[25,46,47] These methods allow one to study developmental phenomena that are difficult to observe in their full, dynamic complexity, such as perezhivanie (a technical term that is difficult to translate into English in a few words but, roughly, an intensely-emotional-lived-through(-so experienced again)-experience).[25,46,48,49,50] Further trials of these methods constitute another promising area of study.

Concluding Thoughts

We can see two almost-opposing categories in regards to play in many ECEC curricula, worldwide.[25,26,45] On the one hand, there is what is often called "free play," in which children's play is protected from adult interference. On the other hand, children's play is directed toward goals that adults decide are most important. These two categories appear to be equally powerless in response to the current restriction of play in which "academic" subject matter learning is becoming the focus of the curriculum, in place of play, in many early childhood classrooms internationally.[51] This is happening despite all that we know about the importance of play for children's wellbeing, learning, and development, and the status of play as one of the fundamental rights of the child. Meanwhile the above-mentioned two categories of curricula have remained, to a great extent, unchallenged by many third alternatives.[4] Playworlds may be a third, alternative category of play, neither free play nor adult-directed play, as playworlds include adults and children in joint play that is directed towards adult and also child-made goals (and is based on mutual caring between adults and children).[4,25,26,43,52]

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Playworlds deserve the attention of ECEC and elementary school teachers and administrators, policy makers and parents, because, over the past three decades, playworlds have been shown to promote development and support the study of development in unique and powerful ways. Sweden, with their world famous EDUCARE early childhood education and care system, develops and fosters early childhood pedagogies via a unique process that includes the input of both well-educated early childhood teachers who are given ample time for research and excellent working conditions; and researchers who are well connected to work in preschools and whose research is

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amply supported. Finland is world famous for their children's high achievement in school subjects. Both Sweden and Finland are leaders in the development and use of playworlds, but playworlds have received less attention than many other Swedish and Finnish contributions to education and ECEC. Furthermore, playworlds may help us to respond effectively to the forces that are reducing play in early childhood education and care, by challenging the above-mentioned two categories of play, neither of which has been able, thus far, to withstand these forces.[53] Playworlds offer such varied and important means to support children in great part because playworlds allow adults to listen to children in a unique way: from within adult-child joint play.[4,28]

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