INTRODUCTION

Playworlds of Children and Adults: Cultural Perspectives on Play Pedagogy

In recent decades the major trend in public education in the United States and some other Western countries was to focus on teaching specific academic skills and to prepare students for statewide achievement tests that became essential for entering institutions of higher education. An important ramification of high-stakes testing is a strong tendency for educators to focus on teaching content that is congruent, or even equivalent, to test materials, and to disregard, or pay less attention to, content that is not included in test batteries. As a result of these policies, play has been relegated to a marginal position, even in early childhood curricula, where it traditionally held a dominant role.

In organizing this special issue we attempt to revitalize interest for studying play and to mobilize efforts to strengthen the role of play and imagination in education. We present four articles that specifically address the educational and developmental relevance of play and argue for a wider approach to play, known as “play pedagogy.”

The roots of play pedagogy can be traced to Vygotsky’s work and his notion of play as a cultural activity. In one of his essays, Vygotsky discussed explicitly the role of play in human development (published in Mind and Society) where he argued that play creates a zone of proximal development and that “in play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). Along similar lines, Vygotsky emphasized that “though the play-development relationship can be compared to the instruction-development relationship, play provides a much wider background for changes in needs and in consciousness” (p. 102).

The notion of play pedagogy has been specifically elaborated by the Swedish scholar Gunilla Lindqvist (1995). Lindqvist grounds her educational approach, play pedagogy, in a lesser known work of Vygotsky, titled “Imagination and Creativity in Childhood” (Vygotsky, 1930/2004). Lindqvist has embraced Vygotsky’s cultural approach to children’s play and argued for a play-based pedagogy. In a practical realization of this approach, Lindqvist and her students worked together with children between 3 and 8 years of age 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. Appreciating Gunilla Lindqvist’s contribution to play theory in general, and play pedagogy in particular, we have included an article by Monica Nilsson that provides an essential reflection on the life, intellectual theory, and work of
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Lindqvist and Nilsson’s article, “Creative Pedagogy of Play—The Work of Gunilla Lindqvist,” brings us to the end of the issue while returning it to its very roots.

Embarking on the notion of play pedagogy and play, the four articles contribute to play theories by bringing into the focus the following trends.

1. Play Is a Lifespan Activity

Influenced by the Piaget’s developmental theory, the dominant view of play is still that play is the domain of children. This essentially normative approach to play emphasizes developmental stages of play and implies that by the end of early childhood play becomes gradually replaced by more “mature,” “adult-like” activities such as games and academic learning. As a result, even though play is seen as beneficial for cognitive, emotional, and social development, play research typically focused on studying developmental benefits of play for younger children and paid only limited attention to adult or multigenerational (adult–child) play. In contrast with this dominant approach, the articles featured in the issue illuminate the psychological benefits of adult play (see Talamo and colleagues) as well as multigenerational play (see the articles by Nicolopoulou and colleagues and by Ferholt and Lecusay, this issue).

Working in the context of digital play, Alessandra Talamo, Simone Pozzi, and Barbara Mellini prepared the first article, “Uniqueness of Experience and Virtual Playworlds: Playing Is Not Just for Fun.” In this article, the authors discuss the mediational character of play by resituating the question and context of experience within the virtual playworlds of multiplayer online games. The authors analyze how these virtual playworlds provide adult players with meaningful life experience—in some sense even an extension of social experience—because they offer a diversified array of social interactions (different from those of everyday life) and possibilities/opportunities for exploratory behavior.

The article “Using the Transformative Power of Play to Educate Hearts and Minds: From Vygotsky to Vivian Paley and Beyond,” by Ageliki Nicolopoulou, Aline Barbosa de Sá, Hande Ilgaz, and Carolyn Brockmeyer, explores the storytelling/story-acting practice developed by Vivian Paley. Following Paley, the authors infuse a preschool curriculum with play-based activity to support the development of language and social competencies in young children.

Along similar lines, Beth Ferholt and Robert Lecusay’s study of multigenerational playworlds in the third article, “Adult and Child Development in the Zone of Proximal Development: Socratic Dialogue in a Playworld,” describes a playworld-based educational intervention directly inspired by the work of Gunilla Lindqvist. Their work extends Lindqvist’s framework to examining the development of adults. The authors describe how, as a part of the playworld intervention, the traditional classroom discourse has been replaced by a more egalitarian Socratic dialogue that creates a zone of proximal development, which enables both adults and children to advance their social competence and conflict resolution strategies.

2. Play Is a Pervasive and Immersive Activity

Studies featured in the special issue emphasize the quality of play to transcend the boundaries that separate between fantasy and reality. The article by Talamo and her coauthors provides an extensive analysis of the difficulties in identifying the ontological boundary between everyday life and the fantasy world of game, as far as the player’s experience is concerned. On the other
hand, the authors also find that players’ real-life experiences infuse play with rich layers of meaning and emotional content that account for the immersive character of play experiences. This finding is in agreement with findings from the study by Nicolopoulou et al. as well as with the Ferholt and Lecusay article. Gunilla Lindqvist’s concept of playworld captures well this merging of fantasy and reality, which, according to Vygotsky (1930/2004), accounts for the creative and formative aspects of play. In his essay about the role of play in development, Vygotsky (1978) implied that developmental benefits of play can be understood in the context of the relation between children’s fantasy expressed in the imaginary situation of play and the child’s reality. He elaborated on this point more extensively in his piece on imagination and creativity (Vygotsky, 1930/2004) where he specifically argued that fantasy is a way to interpret reality and to make it both more manageable and richer. The richer the reality of players, the richer their fantasy, and vice versa. The more we are immersed in play and the more play “spills over” into our everyday life experiences, the stronger the integration between fantasy and reality.

On the other hand, the immersive and pervasive character of play brings up some controversial issues with regard to the unbounded character of play and the lack of clear boundaries between fantasy and reality. Especially in the discussions of play in computer-mediated environments, among many media critics and scholars, there is a growing suspicion about the “unruliness” of play, and its obsessive, or even addictive, life-consuming properties. Notwithstanding this concern, the studies featured in the issue illuminate some apparently beneficial aspects of immersive play and we hope to bring some new elements into the public debate about the psychological and social consequences of playing in fantasy worlds.

We are especially pleased with the different routes each of our authors took in addressing the questions surrounding the role of play in human development. Furthermore, we feel that each article extends our understanding of play pedagogy and playworlds in new ways—perhaps (at times) provocatively. As guest editors, we were excited to bring this work to you in a devoted forum. It is our hope that you enjoy this special issue of *Mind, Culture, & Activity*.

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REFERENCES


