

Promoting narrative competence through adult–child joint pretense: Lessons from the Scandinavian educational practice of playworld

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of the playworld educational practice on the development of narrative competence in 5- to 7-year-old children. The playworld educational practice is derived from play pedagogy and the theory of narrative learning, both developed and implemented in Scandinavia. The playworld practice consists of joint adult–child pretense based in a work of children’s literature, discussion, free play, and visual art production. When compared to children under a control intervention (conventional school practices without pretend play), children who participated in the playworld practice show significant improvements in narrative length, coherence, and comprehension, although not in linguistic complexity. These findings provide further evidence concerning the role of pretense in the narrative development of young children. © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, a series of legislative and political measures have been undertaken in the United States to create educational activities that would enable all children to achieve state and national learning objectives. As a result of this legislation and the introduction of accountability policies, statewide testing has become mandatory for the survival of public schools. 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. Consequently, in preschool and the early elementary grades traditional activities for young children, such as art and pretend play, have been relegated

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to a marginal position despite the fact that these symbolic and representational activities are widely seen as beneficial developmentally (Goncü & Klein, 2001; Lillard, 2002; Piaget, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Vygotsky, 1982).

By contrast, in Sweden and Finland, countries with some of the highest rates of literacy, the emphasis has been placed in the opposite direction. In Sweden, the value of play in early childhood education has been recognized in educational policy and practice since 1946 (Nilsson, 2003). Recent modifications in Swedish preschool and elementary school educational curricula involve an even closer integration of play with other learning activities (Ministry of Education, 1998; Sandberg & Samuelson, 2003). For example, the new curricula focus on the development of the “whole child” and require that preschool and elementary school teachers work together in teams with mixed age groups, implementing activities that integrate play and learning (Sandberg & Samuelson, 2003). Lindqvist (1995, 1996, 2001) has developed an educational practice, “play pedagogy,” which addresses the demands of the new curricula. Play pedagogy is currently being used in a few teacher education programs and day care centers, and Nilsson (2003) suggests that play pedagogy should be used more widely, as it would satisfy the requirements of the new curricula.

In Finland, the value of play in early childhood education has also been recognized in educational policy and practice. In 1997, Pentti Hakkarainen started an experimental teacher-training program at the University of Oulu that was partly inspired by Lindqvist’s work. Using Hakkarainen’s educational theory of “narrative learning” (Hakkarainen, 1999, 2004), several schools across Finland have now implemented curricula closely related to play pedagogy.

In this paper, we first introduce some of the basic tenets of play pedagogy and narrative learning. We do this in order to describe the operation of a playworld, an educational practice that we created in the United States, and which is derived from Lindqvist’s play pedagogy and consistent with Hakkarainen’s narrative learning. We then present a study which investigates the effects of this practice on the narrative competence of young elementary school students.

1.1. Playworld in play pedagogy and narrative learning

Lindqvist (1995, 1996, 2001) grounds the educational approach of play pedagogy in a lesser-known work of Vygotsky, entitled “Creativity and fantasy in childhood” (in Russian: “Voobrazenie i tvorcestvo v detskom vozraste”). Vygotsky’s (1982) theory of play and fantasy implies that pretense is a way to interpret reality and to make it both more manageable and richer. This is congruent with anthropological (Bateson, 1972; Turner, 1982) and cognitive developmental accounts of pretense (Goncü & Klein, 2001; Lillard, 2002; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Sutton-Smith, 2001). Lindqvist (1995) also embraces Vygotsky’s cultural approach to children’s play and argues for a play-based pedagogy—an approach in which adults actively and jointly participate in children’s play. She claims that play has a close affinity with art and argues for a cultural approach to play rather than a psychoanalytic or cognitive approach. According to Lindqvist, the two latter approaches disregard the significant role of the adult in influencing children’s play. Either the child builds up his/her knowledge through play (cognitive approach) or processes inner conflicts (psychoanalytic approach), but in both cases the child is left alone with, and in, the play. In contrast, according to the play pedagogy doctrine, children and adults together can create space and possibilities for play.

In a practical realization of this approach, Lindqvist and her students worked together with 3- to 8-year-old children to create playworlds, an educational practice that includes pretend play, dramatic performance of a text from children’s literature, and visual art production. A playworld

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