Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica – Journal of Theories and Research in Education 12, 2 (2017).
ISSN 1970-2221

Exploring Alternative Pathways:
Children, Pedagogy and Play in the Age of Digital Technology

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Abstract
I bambini di oggi sono immersi in un ambiente digitale che crea marginalità e, in molti casi, tende a cancellare le varie forme di gioco infantile tradizionale. Senza dubbio ci sono molteplici vantaggi insiti nella tecnologia digitale, ma aspetti molto importanti nella formazione e socializzazione dei bambini sono ormai andati perduti. Dopo una breve revisione della letteratura che tratta il significato del gioco nella vita dei bambini, si passa a descrivere una risposta pedagogica alle sfide della tecnologia digitale per come ristruttura e trasforma in misura via via crescente il mondo del gioco infantile. Riflettendo sul lavoro che abbiamo svoto con i bambini negli ultimi quattro decenni, offriremo una risposta pragmatica in grado di rispecchiare parallelamente da una parte l'enfasi posta da Johan Huizinga (1938-1955) sul primato di gioco nell'evoluzione della cultura, e dall'altra l'idea sostenuta da Neil Postman (1979) sulla creazione di un "meccanismo termostatico" che dovrebbe controbilanciare la presenza dominante dei media elettronici nella vita dei bambini.

Children today are immersed in a digital environment that is marginalizing and, in many cases, obliterating multiple forms of traditional childhood play. No doubt there are multiple benefits embedded in digital technology but we will argue that something very important in the education and socialization of children has been lost. After a brief review of the literature establishing the significance of play in the life of children, we will outline a pedagogical response to the challenges of digital technology as it increasingly restructures and transforms the play world of children. Reflecting on our own work with children over the past four decades, we will offer a pragmatic response that both parallels the emphasis placed by Johan Huizinga (1938/1955) on the primacy of play in the evolution of culture and,

at the same time, strongly reflects the view advocated by Neil Postman (1979) of creating a "thermostatic mechanism" that would counter-balance the dominant presence of electronic media in the lives of children.

Parole chiave: pedagogia, bambini, gioco, day camp, dramma-in-formazione

Keywords: pedagogy, children, play, day camp, drama-in-education

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With a suddenness and speed that astonishes, digital technology is rapidly altering the ways in which children are educated and socialized. We see its presence everywhere: in schools, in public places, on vacations, in parks, on playgrounds, in our homes. Its reach cannot be denied, escaped or easily contained. This isn't necessarily a "bad" thing—certainly multiple advantages abound—but its pervasiveness needs to be acknowledged, questioned and thoughtfully addressed.

In our paper, we will argue that in an age of steadily expanding digital technology, it would be prudent to allow for a time and space where non-digital media still have the opportunity to play an important role in the socialization and education of children. As children become more deeply absorbed in the digital environment evolving in their lives, the opportunities for traditional forms of play—the ability to self-organize activities, negotiate rules, socialize spontaneously in face to face encounters, be physically active and the freedom to explore the outdoors—is routinely being displaced or left underdeveloped. At the same time, the accelerated interaction with rapidly changing images and text on a screen accompanied by the constant distractions and interruptions of handheld devices work against the quiet and calm conducive to reflection, solitude and conversation. No doubt there are valuable lessons, learning and creative experiences associated with the use of digital media but they are clearly of a different order and character those born of traditional forms of play.

Reflecting on our own work with children in primary school classrooms, youth centers and day camps over the past four decades, we will suggest a pragmatic approach that both parallels the emphasis placed by Johan Huizinga (1938/1955) on the primacy of play in the formation of childhood and, at the same time, strongly reflects the view advocated by Neil Postman (1979) of creating a "thermostatic mechanism" that would counter-balance the dominant presence of electronic media in the lives of children. After a brief review of the literature establishing the significance of play in the life of children, we will suggest a pedagogical response to the challenges of digital technology as it increasingly restructures and trans-

forms the play world of children. We will do so by focusing on two areas of expertise in which our organization (the Educational Arts Team) has developed educational and recreational programs over the past 40 years: dramatic play programs that help students improve the cognitive, literate and social skills of children; and a summer day camp that focuses on physical, as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal development. Both these programs make use of children's natural inclination and need to play.

The Digital Environment of Children

Digital technology is not primarily a thing or a conglomeration of things but an environment in which we increasingly live our lives (Vandewater, 2015). It is our new home. "In a little over 50 years," write Roberts and Foehr (2004), "we have moved from a media environment dominated by local newspapers and radio stations to one characterized by an almost continual diet of highly vivid, on-demand, audiovisual images, many with interactive capabilities" (p. 1). While adults socialized in an earlier, pre-digital time exist and thrive in this emergent environment, we do so as "immigrants." We are not really from here. Children, however, are different: they are its natives.

While the degree to which a child or a society is emerged in an electronically mediated environment varies from family to family, country to country, depending upon a whole host of factors, there can be little doubt that digital media is making substantial inroads into the lives of children throughout most of the world. "Children around the world are born today," write Tidhar and Lemish (2003), "into a media-rich environment. Multi-television homes, multiple channels, video recorders, video cameras, interactive video, and computers—all are part of their everyday life" (p.75). Lemish (2007) emphasizes that the media aren't just passive forms of entertainment but important agents in the international socialization of children. "In short, television is one of the most shared and homogenizing mechanisms of children's lives throughout the world…Very few other cultural phenomenon have such a magnitude of penetration, and even fewer have achieved global status" (p. 2). Lievrouw and Livingstone (2009) agree, adding that "societies worldwide are being reshaped, for better or worse, by changes in the global media and information environment. So, too, are the everyday lives of their citizens" (p. 1).

In the United States, these changes are especially apparent and their presence within our daily lives is steadily expanding. In a 2015 survey of 2600 young people conducted by Common Sense Media, it was determined that, *besides* the time spent with media at school and for homework, "On any given day in this country [United States], tweens (8- to 12-years old) spend an average of about six hours (5:55) and teens (13- to 18-years old) spend about nine hours (8:56) with media…" (p.

19). These results follow an earlier survey by the same organization (Common Sense Media, 2013) in which it was determined that "Seventy-two percent of children age 8 and under have used a mobile device for some type of media activity such as playing games, watching videos, or using apps…In fact, today, 38% of children *under two* have used a mobile device for media" (p. 9).

By the time children enter school, they have already become dependent upon digital technologies as their primary toys and frequently behave agitatedly when these technologies are not readily available. Rideout, Foehr and Roberts (2010), in their survey of media use by young people from 8 to 18, found that children were much more attached to electronic media in 2009 than they were just a decade earlier. In 1999, TV/video viewing measured 3:47 hours per day; in 2009, it registered 4:29 hours per day. Music listening went from 1:48 hours per day in 1999 to 2:31 hours per day in 2009. Computer use more than tripled from 27 minutes a day in 1999 to 1:48 hours per day in 2009. The use of video games more than quadrupled, multitasking nearly doubled and overall media use increased from 6:19 hours per day in 1999 to 7:38 hours per day in 2009. The authors also noted that text messaging, which was not counted in their study as media, registered an hour and a half per day. As a result, the total time that children are engaged in some form of electronic media is nearly nine hours per day, that is, more time than is spent in any other activity including sleep. Moreover, since many young people now sleep with their phones tucked under their pillows and their laptops on all night, even sleep is subject to frequent digital interruptions.

An even more recent survey published by Common Sense Media (2015) suggests that media use (defined as "watching TV, movies, and online videos; playing video, computer, and mobile games; using social media; using the Internet; reading; and listening to music") by young people is continuing to grow. Discounting media use related to schoolwork, the study concluded that "American teenagers (13-to 18-year olds) average nine hours (8:56) of entertainment media use, excluding time spent at school or for homework. Tweens (8-to 12-year-olds) use an average of about six hours (5:55) worth of entertainment media use" (p. 15). Moreover, the study found that "teens from lower-income families spend 2:45 hours more with media than teens from higher-income families" (p. 26).

Despite many of the problems wrought by digital technologies, it would be very shortsighted indeed to overlook the multiple benefits they quite obviously bring into the lives of children. Studies by Bogatz and Ball, (1972) and by Rice, Huston, Truglio and Wright (1990), for example, have demonstrated that regular exposure to the popular children's show *Sesame Street,* which is now carried in nearly 50 countries, "is associated with impressive gains in preschoolers' vocabularies and prereading skills as well" (Shaffer, 2000, p. 412).

Educational gains have also been attributed to other educational TV programs such as *The Electric Company* (Ball and Bogatz, 1973) as well as *Science Court* and *Pop-*

ular Mechanics for Kids (Farhl, 1998). Multiple authors report an association between digital media and creativity (Valkenburg & van der Voort, 1994; van der Voort & Valkenburg, 1994; Anderson, et.al. 2001; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Sefton-Green et al., 2011; J. Fisherkeller, 2015). Getz et al. (2005) argue that the make believe worlds that children encounter in the media do much to inspire the imagination. "In some instances a media setting serves as a springboard for a child's fantasy-world, providing space for his or her own drama to evolve" (p. 199). The obvious advantages of emergent digital technologies have inspired many authors to advocate moving "full steam ahead" (quite an antiquated metaphor in the digital age) and aggressively integrate technology into childhood learning on an expansive level (Elkind, 2007; Collins & Halverson, 2009; November, 2012).

Even those generally critical also point to some of the advantages of new forms of media. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016), in a statement of policy, counselled that although research has established that a child's exposure to electronic media has been shown to be associated with "negative health effects on weight and sleep; exposure to inaccurate, inappropriate, or unsafe content and contacts; and compromised privacy and confidentiality," there are also several benefits including "exposure to new ideas and knowledge acquisition, increased opportunities for social contact and support, and new opportunities to access health-promotion messages and information" that need to be included in our assessment of digital media (p.1).

A more balanced response to this rapid proliferation of electronic media within the culture of youth has been widely articulated in a set of critiques loosely described as "media literacy." Lemish (2007) defines media literacy as "the ability to analyze and evaluate messages, as well as the ability to communicate in a variety of ways" (p. 182). Scholars and educators such as Livingstone and Bovill (1999), Lemish et.al. (2001), Hobbs (2006), Buckingham (2007), Burn and Duran (2007), Jenkins (2009), Sonia Livingstone, et.al. (2017), and many others have urged that rather than condemn new technologies in a moral panic, we should carefully analyze the emerging environment and, at the same time, explore ways of using new media in positive and creative ways.

While acknowledging that internet use among young people presents substantial risks that "do warrant serious attention and intervention by government, educators, industry and parents," Livingstone and Bober (2005) conclude that "the risks do not merit a moral panic, and nor do they warrant seriously restricting children's internet use because this would be to deny them the many benefits of the internet" (p. 4). Kirkorian, Wartella, and Anderson (2008) add that although "electronic media, particularly television, have long been criticized for their potential impact on children," there are effective ways "for maximizing the positive effects of media and minimizing the negative effects" (p. 39). Lemish (2007) notes that although "there is a body of research that points out the possibility that there

is a negative relationship between amount of viewing television, combined with specific kind of television genres, and performance in schools, including literacy skills," there is also sufficient evidence to suggest that educational TV does have a positive effect (pp. 155, 179). In addressing concerns about a child's online safety, Livingstone, et al. (2017) "have proposed that policies to improve digital skills for both parents and children could provide a valuable lever in effecting change" (p. 101).

The awesome speed with which these changes are evolving makes it difficult for researchers to keep pace with, let alone evaluate them. Wartella et al. (2009) observe that "media pervades societies in ways few conceived even 10 years ago; television and DVDs are watched in cars, video games are played on cell phones, music is streamed through the Internet" (p. 1111). Not surprisingly, much of the emergent literature has emphasized digital media's impact on the society of children in rather stark terms. Some have described electronic media as promoting addictive behavior (Alter, 2017), contributing to drug abuse (Grubner et al., 2005; Strasburger, 2015), as a factor undermining interpersonal and intrapersonal communication (Turkle, 2012), and impairing the ability to read (Niederhauser et al., 2000; Kandel, 2006; Doctorow, 2009; Carr, 2011).

In his important book, *The Shallows* (2011), Nicholas Carr examines how the Internet is shown to be influencing the brain and its neural pathways. He notes that while we do gain an amazing access to information, we also lose our ability to hold that information, or to reason and think about it in a calm, reasoned, systematic and creative way. Carr, whose degree is in literature, argues that we no longer read in a traditional, linear way but tend to scan the page quickly, jumping from section to section. Writing too has become disjointed and fragmented. Carr concludes that what is being lost in this techno maelstrom is the calm, focused, undistracted, linear mind: the mind of the thoughtful deep reader, thinker and writer. "The practice of deep reading that became popular in the wake of Gutenberg's invention…will continue to fade" (p. 108).

While we agree with Livingstone and Bober (2005) that there's no need for a "moral panic," we do believe that the accelerating penetration of digital media into the lives of children requires the creation a variety of critical approaches to act as a counter balance. It is our view that, aside from learning how to critically engage and use media, children also need a time and place *away* from digital technologies where they can engage in face-to-face communication, physical activities, and the creative use of play. We are proposing, therefore, something of a different approach, not as an alternative *to* but as an alternative *with* media literacy that can function as a companion strategy in responding to the digital presence within the education and socialization of children.

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The Significance of Play for Children's Physical, Social and Educational Development

Play is rooted into our collective heritage as human beings. We know that all cultures and all historical periods have had play. Huizinga (1938/1955) wrote that play is rooted in our shared relationship with animals. Squirrels play tag, cats wrestle with their companions, and a dog will play fetch until his master's arm falls off. Early psychologists examined the significance of play in a child's development and wellbeing. Jean Piaget (1928; 1955; 1962), writing in the early and middle years of the twentieth century, noted at the very initiation of his career that young children learned not through logic or rational thought but through hands on experiences made possible by the trial and error of play. Lev Vygotsky (1931/1978) also emphasized the importance of play as a tool for children to develop intellectually by drawing them into creative and imaginative experiences. Both Freud and Jung seized the idea that stories were not just childish tales easily dismissed as fantasy but significant illuminations of our unconscious minds. Bruno Bettelheim maintained (1977) that childhood play was of great psychological importance for it provides young children a vehicle to explore in symbolic form unsolved problems "which are too complex, unacceptable, and contradictory" to deal with directly (p. 55).

Recent research as well has consistently bolstered the notion that traditional forms of play contribute to a child's physical, social/emotional and cognitive development. Multiple studies have shown that outdoor play helps to promote children's physical well-being (National Association for the Education of Young Children & the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2002; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Active experiences in play have also correlated positively with the socio-emotional development of children (Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990; Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Steen & Owens, 2001; Nielsen, 2012; Sutherland and Friedman, 2013). Others have published research demonstrating that play allows children to practice various cognitive abilities, including self-control (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Vygotsky, 1967), narrative abilities (Pellegrini, 1985), theory of mind abilities (Harris, 2000), and creative abilities (J.L. Singer, 1995; Carruthers, 2002). Some have argued that pretending allows children to learn about how things in the world could be different than they actually are (Gopnik, 2009; Lillard, 2001). Similarly, research supports the notion that play teaches turn-taking, collaboration, following rules, and empathy (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Krafft & Berk, 1998).

At the same time that play is essential to a child's physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development, several authors maintain that play has an important effect on the development of basic language, literacy and more advanced academic skills in children (D.G. Singer, 1973; Dansky & Silverman, 1973; Dansky, 1980; Pepler

& Ross, 1981; Sutton-Smith, 1986; Fromberg & Bergen, 1998; Frost et al., 2001). Several studies conclude that play and creative thought are related behaviors because both rely on children's ability to use symbols (Singer & Singer, 1990; Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Johnson, et al., 1999).

Play, we must conclude, for all the reasons we listed above and for so many more, is more than just an idle pastime: it is the very foundation of who we are and how we function as a civilization. Play motivates, involves, surrounds, and excites. Play teaches a whole set of skills, patterns of interaction, attitudes, assumptions, and ways of being in the world. Contemporary children's play, however, as we move deeper into the digital age, increasingly has become untethered from its origins rooted in the oral tradition.

Drama-in-Education: A Playful Approach to Education

One pedagogical application of a child's propensity to play is known as "drama-in-education." Through this method, children role play characters in a story and thereby become more deeply committed to the narrative as it unfolds in the classroom. The purpose is not to "act-out" a story as in a theatrical performance but to "enter" the story as characters in an unfolding drama and then to respond to imagined situations that provide opportunities for learning. The role of the teacher is a creative one that guides the process by introducing the initial situation and gaining the class's commitment to the drama. Along the way, in role as part of the drama, the teacher asks questions, adds complexity, and responds to new developments as they present themselves. The key is to use the child's natural way of learning through play and transform it into an opportunity to teach academic subjects and to explore important moral and social points of view.

The drama-in-education method originated in England where, in the words of one of its early practitioners, Gavin Bolton (1982), "the subject-matter is not drama per se, but any aspect of the curriculum which lends itself to dramatic structuring" (p. 7). In role as characters in the story (and thereby achieving some distance from who they are in real life), children converse, respond, argue, write and discuss as would the character they are playing. O'Neill and Lambert (1982), also important figures in the British School of drama-in-education, emphasize that the approach is "a mode of learning. Through the pupils' active identification with imagined roles and situations in drama, they can learn to explore issues, events and relationships" (p. 11).

Drama-in-education has been used widely with great effectiveness in England (O'Neill and Lambert, 1982; Bolton, 1984; Neelands, 1984; O'Neill, 1995; Bolton & Heathcote, 1995), Canada (Morgan & Saxton, 1987; Tarlington & Verriour, 1991; Miller & Saxton, 2004), and the United States (McCaslin, 1968; Wilhelm &

Edmiston, 1998; Tabone & Albrecht, 2000, 2002; Polsky, Shindel, & Tabone, 2006). Research has demonstrated that children who participate in these drama-in-education practices consistently outperform those who do not (De la Cruz, 1995; Parks & Rose, 1997; Catterall, & Waldorf, 1999; Podlozny, 2000; Catterall, 2002; Tabone, 2004).

To illustrate for the reader not familiar with this approach, we will outline a drama-in-education workshop we developed for fourth and fifth graders based upon the famous radio broadcast performed by Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater on the Air in 1938 (Tabone and Albrecht, 2002). The workshop was designed to engage a child's natural curiosity about aliens from outer space in a way that integrates the writing of radio or TV scripts, interviewing eyewitnesses to the unfolding events, artistic renditions of the space craft, and public speaking in front of the class while in role as newscasters. The workshop begins with a game designed to engage the interest of children by building on their knowledge of what Neelands (1984) calls "vernacular culture" (pp. 3-4). On the board at the front of the room, we draw a "cryptogram"—part rebus, part "Wheel of Fortune," part "Caduta Libera"—that entices the class's interest in solving the puzzle as we make the transition from the vernacular world they are familiar with into an imaginary play world. By solving the cryptogram (which reads along the lines "Are there really such things as aliens visiting the earth?"), the class is led into an open discussion where they can enthusiastically offer opinions or retell experiences concerning a subject that usually holds great fascination for children.

Once their interest has been engaged by the cryptogram and the ensuing discussion, the play world can be entered and the drama can take off. In role as journalists at a news conference, children ask questions of the teacher in role as the "world famous astronomer" Professor Pierson of the Princeton Observatory. Children are taught the "5Ws and the 1H" as an aid in formulating a list of questions they write down in preparation for the visit of the "astronomer." The news conference is staged in the class as children and the teacher adapt the appropriate tone of voice and vocabulary for the verbal exchange of questions.

The news conference, after it has run its course, is interrupted with a "breaking news" bulletin that a strange aircraft has landed in a field in Grovers Mill, New Jersey. The journalists rush to the scene and, in partners, interview "eyewitnesses" to the unfolding event. Witnesses may include the farmer who owns the property, townspeople, the mayor, children from a local school, the police who have been called in to maintain order, etc. One child in role as a reporter asks questions and takes notes as another child plays an eyewitness. After a few minutes, they switch roles, thus allowing the "reporter" to become an "eyewitness" and vice versa. After this, new pairs are formed and the same process is repeated a couple more times. Through this form of play, children are learning how to ask questions, to

speak with people they may not normally interact with, to listen carefully, to take notes, and to use a type of language and vocabulary they do not normally employ.

The students then write down their stories and prepare the evening's newscast. The teacher in role as the news anchor invites different student reporters to read their stories from the "news desk" at the front of the room. The news report may include "footage" of their interviews, statements made by scientists, concerns expressed by the government, etc. Through play and in role as professional reporters, children experience public speaking in a way that removes much of the fear that many feel when having to address the full class. The teacher as the program's anchor can also interview and ask questions of both the interviewers and interviewees and introject his or her own comments as the children gain more confidence speaking before a group.

To extend the interest generated by this drama-in-education workshop, the teacher may have the students create a newspaper that chronicles the Martian invasion complete with headlines, feature stories, comic strips, interviews, advice columns and drawings of the events. Teachers wishing to continue with the theme of extraterrestrial life can explore the outer space drama workshops developed by Neelands (1984), O'Neill & Lambert (1982**),** and Wilhelm & Edmiston (1998) or simply create their own.

The drama in education workshop provides students with language opportunities not often found during formal school periods and almost never in real life. Drama talk is expressive and creates dialogue as opposed to being essentially informational as in the traditional classroom setting. In our drama workshop, the whole class is involved and is able to try out new forms of language—even foreign languages—to the extent to which they feel comfortable. Drama sets the context and provides the students and the teachers with the opportunity to create, enlarge and enrich the on-going "script" that they themselves are developing. It is the class's drama, it is the class's story. There is no set ending, no conclusion at which to arrive. There is always the possibility that some bit of new information—provided in role by the teacher or a student—will open the participants to respond in a way not anticipated.

For several years, the Educational Arts Team has developed drama-in-education workshops like the *War of the Worlds* project described above based upon material included in the curriculum assigned by the school (Tabone & Albrecht, 2000, 2002; Tabone, 2004; Educational Arts Team, 2008; 2010; Albrecht & Tabone, 2015). Other than the enthusiasm we witnessed in the classroom, the quality of the work, and the anecdotal remarks of children and their teachers, the pedagogical effects of these workshops had never been measured or evaluated in a systematic or rigorous way using the instruments of social science. In 2005, however, the United States Department of Education sponsored a ten year project with the purpose of testing the effectiveness of drama-in-education as a pedagogi-

cal method. In this project, the Educational Arts Team partnered with the Jersey City Public Schools to study the pedagogical impact of drama-in-education with children 7 to 13 years of age (grades 2 through 7) in some of the most poorly performing schools in the State of New Jersey. Referred to as "arts integration," 90% of the students included in the study were described as ethnic minorities and 80% came from families with low income. All of the schools included in the project had scored low proficiency on standardized state tests in both language arts and math.

In the project, lessons were developed based upon the school district's literature and writing curriculum and included historical topics (Colonial America, Native American culture, Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, etc.) as well as an assortment of novels (Orwell's *Animal Farm*; Forbes' *Johnny Tremaine*, etc.) that had been assigned to the students by their teachers.

As part of this project, a team of independent investigators from Seton Hall University in West Orange, New Jersey were charged with the responsibility of designing and implementing a research instrument that would measure the effectiveness of using the drama-in-education approach as a pedagogical strategy. The study instrument included two levels of randomization at both the school and classroom level. There was a robust sample size with eight schools in the first project, ten in the second and twelve in the third. Schools were evenly and randomly divided into participating and control schools. In sum, approximately 1000 children were included during each of the 10 years of the study. The primary goal of the study was to measure academic performance on state testing in language arts; the secondary goal was to measure student engagement in school.

The following is a sampling of some of the test results comparing treatment and control groups reported in the study:

- 90% of 4th and 5th grade students participating for a two-year period passed the New Jersey standardized Language Arts tests, versus 70% of the control group (Walker et al., 2011a, p. 12).
- The percentage of 6th and 7th graders participating for one year scoring proficient was 56.4%; the control group 43.1% (Walker et al., 2011b, p. 369).
- Prior to the intervention 3rd grade students passing state language tests in the 6 treatment schools was 38.4%; in the control schools 46.6%. By the final year of project participating 3rd graders passing the state tests was 64%; while control group students passing rate was 51.7% (Walker, 2015, p. 9)

In one report, the investigators noted that the research findings confirm the results from recent research showing a strong association between arts-in-education practices and improved academic success, especially for students from low-income families (Walker, et al., 2011b, p. 371). Citing literature from other studies (Beach, et.al., 2010; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O'Neill, 1995; O'Toole, 1992; Wilhelm &

Edmiston, 1998), the Walker study concludes "the theater and arts strategies used in the EAT project demonstrate tremendous potential for improving middle school students' language arts skills by empowering students to question, think, reflect, and problem solve as they work within and outside of the imagined worlds that carry a story's issues, themes, and characters" (Walker, et al., 2011b, p. 372).

Developing Children's Physical and Social Skills at Camp Liberty

It has been a central argument of this paper that traditional forms of play should be seen as a serious and necessary part of a child's education and socialization. As such, communities need to create the time and the spaces for children to play outdoors in a safe environment where they have the opportunity to develop friendships and cultivate new experiences without the hindrance of screens and the constant interruption of digital media. Children should have spaces set aside, at least for part of the day, where they are able to run, jump, shout and sing. Ideally programs would give children options of free play, small group games (tag, duck-duck-goose, follow the leader), organized sports (soccer, softball, basketball) and the opportunity for safe and spontaneous face-to-face interaction with others. During the summer months, when many children spend a great deal of their free time engaged online, these spaces would provide a crucial alternative.

For over forty years, we have been cultivating such a place in Jersey City that has evolved from a very simple summer program on an abandoned city lot into a very sophisticated blend of art, music, dance, theater, gardening, board games, field games, drama and puppets. Each activity is a learning experience; each day is a celebration of play. Most importantly, the children are outdoors for the entire day in an environment not mediated by digital technology. Children, aged 6 through 12, are instructed to leave their cell phones and electronic devices at home and for six hours a day, five days a week, the children inhabit a non-cybernetic environment free from the hypnotic spell of digital screens as well as the rush and roar of motor vehicle traffic. Junior counselors (aged 14 through 17), novice counselors (college aged) and senior staff are also instructed to refrain from using electronic devices (radios, ear pods, text messages, Facebook chat, cell phones, etc.) while supervising children.

The morning at Camp Liberty begins with a short assembly program. A hand rung bell calls all children (approximately 250) and staff (approximately 30) to gather in a large outdoor pavilion. The acoustic bell is an important symbol of the community created at the Camp. Lewis Mumford (1961) reminds us that "Mesopotamian cities had an assembly drum, just as medieval cities used a bell in a church tower to call their citizens together [and] Plato limited the size of his ideal city to the number of citizens who might be addressed by a single voice" (p. 63).

Similarly, we never utilize microphones or public address systems to communicate with the children only the acoustically mediated voice. Acoustic communication helps define the space as an oral community, existing in a face-to-face environment, with obligations and responsibilities we share as part of this gathering. Following the assembly bell, the children are welcomed to the new day by the staff, a couple of songs are sung with the children ("Jambalaya," "The Cat Came Back," "This Land Is Your Land," etc.) and a few announcements are made.

At that point, children are offered a choice of a wide selection of activities: drawing, painting, crafts, singing, dancing, drumming, drama, vaudeville, puppetry, gardening, playground, soccer, softball, handball and so on. At Camp Liberty, all activities are cultivated in such a way that they encourage inclusion, participation and the joy of creation. We are not interested in developing future professional artists, musicians or sports stars but in creating an environment where the arts and vigorous physical activity can be experienced on an everyday basis by all. The joy is focused on the doing, not the accolades and awards that they may bring.

For this reason, singing at the Camp retains its character as play rather than as performance: the emphasis is on participation and involvement rather than aesthetic perfection. Singing punctuates the day at the morning assembly, before lunch, and at dismissal, and there are opportunities during the day for children who like to sing to gather together to do so. The same can be said of music's most faithful companion, the dance. Children are given ample opportunity to dance: in plays and in rehearsals where they are exposed to dances from different cultures and different historical periods, in unsupervised moments where they can improvise spontaneously with each other, and in periods during the day where they can dance openly with friends as a way of playing.

There are also several forms of recreation that are offered: swimming, softball, soccer, basketball, handball, small group games, board games, etc. More than being just an array of different activities, these are opportunities for a child to explore the various dimensions of play. Gardening is not just about planting, weeding, and watering, but the feel of the earth on the hands, the discovery of different kinds of insects, the coolness of water on the skin, the sense of stewardship and nurturance of life, the conversation and negotiation with companions as they work together cooperatively, the learning to use a variety of tools—shovels, hoes, pitchforks, watering cans, wheel barrows—and improvising new ones with sticks and stones found on the ground. Board games depend upon a mixture of skill, chance and waiting one's turn. Athletics—soccer, softball, basketball—demand commitment to the game and its rules, the cultivation of endurance, strength and speed, a graciousness in victory and a tolerance in failure.

Huizinga (1938/1955) maintained that "first and foremost…all play is a voluntary activity… (T)he first characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom" (pp. 7, 8). By having the freedom to choose from a wide variety of options, chil-

dren learn how to make decisions, explore different activities, negotiate with friends which activity they will join, and have the opportunity to make new friends. Moreover within Camp Liberty, not only do the children have the freedom to choose their activities but even the staff has a great deal of leeway in choosing which activities they will coordinate and their level of involvement.

At the conclusion of the morning's activities, the assembly bell is rung once more, the play world is interrupted, and children re-enter the "real world." Huizinga (1938/1955) writes that "play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration…It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place…The umpire's whistle's whistle breaks the spell and sets 'real' life going again" (pp. 9, 10).

Once outside the play world, children assemble in the pavilion for lunch. From the stage, a couple of songs are sung and then the children take their seats at the picnic tables located at the rear of the pavilion. Eating is a ritual guided by rules of decorum that are not normally taught or respected in the digital environment. No one begins to eat until everyone has been seated and all have been served. A counselor leads them in a breathing and relaxation exercise before eating. The staff sits and eats with the children. This gives adults a chance to chat informally with the children, exchange jokes and riddles, share food and make sure they eat orderly and clean up after themselves. Here too, we are engaged in a muted but very important form of play. "Culturally speaking," Huizinga (1938/1955) notes, "advice, riddle, myth, legend, proverb, etc., are closely connected…The riddle, we may conclude, was originally a sacred game, and as such it cut clean across any possible distinction between play and seriousness. It was both at once; a ritual element of the highest importance and yet essentially a game. As civilization develops, the riddle branches out in two directions: mystic philosophy on the one hand and recreation on the other" (pp. 110-111). Once again, this form of social interaction, practiced on a routine basis, is not something that digital technology readily cultivates. The art of conversation, questioning and negotiating outcomes is learned through initiation, imitation and habit. It is learned by doing.

After lunch, a counselor tells a story from the stage. These stories give the children and staff a few moments to rest and digest their food before entering the afternoon's activities. The stories include a selection of age appropriate folktales, fairytales, myths and fables from the four corners of the world. These stories allow us to explore various points of view that contrast rather dramatically with the stories children normally see on television or in the movies. While the stories are meant to be entertaining, there is often a worthy lesson embedded within each tale.

As a medium of communication, storytelling enhances a child's capacity to listen and to follow an extended narrative that has no images other than the ones created in the child's mind. Storytelling can be said to support the acquisition of

literacy which also requires an individual to focus on a narrative and turn words into mental pictures. Electronic media, in contrast, short cuts the process by providing the viewer with pictures and thereby making literacy more of a challenge to children who are accustomed to having the images provided facilely for them. Moreover, it is not secret that because of the commercialism (Elkind, 2007; Rideout et al., 2003) embedded in their technologies, the prime directive of electronic media is to entertain and amuse not educate.

The summer is divided into four two-week sessions. During each session, the staff works with the children on developing a play that will be presented on stage before the entire camp on the final Friday of each session. Participation in plays is voluntary not forced. Staff members play the principle roles in the story, thus relieving small children of the responsibility of learning lines and projecting their voices in a large outdoor space. It also avoids the competition among children for featured roles and thereby prevents hurt or hostile feelings of those not selected. The children do play, however, supporting roles in the stories, appearing in costumes and performing in dance numbers that have been choreographed and practiced with the staff during the two weeks leading up to the presentation.

Like the stories told after lunch, the plays are based on wisdom tales from around the world including Africa (such as Anansi folktales), the Americas ("How the Birds Got Their Color"), Asia ("The Mahabharata"), Europe ("Prezzemolina," "Eros and Psyche" from Greek mythology) and the Middle East ("Aladdin and the Magic Lamp"). In short, a story at Camp Liberty is selected because it makes an important point, it teaches a valuable lesson. It nourishes not just entertains. In *The End of Education,* Postman (1995) writes that the young minds of children need to be guided by such stories, that is, by a story "that tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose" (pp. 5-6).

The benefits of such an experience are obvious to parents and children alike. Some children fall in love with activities that they hadn't experienced previously; others are excited to discover that they can deepen an interest in an activity not possible at home. Since the children are happy, there are few discipline problems of a serious nature. Feedback from parents and children are overwhelmingly positive. Parents often tell stories of how their child lost weight because of being physically active while others relate how their child sings songs around the house that were learned at camp, teaching them to siblings and others in the family.

Conclusion

Today, as we take our first steps into the digital age, the implications for childhood development are enormous, even mysterious. We simply do not know where we are going. "What is happening?," ask Rich, Bickham and Wartella (2015). "Are children being helped or harmed by the media they use and the ways

they use them? Are their brains developing differently in today's (and tomorrow's) media-saturated environments? Are these changes in our brains, behaviors, and relationships to each other and the world desirable, undesirable, or a natural evolution?" (p. 1731).

We do know, however, that the exposure of children to this rapidly evolving techno-milieu starts at a very young age and this alone should be a question of great interest to all pedagogues (Common Sense Media, 2013). By adolescence, the digital world absorbs more time in the life of a child than any other single activity (Rideout et al., 2010). To be sure, the virtual worlds contained within our TVs, computers, and handheld devices bring into being great power and enjoyment, but they also require a studied and measured approach as to how we, as educators and parents, and our students and children use them.

In this paper, we have attempted to outline how traditional forms of play can be encouraged as a counter balance to a child's growing dependence on digital technologies while, at the same time, be effective in the teaching of literacy, cooperation, and interpersonal communication. By experiencing various activities outside the realm of the digital world, children are routinely exposed to some of the values, attitudes and behaviors embedded in traditional forms of play. These forms of learning encourage young people to socialize in a face-to-face environment, be physically active and develop higher order thinking.

In closing, we do not mean to suggest that digital technologies are necessarily detrimental to children or that they need to be prohibited. This would be nonsense. Used wisely, digital technologies are important tools of communication, information gathering and learning. We only wish to emphasize that their reach needs to be limited and counter-balanced with some viable alternatives. Along with media literacy approaches that critically engage new media directly, we have maintained that it is also crucial to support and extend traditional forms of play in the education and socialization of children. Moreover, we do not wish to imply that the pedagogical strategies we have outlined here are the only effective methods that exist in balancing the advance of digital technologies. They just happen to be the ones that we have crafted for the past four decades and have found to be the most useful. It is our belief that others are also experimenting and that together we can play some small part in an on-going dialogue that needs to happen among educators and parents as we enter more deeply into the unchartered waters of the digital age.

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