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Play's the Thing: Community Adventure Play Experiences

Kim T. Ferguson, Barbara Schecter, Emily Feltham, and Andrea Davis

abstract

The authors conducted a participatory action community-based research project that included the development, implementation and evaluation of 36 Community Adventure Play Experiences (CAPEs) in a variety of communities in the United States and abroad. In CAPEs, the emphasis is on free play created by children using “loose parts” that are readily available in their communities such as cardboard boxes, tires, fabric, recyclables, sand, wood, and water. During these play experiences children use their imaginations, and take the initiative to collaborate and problem-solve with found materials. Play facilitators ensure a safe physical and emotional space and assist children in their play as directed by the children. The authors studied CAPEs in rural, urban and peri-urban settings in the United States, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. As part of the investigation, they interviewed 225 caregivers and teachers in the United States, Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe for information about their perceptions of CAPEs.



Community Adventure
Play Experience • CAPE

Introduction

According to play advocate Penny Wilson, play should be “freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated” (Wilson, 2010). In other words, play should be the domain of children choosing and actively deciding the course of their own activity, “unadulterated” by the needs or agendas of adults. Adults should be as invisible as possible, their only role being to insure the safety of the play space.

Unfortunately, in many communities in the United States and in sub-Saharan Africa, including in Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe, unadulterated play is becoming less common for children of all ages. For example, recent work by the Alliance for Childhood and Sarah Lawrence College’s Child Development Institute (CDI) demonstrates a reduction in play and time for play in Kindergarten classrooms in the United States (see Miller & Almon, 2009). In Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe, the growing focus on Early Childhood Development programming has led to pressures surrounding play in early childhood. To address this concern, in this paper we describe the implementation of Community Adventure Play Experiences (CAPEs) in diverse communities in the United States, Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe. We further describe ongoing research with parents, caregivers and teachers attending CAPEs that highlights the importance of CAPEs for play advocacy in communities and schools.

CAPEs are play experiences created by children using “loose parts” (Nicholson, 1972) available in their communities such as cardboard boxes, tires, fabric, recyclables, sand, wood, and water. Children initiate and direct their own play. Adults in these play

experiences encourage children to use their imaginations, develop initiative, collaborate, and problem-solve using materials found in their communities. Play facilitators ensure a safe physical and emotional space and assist children in their play as directed by the children. The materials vary somewhat by context, as they are typically found in and around children's homes, enabling them to continue to engage in these play experiences at home.

CAPEs derive from the Adventure Play movement in Europe after World War II, and particularly from the implementation of Adventure Playgrounds in England and in some communities in the United States (for example, in Berkeley and in New York City). According to Penny Wilson, the first adventure playgrounds were “compensatory environments” in the bombed out cities of Copenhagen and London which were intended to serve as “urban countrysides” for children who no longer had outdoor play spaces (Wilson, *The Playwork Primer*, 2010). The materials were “loose parts” which could be carried, piled and combined in many different ways. The key was that they would allow children to turn everyday objects into anything they wanted them to become (Nicholson, 1972).

The phenomenon of adventure play was built on a philosophical and political foundation that has a great deal to contribute to our contemporary understanding and challenges concerning free play in the United States. The cultural context was distinct in that the movement for adventure play in Europe was a response to the particular historical moment in postwar urban areas where the devastations of war had deprived children of spaces to play. However, the impetus to give back to children the freedom and

means to create their own self-directed, open-ended play is as compelling today across diverse contexts in which children live. Indeed, as Fraser Brown (2003) has used the term, “play deprivation” takes many forms in many different cultural and economic circumstances. Many factors contribute to the lack of available play spaces and time for play, including a lack of access to safe, green play spaces for low-income communities across the world (Ferguson, Cassells, MacAllister, & Evans, 2013) and a lack of time and commitment to play in preschool and elementary school communities and classrooms as the focus becomes on building specifically prescribed academic skills as early as is possible. CAPEs provide the opportunity for children in both low- and high-resource settings to engage in the creative, child-directed, open-ended play that is the central mode of learning for all children. They adapt the model of adventure play to be viable, accessible and sustainable in diverse communities. In addition, by allowing parents, caregivers and teachers to observe this type of play as it is facilitated by “invisible” play facilitators, CAPEs help to build a better understanding of the importance of “freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated”, unadulterated play. Adults who work with children – teachers, social workers, afterschool program supervisors and parks and recreation workers – are trained to “do CAPEs” in their communities and teachers, parents and caregivers attending CAPEs with their children are asked about their own play memories, as well as their views of play before and after observing the CAPE.

Participants

In a participatory action community-based research project that includes the development, implementation and

evaluation of 36 Community Adventure Play Experiences (CAPEs) in rural, urban and peri-urban settings in the United States (10), Tanzania (8), Malawi (8) and Zimbabwe (10), we interviewed 179 (127 caregivers, 33 teachers, 18 other) adults in the United States, 6 (6 teachers) in Tanzania, 25 (25 teachers and caregivers) in Malawi and 15 (14 teachers, 1 caregiver) in Zimbabwe.

Procedure and measures

We implemented a protocol to more formally assess the impact of CAPEs on children’s creative and imaginative play and on parents’ and educators’ perceptions of and attitudes regarding play in multiple contexts. Our research protocol included interviews before and after CAPEs to better understand views of play, types of play children at their organization engage in, amount of time they spend playing, and availability of safe and accessible play spaces in their neighborhoods; a structured questionnaire for parents and educators both before and after they attend and observe their children at play at a CAPE to assess their memories of and attitudes towards play; observations of children at play during regularly scheduled events at their school or community organization; and structured observations of children’s play at CAPEs to document the range and types of play in which they are engaged, using a typology of kinds of imaginative play developed by Drucker, Franklin and Schecter (2008) in a study of children’s play in Kindergarten classrooms. These structured observations document play episodes, social interactions, uses of materials and space, and play types and processes. The structured pre- and post-CAPE interview includes questions concerning play memories, expectations for CAPEs, how their children play, and how they play with their children (pre-

CAPE) and what they observed during the CAPE, whether anything surprised them, and whether their views of play have changed (post-CAPE).

Results and Discussion

Findings suggest that parents', educators' and administrators' perceptions of play are significantly changed following CAPEs, with key responses including that adults "did not realize children were able to play with so little direction" and that "CAPEs look like the sort of play [observers] remember as a child." Play observations document children aged 2-16 years engaging in all types of creative and imaginative play, across genders and ages and for sustained periods of time (10-40 minutes). These findings are being incorporated into a toolkit for organizations, parks, schools, and families interested in facilitating CAPEs across diverse communities.

Community and school partner interviews & focus group discussions

In all four contexts, participants expressed concerns that children did not play in the ways that they used to. Common explanations for changes in play included growing pressure to perform well in school and/or school-based tasks; reduced time for play due to other school (and, in some cases, work) responsibilities; and the influence of mobile and other technologies. For example, a community organization staff member in the United States noted that, today, there is "[a] lot more technology, and kids get bored quickly". Similarly, a community-based organization leader in Malawi noted, "I think there's a freedom lost; children are more restricted".

Structured questionnaire for parents, caregivers & teachers: Themes Participants' play memories.

Common play memories across all contexts included playing outside; bike riding, ball games and sports; building and making things; and pretend play and/or imaginative play, such as doll play, pretend cooking, and playing with clay.

Participants' perceptions of play pre-CAPE.

At the beginning of CAPEs, participants in all four contexts noted that play had changed since they were children, particularly highlighting that play today is more technology driven and children have more screen time; that children play with more store-bought toys and fewer found and natural materials; that play is more structured and there is more parental involvement; that children's play is less creative; and that children engage in less outdoor play. A participant in Malawi noted, "As of now because of technology the children are able to get things from the grocery or shops, toys, instead of things we found outside, mud, clay, soil, because before we used to make things out of mud - now they buy it" (ID SM200315). A US participant noted the movement from more outdoor to more indoor play, "Mud and sticks changed into video games. It moved from outdoor to indoor" (ID T5). A participant in Tanzania noted, "Yeah, it changed...because of science and technology - they watch television." Interestingly, across contexts, they emphasized children's preference for technology and indoor play.

In the US and in Malawi, participants also commented that the changes in technology had led to reduced creativity, for example "Every generation is always going to say that, but it's true. Kids may learn with tablets, but lose their imagination" (ID 110, USA).

In terms of increased supervision and structure, participants noted that they themselves often engaged in more sports

and planned activities with their children. In the US, a participant noted, “Structured play versus not; we try to be less structured. It has turned into academic play; free play has become less important” (ID 5). Similarly, a participant in Malawi noted, “from my own experience, I think there's a freedom that's lost, children are more restricted.” In the US, participants emphasized increased parent involvement, for example “[I] [d]o not remember playing with my parents, now they do. Now it is more directed” (14) and “It's not free, it's more organized, usually directed by adults” (42).

Perceptions of play post-CAPE.

After CAPEs, many participants, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, reported that the CAPE was not what they expected and/or that there were some aspects of the CAPE that surprised them. In particular, participants were surprised that every child played; that children did not get bored; that children played independently; that children explored the materials and played with them creatively; that children shared materials and played together, including across different ages; and that children were clearly learning through play. In terms of creativity, independent play and a lack of boredom, a US participant noted, “I was surprised by just how much today's children still get excited to play with random materials and outdoors” (ID TP2), while another noted, “I thought they would get bored. The different imaginative things that they decided to do” (ID 54). A participant in Malawi noted, “[I was surprised] to see them so focused. Most of the time children lose focus. For example, a boy with a ball he made has used it the whole time” (ID SC100316). A participant in Tanzania noted, “...they could find something to play with...and can be left to their own

devices” (ID RM 200315). A participant in Zimbabwe noted, “I didn't think the children could make all of their own games” (ID SN05062015). Another participant in Zimbabwe noted, “They were all able to play creatively with the materials, pretending to cook, pretending to be mothers, building, drawing...they were playing and learning...I did not expect that they could play like that without direction” (teacher, Zimbabwe).

In terms of children playing well together, a US participant noted, “it is surprising that there were children that played together that hadn't played together before” (ID 529MC), while another noted, “there was less conflict and they work together” (ID 112LCS). In Zimbabwe, a participant noted, “I was surprised that the children were very...social [with] each other.” When asked whether the CAPE had changed their perception of play, most participants noted that it had, if they had not previously attended a CAPE. They also noted that they would use loose parts play at home; that they realized that children can play without toys; that “play can be anything...You don't need fancy toys to have fun” (ID TP12, USA); that outdoor play is important; that children are learning skills through play; and that children learn respect and how to share through play. For example, a participant in Tanzania noted, “Play can teach different things - it can also expand their thinking - they were just creating their own things - it makes them think more”. A participant in Malawi noted, “this has left me realizing that having things to play doesn't require you to take your money and buy things” (ID JC200315). Likewise, a participant in Zimbabwe noted, “Ya, the child should not just be used to playing with cars and dolls - of course they will push the car or dress the

doll - obvious - but here they are being creative” (ID NZ05112015).

Structured play observations

In preliminary structured play observations, we were able to identify multiple categories of play, with creative and imaginative play being common in all four contexts studied. Children’s play developed from being more individual and with fewer materials to being more group-oriented and including more diverse materials over the course of the CAPE. Cross-age play was very common. In addition, because children frequently constructed small or large play structures, play materials and play spaces changed frequently over the course of the CAPE.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Our findings provide good preliminary evidence that Community Adventure Play Experiences are successful in changing adult observers’ perceptions of play. In particular, participants noted that, after observing CAPEs, they realized that children are able to play creatively with natural and found materials; that they do not necessarily need bought materials or technology to be engaged and focused in the task at hand; and that play with “loose parts” allows for focused, creative, imaginative, cross-age and collaborative play. Preliminary evidence from observations supports these findings.

Given the positive impact of CAPEs on both children’s play and on their parents’, caregivers’ and teachers’ perceptions of play, we are finalizing a CAPE toolbox and training program to be a resource for introducing CAPEs in diverse contexts. The training program has been piloted successfully in all four contexts studied.

We are also now giving children themselves the opportunity to be more active participants in CAPE research

through a post-CAPE play mapping and interview process to better capture children’s play experiences at CAPEs from their own perspectives. Such an approach will get us that much closer to providing the opportunity for “freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated” (Wilson, 2010), “unadulterated” play that is important for children’s development and wellbeing.

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