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# The Circle of Play: A Cross-Cultural-Study of Teachers' Views of Play Before and After Observing a Community Adventure Play Experience

Andrea Davis

Sarah Lawrence College, [adavis1@gm.sl.c.edu](mailto:adavis1@gm.sl.c.edu)

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# The Circle of Play

A Cross-Cultural-Study of Teachers' Views of Play Before and After

Observing a Community Adventure Play Experience

By Andrea Davis

Submitted in Partial Completion of the Masters of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College,

August 2017

## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at how teachers from Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and the United States viewed play before and after observing children participating in a Community Adventure Play Experience (CAPE). A CAPE is a play experience that utilizes “loose parts” (materials that can be played with and used to create, but are not traditional toys, i.e. tires, sticks, boxes, etc.) instead of manufactured toys and play equipment. In many schools, children are being allowed fewer and fewer opportunities to play as teachers try to cram more and more academic material into the school day. However, all of the literature suggests that play plays a key role in learning and development. With CAPEs, we were able to show teachers of young children the essence of that point of view. We interviewed teachers before and after observing a CAPE so that we could document their thoughts about the experience, and whether it changed their view of play. This thesis focuses on the memories that teachers had of their own play experience as children, their thoughts on whether or not play had changed, and how it had changed since they were children. This led to an analysis of the assumption that increased access to manufactured toys and electronics has encouraged a change in children’s play. We found that many teachers remembered engaging in loose-part, CAPE-like play as children. Before the CAPE, they felt that play had changed, in large part because of increased access to manufactured toys and electronics, particularly in the US. After the CAPE, they felt that play, at its core, was the same.

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## Play Memories

Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, let it out slowly, and let your body just relax. Let your mind wander back through the years to when you were a child. Think about a time when you were playing. Zone in on that one instance of play and focus on it. How old are you? Where are you? Who are you with? What are you doing? What materials or toys are you playing with? Take yourself back to that time and just let yourself enjoy the experience of playing. What do you smell? What do you hear? How do you feel? Hold that memory in your head and write it down with as many details as you can possibly remember. It doesn't have to have a certain structure or flow. It does not have to be something that someone else can read. Just notes of ideas, feelings, and memories for you to hold on to. As you read through this thesis and observe your own children or students playing, keep that memory in your head.

When I first did this exercise, I thought back to when I was about five or six. I was helping my mother clean the snow off her car with my great grandmother. We weren't very much help, however, because my great grandmother and I quickly began a snow fight that had us wrestling in the snow with my dog, Theo. I remembered laughing and having snow in my face. I remember my mother quickly giving up on trying to tell us to be careful. And I remember it being the most fun I've ever had in the snow.

Others, when presented with this exercise, have recounted stories of melting crayons into bottle caps to use in a game, melting and molding plastic bags from the store into balls to play catch, or wandering outdoors with friends in search of unknown adventures. I have heard many fun and imaginative memories of play and there are three features which really stand out in almost all of them: 1. They are social experiences, shared with friends or family;

2. They almost always take place outside; and 3. They tended to involve improvised games or toys instead of items purchased from a store.

I'm sure you are wondering why I started with having you think about your own experiences of play as a child. It is because we, as adults, so often forget what it's like to be a child, when your primary concern is whether or not you will be able to finish building your tower, or if you will be able to find something cool and interesting as you explore your backyard, or if you can bring your game to a satisfactory conclusion before mom calls you for dinner. We also forget how much we learned about ourselves and our world as our play caused us to have questions about why things happen and our role in creating that change. When we forget to remember these treasured memories from our own childhood, it is easy to trivialize a child's play. This is especially true when their play gets in the way of our big, "important" adult plans, whether those plans are for things we want to do or things we want for the child.

The purpose of this piece is to highlight that even for today's children, play involving random items, like using a trashcan lid for a sled or underwear as a superhero mask ("loose parts"), is still alive and well, and that there are benefits to bringing this play into the classroom. I will examine the history of adventure play and adventure playgrounds. I will also look at traditional theories of play, the general benefits that play has for children, and then how those benefits connect to the classroom. Lastly, I will look specifically at the research done on Community Adventure Play Experiences, what it has to tell us, and what the next steps should be.

## Adventure Play

The theory of loose parts play was first introduced by Simon Nicholson, who was an architect by trade. In 1972, he reflected, “in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it” (Nicholson, 1972, p. 6). But what is a loose part? The answer to that is pretty open-ended, because it is any material that has the potential to play a variety of roles in a child’s play. In other words, it is something that can be made into a wide variety of things with a little imagination, as opposed to items that have a preset purpose. In the context of play materials, this is the difference between a cardboard box and a ready-made doll-bed, a stick and a bought doll, or pieces of fabric and a superhero cape. If you have ever read Antoinette Portis’ books *Not a Box* (2006) and *Not a Stick* (2007), then you are already a bit familiar with the incredible things that can come from putting together loose parts and a little imagination.

Loose parts play really is the basis on which adventure playgrounds are built, though they existed long before Nicholson’s work. Adventure playgrounds first appeared in 1943 in Denmark, and became popular in the UK after 1946 when they were brought over by Lady Marjorie Allen of Hurtwood (Sutton, 2005). After WWII, children were often found playing in the rubble of bombsites; they set fires and built new structures with scrap materials, also known as loose parts. Several communities decided to make designated playgrounds where children could be free to explore, experiment, create, and be themselves (Chilton, 2013). These spaces showed the power of a child’s imagination and ability to structure their own play without adult input or supervision. Adventure playgrounds can now be found throughout Europe as well as in Japan, the US, and throughout the global south in various formats. These

adventure playgrounds give children the freedom to use scrap metal, saws, fire, hammers, tarps, etc. to create their own play experiences with adults present to ensure safety, but not to volunteer input or otherwise be involved in the play experience.

One of the downsides of adventure playgrounds, as with all playgrounds, is that they are stationary. This can drastically limit a child's access, as not every community has a safe place to build a playground or the money to do so. Roger Hart (2002) looks closely at this issue, particularly in relation to New York City, but much of what he says can easily be applied to other communities. One particularly important observation is the increase in privatized play with after school programs or "pay-for-play" spaces that simply aren't accessible to poor families (Hart, 2002, p.14).

Nicholson (1972, p. 6) argued that the solution to the accessibility problem was to put adventure play spaces in school playgrounds, particularly in high-need areas. However, not all schools have the space or funds to create these spaces, and this is where Community Adventure Play Experiences (CAPEs) come into play (CDI, 2017). CAPEs are, in their simplest form, a sustainable, mobile, and inexpensive adventure play experience that the Child Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence College has brought to schools, community centers, and parks in the US, Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. CAPEs bring together the child-directed free play of adventure playgrounds with easily portable loose parts like cardboard boxes, old tires, pieces of fabric, water bottles, natural materials, etc., to bring adventure play to children in their community. We are able to make CAPEs inexpensive and sustainable, because we tailor the materials used to fit each specific community in which they take place. Tables 1 and 2 show a list of factors we consider when choosing materials and a list of recommended materials.



<i>Things to consider</i>	
<b>Loose Part –</b>	all materials should be a “loose part” - something that children can manipulate and create with, that doesn’t have a prescribed function or a defined purpose
<b>Accessibility –</b>	materials should be things that can be found in almost all households <i>or</i> more broadly within the community in which the CAPE takes place, as determined by community partners
<b>Transportability –</b>	materials should be easily transported to the CAPE site, and should be able to be stored in an accessible place
<b>Sustainability –</b>	materials should be collected with the intention of sustainability in mind
<b>Variability –</b>	take some time to consider what level of variability of materials is possible within the community in which the CAPE is taking place
<b>Community connection –</b>	consider materials that may be typically used for outdoor and imaginative play within the community in which the CAPE is taking place
<b>Safety –</b>	avoid sharp edges and hazardous materials, but be open to discussing what is safe within the community in which the CAPE is taking place
<b>Cleanliness –</b>	materials collected should be clean

*Table 1: CAPE Guidelines*

<i>Recommended materials</i>	
<b><u>Cardboard</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- packing boxes</li> <li>- shoe boxes</li> <li>- clean cereal boxes</li> <li>- toilet paper rolls</li> <li>- packing materials</li> </ul>
<b><u>Natural materials</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- water</li> <li>- sand</li> <li>- pinecones</li> <li>- driftwood</li> <li>- sticks &amp; twigs</li> <li>- leaves</li> </ul>
<b><u>Plastic</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- empty water jugs</li> <li>- thoroughly washed plastic containers</li> <li>- buckets</li> <li>- pipes &amp; tubes</li> <li>- dorm risers</li> <li>- bubble wrap</li> </ul>
<b><u>Paper</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- scrap paper</li> <li>- construction paper</li> <li>- old newspapers &amp; magazines</li> </ul>
<b><u>Wood</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- wooden spoons</li> <li>- clothes pins</li> <li>- scrap wood</li> <li>- wood shavings</li> </ul>
<b><u>Connecting materials</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- twine</li> <li>- thick string or rope</li> <li>- wool</li> <li>- duct tape</li> <li>- masking tape</li> <li>- paper glue</li> </ul>
<b><u>Craft supplies</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- children's scissors (for younger groups, facilitators control)</li> <li>- chalk</li> <li>- washable markers</li> <li>- old wax crayons</li> <li>- washable, nontoxic paint</li> <li>- old paint brushes</li> </ul>
<b><u>Textiles</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- scrap fabric</li> <li>- old T-shirts</li> <li>- old, holey clothing</li> </ul>

*Table 2: Materials*

CAPEs take an assortment of materials, like the ones shown in Table 2, scatter them

around an open space (see Figure 1) and then allow children to use their imagination to create their own play world, design their own games, and orchestrate their own play experience (see Figures 2 and 3). What materials we use depends mainly on what is readily available in the community we are in so children can use tape at many CAPEs in the US, but not ones in Tanzania, Malawi, or Zimbabwe. What materials you use also depends on what can be naturally found at or near the space where the CAPE is being held so that with one CAPE we had bags of freshly raked leaves and at another, children mixed water and soil to make clay. You really want a space where there is a variety of natural materials for children to include in their play.



*Figure 1: Pre-CAPE Space*



*Figure 2: Beginning of CAPE*





*Figure 3: A CAPE Creation*

Children should be able to be free to explore, create, and play in the space that you are using, independent of adults. Adults (trained play facilitators) are incorporated into the play only as the child deems necessary. Because CAPE materials are all repurposed items, children are free to manipulate them however they want without limitations or concern for maintaining their structure, a freedom that children just do not have with expensive, store-bought toys. The benefits of play are numerous and these benefits have been established by many psychologists who have studied children as discussed below.

## Play Theories

There are many different theories about how children play, why they play, and what we can learn about children through observing their play, including the work of Erik Erikson, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget. Erikson, who was heavily influenced by Freud, saw play as “a function of the ego, an attempt to bring into synchronization the bodily and the social processes of which one is a part even while one is a self” (Erikson, 1950, p.184). He viewed play as a way for children to work through and master areas in their life where they feel they are lacking or weak, or as a way for children to process situations or feelings that seem overwhelming. For example, a child who feels small and weak may pretend to be a strong superhero able to beat up big, scary villains. Erikson also wrote about play as a way for adults to enter and understand a child’s world through therapy, as with an example he gives of three-year-old Mary. By engaging her in play activities and observing how she interacts with him and the toys he realizes that she fears losing body parts, but, because she is so young, she is struggling to communicate that with her parents and other caregivers directly (Erikson, 1950 p. 197-207).

Vygotsky (Berk & Winsler, 1995, Ch. 3) saw play as a way for children to experiment with and discover their place in the world in a safe environment that would then prepare them for the larger world. Children practice roles, as they pretend to be doctors, teachers, parents, or superheroes. Play is always a combination of an imaginary situation and rules through which the child is exploring the cultural practices which surround them. In play, children engage in symbolic activity with objects, which is the beginning of abstract thinking. Vygotsky saw play, as he saw all mental life, as a social process occurring in a cultural context of language and thinking, where it holds the greatest benefit for the child

when they can interact with other children of a variety of ages so that they can build off of and learn from each other.

Like Vygotsky, Piaget was interested in how play is related to the development of children's thinking (Doyle, 1987, Ch. 9). Piaget viewed play as a way for a child to explore the world, organize new information and connect that information to previous knowledge. For example, a child may understand the idea of a doctor within the context of their pediatrician, but then visit a dentist and learn that there are other kinds of doctors besides their pediatrician. This may appear in the child's play in a game of doctor where they check their "patient's" teeth as well as temperature and blood pressure before giving them a diagnosis of "sick." Another level of this process of organization is when older children begin to understand that different people have different perspectives, opinions, and personalities. Ultimately, this suggests that children, through their experiences, are able to direct their own development, and that if we don't allow children to fully process those experiences in their own way (i.e. play), then we are stunting their development.

### **Benefits of Play**

Given how important play is to a child's development, it stands to reason that it would also play an important role in how they learn, and that it should therefore have a place in the classroom. While all forms of play are beneficial for children, it is of even greater value to them when they are able to take control of and direct their own play. Child-directed play gives children the ability to make their own decisions, explore topics and areas that interest them, and move at their own pace instead of simply bending to the rules and demands of an adult (Ginsberg, 2007. p. 183). When given the freedom to play, children are

able to learn material in a way that makes it meaningful for them. We've found that when children are allowed to play in groups, they are more creative and better at engaging in symbolic play—which translates into being able to understand other symbol systems later in other areas of life such as metaphors, algebra, and even reading—and they are more likely to experiment and explore new activities (Lynch 2015, p. 347). That creativity increases when they are given the chance to play with loose parts (Maxwell, Mitchell & Evans 2008, p. 57).

There are a wide variety of long-term benefits to children who are allowed to play and not required to do structured work during early childhood. One longitudinal study found that children who were in a more child-centered learning program throughout primary and secondary education were happier, more involved in extracurricular activities, less likely to be in trouble with the law or other authority figures, and better able to communicate with others than children who had been in more structured classrooms (Miller & Alman 2009). Final conclusions were drawn at the age of 23, and researchers found that those in more child-centered programs were doing better in 17 different areas in their life. Most dramatically, these children were likely to have fewer felony arrests.

### **Play in the Classroom**

Play in the classroom is changing and not for the better. Educators today have very broad definitions of play and much of what they would call play is highly structured, unimaginative, and teacher-directed (Miller & Alman, 2009, p.25). In many classrooms, even on the kindergarten level, play, especially child-centered play, is disappearing altogether (Miller & Alman, 2009, p. 18). With the increase in standardized testing, there is more and more pressure on teachers to make sure that their students are prepared for the exams that



cover math, reading, science, etc. Even when preschool students are not being tested, there is a trickledown effect that pushes teachers of younger students to focus more on academics because there is this misconception that “children aren’t learning if they aren’t doing a paper-and-pencil task” (Lynch, 2015, p. 355; Miller & Alman 2009, p. 11).

Because kindergarten teachers are so concerned with preparing their students to pass exams, there is a distinct lack of time, space, and materials for children to play with (Lynch, 2015; Miller & Alman 2009). For example, one study that looked at comments posted by teachers on various messaging boards for teachers reported that one kindergarten teacher felt that “dramatic housekeeping-type centers are GREAT for preschool, but I don’t have time for them in [kindergarten], with all the stuff I need to teach.” Other teachers felt pressure to make play spaces and play times sound “more academic” so that it didn’t seem that children were playing more than they were learning (Lynch 2015, p. 355). Preschool and early elementary teachers in Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe experience similar pressures, as documented in our CAPE research (discussed below). This is troubling, as the research all points to play being an asset, not a detriment or interruption to learning. With CAPEs, we empowered teachers to recognize that letting their students play is not just acceptable, it is ideal!

### **What we Did**

While Malawi, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and the US are very different contexts, there are a great many similarities in terms of the issues that teachers face, including a lack of funding, and a lack of time and space to allow children to play freely given all the material that teachers are being called upon to cover in a relatively short period of time. In Tanzania,

Malawi, and Zimbabwe, in recent years, there has been an increased push for early childhood education programs, from both country governments and from international bodies such as the United Nations. These programs, however, are set up with the idea of preparing children for starting primary school by ensuring that they know their letters, numbers, etc. Like what we find in the US, there is a great deal of testing that is putting pressure on teachers. In some ways, the testing is even more extreme as, in Tanzania, all Form 4 (Grade 11) students must pass an exam in order to move on to university and, if they do not pass, they cannot retake it.

One of the biggest issues in Malawi, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe is the extreme variation in the qualifications of teachers. Nearly all of the early childhood teachers that we worked with in Malawi were merely volunteers who had received no teacher training, but had the time and the desire to try and help their community's children. In all of these contexts, it is not uncommon, in the more rural areas, to find teachers teaching primary school that have only completed primary school themselves.

For this study I reviewed Malawian, American, Zimbabwean, and Tanzanian teachers' responses to interview questions about their memories of play when they were children, how they felt about play in reference to their own memories before observing a CAPE, and how and why their views of play may have changed after watching the CAPE. Miller & Alman (2009) and Lynch (2015) frequently comment on how teachers do not seem to know why play is important for learning, overgeneralize play to include the use of manipulatives or centers in teaching material, or believe that it is important, but then do not follow through with their convictions.

While conducting these CAPEs we interviewed teachers immediately before and after the CAPEs about their own experiences with and thoughts about play, what they noticed

about the CAPE, and how what they saw affected their overall idea of play. From the information we gained from these interviews, we focused on their memories of play as children and how their views of play changed after observing the CAPE so that we could track what they were thinking about play and what was affecting those ideas. We also noticed, upon reviewing the data for key themes, that, when asked why they felt play had changed, teachers often cited children's increased access to technology and store-bought toys, so we decided to take a closer look at this idea as well.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

We interviewed 78 teachers attending CAPEs in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and the United States. In Tanzania, we interviewed 6 teachers (2 male, 4 female) at one school. In Zimbabwe, we interviewed 14 teachers (1 male, 13 female) across two preschools and three primary schools. In Malawi, we interviewed 24 teachers (1 male, 23 female) across 4 community centers and 1 preschool. In the US, we interviewed 34 teachers (13 male, 21 female) connected to four different organizations that were coming from many different early learning centers.

### *Measures*

In all of our interviews, we asked teachers five questions before the CAPE began and five after it ended. The five pre-CAPE questions asked why they attended the CAPE, what play they engaged in as a child, whether play has changed, and what kinds of play they engage in with their children (see Table 3). The five post-CAPE questions evaluated whether

their view of play had changed and, if so, whether what they saw their children doing that may have inspired that change in perspective (see Table 3). Each teacher was given an individualized ID number to protect their identity. Individual interview responses are thus reported by ID number.

<b>Pre-CAPE Questionnaire</b>	<b>Post-CAPE Questionnaire</b>
Have you ever been to a CAPE before? Yes No If so, what do you think about CAPEs? If not, what do you expect to see at today's CAPE?	Was the CAPE what you expected? Yes No In what ways?
What drew you to today's CAPE?	What did you notice your child did with the materials? What did you make of it?
What kinds of play did you engage in as a child?	Was there anything that surprised you?
Has play changed since you were a child? Yes No If yes, how has it changed?	Has this experience changed your view of play? Yes No If yes, how?
What kinds of play do you and your child engage in?	Other comments, questions, or thoughts you would like to ask or share?

*Table 3: CAPE Questions*

### *Procedure*

All teachers were asked the pre-CAPE questions just before the children began to play or soon after the play had started, before the children were really getting into the play. After the CAPE, or just as the program was wrapping up, the teachers were asked the post-CAPE questions to reflect on what they saw and thought. In Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and the

US, teachers were fluent in English and therefore the interviews were conducted in English. In Malawi, however, many teachers only spoke Chichewa, and thus interviews were conducted with the help of organization field officers who were fluent in both English and Chichewa and therefore were able to translate.

## **Results**

### *Key Questions*

We focused on three key questions: (1) What do teachers remember of their own childhood play? (2) how do teachers feel access to technology and/or manufactured toys has changed play? and (3) how did observing a CAPE change teachers' views of play? Table 4 shows samples of answers to these questions given by teachers from each country that provide a brief insight into what, in general, they thought and felt.

	Childhood play memories	Technology & store-bought toys	Post-CAPE views of play
United States	“A lot. Jacks, makeup games, tag, running. We had neighborhoods that allowed kids to have fun, we don’t have that anymore. Most of our games were made up. The cut-out dolls, doctor kits” (EN0808).	“It is a lot more electronic based and video games” (78EE)	“It reminds [me] that children are meant to play more” (112LCS)
Zimbabwe	“We learned through playing. We did poems and singing and rhymes; drawing in the sand or newsprint. I did tracing in art books, story writing and telling through drawing pictures, not through words. We would pretend play house & having family. We would draw our families” (SLJ2015)	“There's a change - now they even play with skipping ropes and even making wire cars has gone out of date - now they pretend to have a phone - and they play with toys” (ENC04212015)	“It's changed because we usually focus on one thing - when it's playing homes, every child is playing homes. But this was separate - they were doing different things - they chose” (SS05112015)
Tanzania	“I played football, also tennis” (MA02192015)	“Yeah, it changed because as we grow up the commung . home have different play and different games - change because of science and technology - they watch television - and more games use amongst our teaching” (MZ02192015)	“Activities that make somebody to refresh their mind, to have fun, to strengthen bodies, to make friends, to entertain each other and it teaches them to respect each other - they have to learn to share. In play children become more creative, more active, more competent and more confident - they can express themselves through play” (MD02192015)
Malawi	“When I was a child, I mainly was involved in making toy cars [with wire], and I had a dream of being a driver” (TM200315)	“Yes, because there is more technology now play is very different. We used to use whatever materials were available, and now you buy materials. For example, we used to make clay, now it can be bought in stores” (EC200315)	“This whole experience has changed my view of play. It's not just sitting inside and singing songs. Now I can bring them outside with a few resources that I can collect around the village.” (MM070316)

Table 4: Sample Interview Answers

### *Memories of Play as a Child*

Many teachers interviewed in a US context remembered a great deal of imaginative outdoor play (which included many store-bought toys like dolls, blocks, cards, bikes, and balls, but also included play with natural materials). For example, “A lot of outdoors. Out in the morning until dinner time. Softball, playground. I don’t remember being inside too much. All outdoor activities, especially summer” (SC0605) and, “We did a lot of CAPE kind of things with toys and clothes. My sister and I would put underwear on our heads and pretended to be superheroes” (GW0525).

Teachers in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania all reported very similar memories of play insofar as they remembered playing almost exclusively outside. One teacher in Zimbabwe remembered, “We used to play a game outside—we made a big circle, then we were holding hands, then someone goes inside, and they try to run out of the circle and we try to catch them to stop them...we even played a game where we drew a straight line and write river on one side, bank on the other...when you say river, you have to jump there—and I used to make wire cars, and even going up to the rocks and sliding down...and even pretending to be cows, pretending to be bulls...and there was a game played by boys—chest bump—if you fell down, you are the smaller bull” (ENC04212015). Several other teachers said that the materials they used to create their toys and games were based on what they could easily find in the environment (e.g., SS2015-Zimbabwe) like the games played by this teacher from Malawi “I most of the time played with water and mud to make things, and pretended I was cooking, and used paper to make balls” (CM260315).

### *Influence of Certain Types of Toys*

Overall, 68.4% of teachers felt that play had changed since they were children. As they thought about why play had changed, 43.0% connected it to an increase in the availability of electronic devices and/or manufactured toys that children had (see Table 5).

Country	Said that play had changed	Felt that change was due to technology
United States	91.2%	58.8%
Zimbabwe	57.1%	7.14%
Tanzania	100%	33.3%
Malawi	36.0%	44.0%

*Table 5: Change in Play*

The evidence shows a big difference between the views of American teachers and the teachers we interviewed in sub-Saharan Africa in their ideas about technology, but I believe that much of this simply has to do with access. Because we were working in more rural, poorer communities in sub-Saharan Africa, many children were coming from households that could not afford toys from the store, though, as one teacher in Malawi pointed out, toys are often donated by people from overseas (TM200315). They also have very limited access to the electricity required to power more than a cellphone. This One teacher in Zimbabwe commented that play has changed in some places because of television, but because the children she was working with were in a rural area, their play is much the same as her play was (NZ05112015). However, in the US, even those who are extremely poor still often have access to technology and toys through school, local libraries, churches, community centers,



etc. A “barbie” doll, for instance, can be purchased at your average dollar store.

### *Post-CAPE views of play*

Many teachers who felt that play had changed came to realize, after watching their students participate in a CAPE, that play, when their students were given the space and opportunity, was still (or could be) very similar to what they remembered. In fact, one teacher in America commented that “it brings back memories,” (Ii5IA). When asked if their view of play had changed after observing the CAPE, 51.9% of teachers (38.2% US; 57.1% Zimbabwe; 83.3% Tanzania; 52.0% Malawi) responded that yes, they did view it differently. Teachers in every context commented that the CAPE showed that play is beneficial to children and offers them an opportunity to learn skills that they can carry with them through school. Many teachers that reported that their view did not change said that it was because they already knew that this was how children should play, because they had been to a CAPE in the past or already worked at more progressive schools.

One Malawian teacher commented that “the CAPE did not change my view of play, but it did open new ideas to the children as to how they can play. I thought the CAPE was a good thing” (PK080316). This same teacher had commented during the pre-CAPE questions that because children have so much technology and manufactured goods, they no longer play with found materials. Another Malawian teacher commented in the pre-CAPE that she felt that children have “somehow forgotten to play” (EN080316). I think they are both pointing at very important ideas: that, while children are fully capable of playing with found materials and there are definitely benefits to them doing it, it is a skill that can be lost if not practiced. I believe that this was one point that Nicholson was trying to make when presenting his loose

parts theory. Writing mainly for architects, he argues that all people are capable of immense creativity, but are often stripped of the ability to experiment with and explore that creativity because they are surrounded by structures which have already been pieced together and with which people could not engage.

### *Reflections on the Process of CAPEing*

Despite the differences in accessibility that children may have to technology and manufactured toys, they all enjoyed and benefited from participating in CAPEs. I noticed often with CAPEs, particularly those that we did in the US, that when a child came to a CAPE for the first time, they spent the first few minutes close to a parent, wandering around the space and observing what others were doing before beginning their own play. Once they started playing, there was often some hesitancy and uncertainty about what they could and could not use or do. Eventually, the children relaxed and just enjoyed the opportunity to play, create, and destroy, but there was definitely an adjustment period as it is a play experience that is extremely different from what they are used to. As one teacher in Zimbabwe pointed out “If they have more experience playing, they enjoy it more,” (ZM05062015). Other teachers in Zimbabwe commented on the diversity of the materials and how this helped the children move away from just playing the same games (SN05062015) and encouraged them to break out into smaller groups and do their own thing (SS05112015).

MD02192015 from Tanzania reflected that CAPEs offer, “Activities that make somebody to refresh their mind, to have fun, to strengthen bodies, to make friends, to entertain each other and it teaches them to respect each other - they have to learn to share. In play children become more creative, more active, more competent and more confident - they

can express themselves through play.” I have many wonderful memories from CAPEs that I have observed, but two of my favorite memories favorite illustrate well what this teacher described. The first incident took place at a CAPE in Zimbabwe a year ago with a little boy that was around three years old. He attached a sign with his “name” on it to a box of random items that he was hoarding. He experimented with how to navigate the box up and down bumpy hills and across the playground. As he saw items that other children had which he wanted, he negotiated with them and bartered with items that he already had in his box.

The other incident was at a CAPE in the US with a boy of about eleven who took a large piece of driftwood and started to aggressively beat on a plastic box. When asked if everything was alright, he replied that he was making himself angry because this was a safe space where he was allowed to simply vent his anger. No one had told the child that this was a space for him to experiment with and express various emotions, but as several teachers mentioned, this kind of open-ended play encouraged children to adapt (1013EC-US), be creative (NZ05112015-Zimbabwe and MZ02192015-Tanzania), build skills (MM05072015-Zimbabwe), and, for children that have yet to start school, prepare for primary school (EC200315-Malawi). Teachers could clearly see the great short and long-term benefits of allowing their students to engage in loose parts play.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis considered three overarching questions about how teachers in the United States, Tanzania, Malawi and Zimbabwe experience and view play. We asked teachers to reflect on their own childhood and think about the kinds of play that they engaged in. Based on those memories, we wanted teachers to think about whether they felt play had changed

since they were children and, since many teachers mentioned technology or store-bought toys as a cause of change, we also decided to examine that issue in more depth despite it not being one of our original questions. Finally, after observing their students participating in a CAPE, we asked them if and how their view of play had changed.

The first question that we asked had teachers think back on the play that they engaged in as children. We found that whether the teacher was in Tanzania, Malawi, Zimbabwe, or the US, most of their play memories were games that they played outside where they were able to engage with other children and their environment.

Many teachers in Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, especially, recalled that when they were children they used a lot of found materials and loose parts in their play. American teachers, though they did use more manufactured items like jump ropes, chalk, and crayons, remembered using them in atypical ways in various games. The literature tells us that play and loose parts play is hugely beneficial to children in helping them to build social, emotional, and academic skills (Lynch, 2015; Maxwell et al., 2008; Nicholson, 1972). Given how flawed our memories often are and how much of our lives we have forgotten, I believe it speaks volumes about the importance of these specific kinds of play memories that they are the ones that first spring to mind with nearly everyone that we talked to. Think back to your own memory from the beginning of this piece. There is something special, unique, and powerful about the experience to be gained from playing and exploring with loose parts.

We next considered whether teachers felt that play had changed since they were children and whether they felt that technology and/or manufactured toys played a role in that change. We found that many teachers in the US felt that technology played a large role in

how play had changed and that children played inside far more now than they used to because the television and their games are inside. Many teachers across Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe commented that children now have greater access to toys that can be bought in stores or are brought over by people from the West than they had as children. This leads to different kinds of play and different games that may have less flexibility in their rules as the materials become less flexible in their uses.

However, this loss of flexibility is not a change that is happening completely outside of the classroom. Miller & Alman (2009) and Lynch (2015) both talk about how teachers are providing their students with far fewer opportunities to explore and create their own play in the classroom as they push children, even young children, to focus on academics and therefore only engage in activities that directly connect to math, reading, and writing. Meanwhile, many classrooms in the US have computers that children are expected to use, and many children are coming to school with cell phones. These teachers are drawing logical conclusions based on what they are observing with their students. We must then wonder how we can change how students and teachers interact so that teachers can see what their students are passionate about seeing and doing in and out of the classroom.

Our third and final question considered whether teachers believed that their view of play had changed and, if so, how it had changed, after watching their students participate in a CAPE. Teachers in all the contexts had very positive reactions to the CAPEs. Many felt that the play was reminiscent of their own play as children when they had created clay figures, played games with small stones similar to jacks, used bottle caps to create many different games, used chalk to create hopscotch boards, etc. While at a CAPE in Malawi, a child

noticed that I was taking pictures of the children at play so he used a blade of grass as his own camera. Several teachers remarked that they found this comical, but also interesting that he could think of such a creative and clever way to replicate what he saw without the help of an adult. In a CAPE in the US, one teacher was pleased to see a little girl empty a large plastic container, climb inside of it, and then use a piece of driftwood as an oar for her “boat.” Most teachers expressed an interest in implementing similar play experiences and opportunities in their classrooms on a regular basis.

Most of the teachers with whom we spoke felt that their view of play had changed after watching the CAPE, and those who did not feel that their view had changed, typically were coming from a more progressive school environment anyway. Teachers across contexts expressed not previously realizing how much children experienced and learned from engaging in free play, appreciation for how low cost play “equipment” actually could be, and that play was something important that should have a place in the classroom. The literature all points to play being the best way for young children to learn (Ginsberg, 2007; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Alman, 2009), and CAPEs are a fun, easy, and affordable way of ensuring that this idea makes it into the overworked hands of teachers by showing them the benefits of play with their own students.

One of the limitations of the current study is the small numbers in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. In the future, we will talk with a greater number of teachers in more classrooms. We will also work with teachers for longer periods of time so that we can follow changes in teachers’ views after watching multiple CAPEs over an extended period of time as, of course, the more you observe something, the more you will notice about it. Also, with these extended

periods we can observe how teachers' behavior changes in the classroom to show if and how they adapt what they see their students doing in play into the classroom. We will talk to children as well about what it is they are doing and what they like about participating in the play program with an end goal to learn more about how children experience CAPEs and what they are getting out of them from their own perspectives.

Many teachers have wonderful memories of exploratory, loose parts play, but they feel that today's children have lost the ability to play in such imaginative ways because of increased access to manufactured toys and electronics. However, the research tells us that loose parts play is the best way for children to explore, learn, and create a foundation on which to build other knowledge bases. It also tells us that many early childhood classrooms, for various reasons, are not providing children with the opportunity to play at all, much less with loose parts as there is an increased push for an academic-focused curriculum. Most teachers realize, however, after observing CAPEs that children learn and develop skills that are useful for building a strong academic foundation when they are given the freedom to explore and play with random objects. Ultimately, it is crucial that we take learning back to the basics and let children reclaim their freedom to explore and learn at their own pace and based on their own interests. CAPEs are a fun, easy, and inexpensive way for this to happen.

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