UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES OF "LEARNING THROUGH PLAY" IN EAST AFRICAN REFUGEE AND HOST-COUNTRY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we investigate understandings and practices of learning through play (LtP) in refugee and host-country contexts in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. This is an area in which international donors have increased their investments in recent years. We used a positive deviance approach to select 12 best practice preprimary and primary schools. We used ethnographic methods to study these schools for 14-20 days in order to learn from their existing play-based teaching and learning practices. Our findings draw from the research team's observations, visually stimulated interviews, and focus group discussions with 205 teachers, parents, and head teachers, and 160 students. The findings reveal that most of these education stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents) understood play and formal learning to be mutually exclusive but also recognized the developmental benefits of play. The findings also describe various LtP and LtP-adjacent learning activities, such as guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, energizers, and structured playful learning. The factors found to be critical to the school-based implementation of LtP include supportive policies, school leadership, and parental support, professional development and support for teachers, and addressing schools' capacity and structural limitations. Based on these findings, we recommend that LtP proponents frame LtP as connected to active learning methods in terms of definition, conceptualization, and advocacy for its integration into policy frameworks. We built on the extant constructivist pedagogy and play literature to develop a typology of classroom-based LtP activities with the aim of encouraging policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to strengthen education systems' ability to provide targeted support for teachers that will enable them to gradually increase their implementation of quality LtP practices across typology zones.

EDUCATION QUALITY IN EAST AFRICA

One important way that children develop is through play. There is growing evidence that integrating play-based teaching methods into schooling can improve children's physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and creative skills (Dore, Smith, and Lillard 2015; Tominey and McClelland 2011; Toub et al. 2016; Zosh et al. 2017). The evidence also demonstrates that structured playful activities done with trusted adults can help mitigate the effects of toxic stress among children in situations of adversity, including refugees (Shonkoff 2012). This suggests that integrating play-based methods into schooling in conflict-affected settings, including refugee contexts, can improve children's holistic learning and psychosocial wellbeing. Education resources are currently scarce in most refugee contexts, including in East Africa. The teaching methods used in these settings tend to be didactic and to depend on teachers who are over extended and under supported to deliver the curricular content (Altinyelken 2010; Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018; Kiriuki and Angoye 2018). Learning outcomes among these children are extremely low, and many children leave the education system entirely (UNESCO 2018).

Learning through play (LtP) used in education settings has been understood as a teaching and learning method that builds on constructivist pedagogies to ensure the provision of quality education across education levels. An evidence review conducted by LEGO Foundation suggests that LtP features five characteristics that make learning activities joyful, actively engaging, meaningful, iterative, and socially interactive. Most of the extant research on LtP is from stable contexts (Zosh et al. 2017). Therefore, to understand LtP in contexts of conflict and crisis, we conducted a cross-country study in 12 case-study schools in refugee and host-community contexts in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. We selected the schools using a positive deviance approach, which is an asset-based method that recognizes positive deviants who exhibit desirable behaviors despite the many challenges they face, to identify culturally relevant and scalable programming (Cohen et al. 2019). School actors, teachers in particular, exhibited desirable LtP behaviors in the case-study schools without the support of any intervention. The behaviors, which were operationalized through active learning, were guided by the five characteristics of play referred to above.

In this study, we employed ethnographic methods to answer our main research question: How is LtP understood and implemented in early childhood development (ECD) centers and primary schools in low-resource and humanitarian contexts in East Africa? We explore conceptualizations of LtP, plot LtP practices on an emergent typology, and discuss barriers to and enablers of LtP practices. We draw from the extant literature on active learning to offer recommendations that will enable policymakers and practitioners to implement effective active and playful learning methods in ECD and primary classrooms. This study took place in three East African refugee and host-country contexts, but it is relevant to other low-resource and crisis-affected settings.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN EAST AFRICA

The definition of play has been theorized and debated for decades, with no consensus achieved as yet (Bergen 2014; Pyle and Danniels 2017). Play is often conceptualized as a continuum consisting of constructs like role, agency, and initiation, although these continuums often emerge from contexts in the Global North (Pyle and Danniels 2017; Miller and Almon 2009; UNICEF 2018; Zosh et al. 2017, 2018). These continuums use terms like "free play," "guided play," "structured play/games," and "direct instruction," although these categories are not mutually exclusive. In free play, children initiate and direct play activities without adult involvement. During guided play, adults provide play materials, time, and/or space, and may provide feedback to the children. Structured play, such as games and sports, is bound by rules. Direct instruction refers to teacher-centered instructional practices, such as choral recitation. Research from the United States suggests that "brain breaks," particularly those involving play and energizers, can be valuable to children's learning by providing an opportunity to rest, process, and acquire new information (Godwin et al. 2016). Activities across the continuum are complementary to children's holistic skills development. However, offering one in isolation should not be viewed as a panacea for the delivery of quality education (Parker and Thomsen 2019). Among such instructional activities, Godwin et al. (2016) identified three types of time-off-task behaviors—distractions in the classroom environment, peers, and self-distraction—that hinder children's engagement in learning, despite their being present in a learning environment.

Evidence suggests that children learn best when they are actively engaged in meaningful, iterative, socially interactive, and joyful activities (Parker and Thomsen 2019; Yogman et al. 2018; Zosh et al. 2017). These five characteristics of play align with constructivist teaching methodologies, such as active learning and student-centered learning that is guided by adults around specific objectives (Zosh et al. 2018). Play, its connection to existing constructivist teaching methodologies, and its role in education are interpreted differently across contexts and stakeholders, globally and in East Africa (Gaskins, Haight, and Lancy 2007; Mendenhall et al. 2021). Evidence from diverse low-resource and humanitarian contexts shows that parents have positive perceptions of the cognitive and developmental benefits of play for young children (Foulds 2022), but that they question the role of play in classroom learning (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017). This poses challenges to the integration of LtP into education systems. Despite the varied perceptions of play expressed by education stakeholders around the globe, there is only minimal systematic documentation of their perspectives on LtP in contexts of conflict and crisis.

While all play is important for children's development and should be encouraged, conceptualizations of classroom-based LtP may benefit from a shift from free play toward guided play, which is characterized by adult-led or adult-initiated activities centered around learning objectives. This conceptualization is what we adopted for this study.

This shift aligns LtP with active learning methodologies that are already integrated into education policies. It builds on accepted understandings of the purpose of education and cultural beliefs about teachers' and students' roles, in this case in East Africa in particular. However, neither LtP nor active learning is a silver bullet that guarantees quality education (Mendenhall et al. 2021; Sakata, Oketch, and Candappa 2021; Tabulawa 2013). Although there is scant evidence on culturally relevant LtP practices in crisis-affected settings, such as refugee communities, research from Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi highlights how cultural practices such as songs, dance, and storytelling can provide a foundation for LtP (Croft 2002; Dzamesi and van Heerden 2020; Freshwater, Sherwood, and Mbugua 2008).

Schweisfurth (2013) conceptualized learner-centered pedagogy across axes with a "minimum standard" of quality implementation, which suggests that LtP practices also occur on a spectrum of implementation quality and standards. Global research on learner-centered instructional practices reveal a lack of coherence between reported and observed practices. For example, teachers may attempt to implement student-centered activities but ultimately co-opt materials or strategies from Malawi and Namibia, or they many adopt didactic ways of using student-centered methods (Mtika and Gates 2010; O'Sullivan 2004). Sakata, Oketch, and Candappa (2021) found that teachers in Tanzania were aligned conceptually with a learner-centered pedagogy, but they struggled to implement these practices due to structural barriers and were thus unable to implement quality learner-centered pedagogy. Moland (2017) found that teachers in Nigeria had limited capacity to use the materials provided for their intended purpose, which led them to co-opt the LtP materials and use them in more teacher-centered ways like rote recitation. Altinyelken (2010) found similarly that teachers in Uganda reported implementing child-centered practices, yet classroom observations revealed that they actually used a "hybrid of traditional and reform-oriented practices" (162). Teachers' attempts to provide student-centered learning or to use co-opted student-centered methods may not fully embody active learning, but their attempts do represent a step toward improved quality, which can be leveraged and supported to achieve higher quality particularly in contexts with extreme structural barriers or limited capacity (Bartlett and Mogusu 2013).

Incremental change in LtP practices or teacher practices in general should also be considered within Vavrus' (2009) conception of "contingent constructivism." She argues that, given teachers' sociocultural positions and the structural factors they encounter, constructivist pedagogy needs to be adapted to recognize the multifaceted contexts in which teachers work. In their evidence review of teacher professional development (TPD) on LtP in East Africa, Mendenhall et al. (2021) highlight the importance of understanding the cultural and systemic factors that influence the implementation of LtP, such as quality TPD and time. Rather than being an inflexible pedagogical panacea, LtP enables teachers to adopt and adapt constructivist methods that are relevant to their contexts. Thus, building teachers' skills, motivation, and resources to navigate complex classroom contexts can mitigate their co-opting of LtP methods, and can lead to the incremental implementation of contextualized LtP that aims to achieve a minimum standard of quality.

The existing research primarily uses a deficit approach, which highlights the gaps in other approaches while showing little understanding of the contextual factors that facilitate the implementation of LtP. This study is situated within unique country contexts that feature complex education systems, as described below.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY IN ETHIOPIA, TANZANIA, AND UGANDA

Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda are host to more than 4.5 million refugees (UNHCR 2022). Ethiopia and Uganda have made a commitment through the Djibouti Declaration (IGAD 2017) to include refugee children in their national education systems. Tanzania, however, is not a signatory to the Djibouti Declaration or the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, and education services in that country are administered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Limited resources, financing, and teacher capacity in refugee and host-country education systems remain a challenge in providing equitable access to quality education in all three countries (Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018).

LtP and student-centered learning are not new to East Africa (Mendenhall et al. 2015). In Ethiopia, teacher training policies and the national curriculum framework "adopt[ed] the principles of active learning" (MoE 1994; 2009, 1). The Tanzanian curricula for preprimary and primary education emphasize the use of play and active learning approaches, respectively, as the primary pedagogical approaches (MoEST 2019). In Uganda, the ECD and primary curricula and teacher training policies recommend using active learning and play-based approaches to learning (MoES 2012, 2016).

Despite these policies, research on the implementation of active learning reveals gaps in practice in Ethiopia (Keski-Mäenpää 2018; Serbessa 2006), Tanzania (Kejo 2017), and Uganda (Schulte and Kasirye 2019; Ssentanda and Andema 2019). The key challenges to its implementation include curriculum structure, test-oriented instructional processes, large classes, and scarce teaching and learning materials (TLMs). Moreover, the teachers in refugee settings may be incentive teachers, meaning that their qualifications, training, and pedagogical knowledge are more limited than those of the host-community teachers, which compounds the challenges faced in refugee schools. Both incentive and national teachers reported that they have received only limited professional development on active learning, despite some ad-hoc training organized by international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Bengtsson et al. 2020).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we apply a positive deviance case-study approach and use ethnographic methods to answer the main question: How is LtP understood and implemented in ECD centers and primary schools in low-resource and humanitarian contexts in East Africa? We also pose three subquestions:

1. What does LtP mean to children, teachers, and parents in the case-study schools?

2. What does LtP look like in the case-study schools?

3. What barriers and opportunities challenge or facilitate the engagement of children, teachers, and parents with LtP at school?

Positive deviance is an asset-based approach that recognizes positive deviants who exhibit desired behaviors in challenging or constrained environments. Positive deviants in this case were the schools that used LtP, despite having limited resources. This approach identifies contextually relevant and sustainable practices that have potential to scale (Cohen et al. 2019; Singhal and Svenkerud 2019).

Sample

Our criteria for selecting positive deviant case-study schools included (i) experience implementing LtP methods that are operationalized as student-centered learning and guided by the five characteristics of play; (ii) being non-fee-based private schools; (iii) not receiving external funding; and (iv) being refugee and/or low-resource host-community schools.

We collaborated with International Rescue Committee (IRC) field staff members and education officials to identify promising schools. Implementing LtP as initially defined—that is, by the five characteristics of play—was challenging and required that it be operationalized as student-centered learning. Additional snowball sampling and outreach to NGOs widely known to implement LtP helped us to identify additional potential schools. COVID-19-related school closures and the positive deviant nature of our site selection made it necessary to conduct multiple rounds of sampling. We gathered descriptive data from a range of schools in order to find the schools with best practices and quality active learning pedagogy. Many refugee schools were excluded, due to the limited LtP practices observed during the preliminary site selection. Site visits for the final selection ensured that schools met the criteria. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants.

Table 1: Sample by Participant Category

Country	Schools			Individual Participants			
	Primary	ECD	Combined	Head Teachers	Teachers	Parents	Children
Ethiopia	2	2	0	4	15	62	61
Tanzania	0	1	3	4	17	38	52
Uganda	2	2	0	4	17	44	47
TOTAL	4	5	3	12	49	144	160

Instruments

Observations

The researchers observed teachers' practices, the classroom environments, and children engaging in LtP activities. They also observed indoor and outdoor free play at the case-study schools. They took photographs and videos, wrote field notes, and used a semistructured observation tool that focused on the presence of the five characteristics of play. The tool was written in English, as all the researchers were fluent speakers.

Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Audiovisual data of LtP activities that were captured in the first few days of data collection were used as stimuli for the key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) we conducted. The KIIs and FGDs enabled the participants to describe their interpretations of the LtP activities depicted in the audiovisual data, which served to complement, deepen, and challenge the researchers' initial interpretations (Richard and Lahman 2015). The teachers and head teachers participated in three KIIs throughout the data-collection period, whereas the parents and children participated in one FGD. The researchers at some primary-level study sites prompted the children to draw a picture of a playful learning activity, after which they held a reflective dialogue session to discuss the drawings with the students. The KII and FGD protocols were developed in English and translated into Kiswahili in Tanzania and Amharic in Ethiopia.

Procedures

The cross-national research team, which included four national university-based researchers per country (one principal investigator and three coinvestigators) and three IRC research staff members, codeveloped the research questions, methods, and instruments. These items were not piloted before the data collection, due to COVID-19-related guidelines and access constraints. The principal investigators trained the research assistants, and pairs of researchers then spent 14-20 days in each case-study school to collect data. Each FGD and lesson observation lasted approximately 45 minutes, and each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The data was collected in English where appropriate, and in the local languages by native speakers or with a translator when necessary. Translation discrepancies were mitigated by conducting multiple KIIs and using visual-stimulation methods. The country research teams conducted daily debriefings between and within countries via WhatsApp.

All the children provided informed oral assent per our Institutional Review Board protocol, and the adults, including the children's parents/caregivers, provided informed consent. This study received ethical approval from the IRC's Institutional Review Board (EDU.100.021); the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists (003/2022); the University of Dar es Salaam (DUCE-22140); and the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (MUSSS-2022-100). Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we observed safety protocols as we collected data between March and May 2022.

Data Analysis

For our data analysis, we used an iterative coding framework on Dedoose using emic and etic codes. For the preliminary analysis, we developed a core cross-national codebook from the lines of inquiry (understandings of LtP, examples of LtP, barriers and opportunities to LtP). Therefore, the findings are applicable to all three countries, unless explicitly attributed to one or two. We used an exploratory open-coding approach for our deeper contextual analysis of the first and third subquestions. For subquestion 2, we coded examples of LtP using emic codes aligned with the literature, including free play, guided play, energizers, co-opted play, and student-centered learning. Following the preliminary analysis, we iterated the coding process using five thematic codes that emerged from the data, which were based on the presence of an explicit learning objective and of playful characteristics. The thematic codes were the LtP Practice Zone (good LtP practice), the LtP Proximal Zone (progressive LtP practice), the Passive Learning Zone (didactic methods), the Recreational Zone (free play), and the Non-Learning Zone (time off task). The country research teams contextualized the codebook based on themes that emerged from the data and held regular meetings to ensure intercoder reliability. Following the initial analysis, the cross-national research team converged to conduct a cross-national analysis.

FINDINGS

Meanings and Understandings of LtP

The findings we present below describe participants' reported understandings of LtP, which deepened definitions of LtP in East Africa.

"Play Means Joy and Physical Activity"

When asked about their understanding of play and LtP, the participants explicitly and implicitly conveyed a perception and understanding of play as free play. The participants at the ECD and primary levels and all participant groups—students, teachers, head teachers, and parents—described play as physical and pleasurable activities. One Ethiopian parent explained during an FGD that "play means joy and physical activity." When prompted in class to draw pictures of their favorite LtP activities, the children primarily drew pictures of free play and games like chess and football—activities not generally connected to classroom learning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Ugandan Primary School Students' Drawing of Play

Some teachers and head teachers also described LtP as free play or as energizers organized to reengage students during a lesson, as a Ugandan primary school teacher explained in a KII: "When a child becomes bored, you bring in play so that it refreshes the mind of the child, then after that you can continue teaching so that the child learns very well." This indicates a conflation between free play and LtP. Other teachers understood play and learning as two separate processes, rather than seeing LtP as a methodology that enhances learning experiences.

"Play Is a Motivator for Learning"

Some teachers viewed LtP as a teaching method and described how structured playful learning can enhance children's learning. One Ethiopian head teacher considered LtP to be "a motivator for learning." A Tanzanian teacher described it similarly: "[Children] cannot forget because they remember that a certain game was played with their teacher, it becomes easy for them to remember compared to when a teacher speaks only without these participatory methods." The teacher used the terms "games" and "LtP" interchangeably, which underscores a general understanding of games as a core activity of LtP. While some teachers understood LtP as free play, others understood the value of integrating play into learning activities, which revealed their mixed understandings of LtP.

Play Supports Holistic Skills Development

Although the participants' meanings of LtP primarily converged around free play and games, participants across all categories recognized the myriad benefits of play and LtP for children's holistic development and wellbeing. For example, a Ugandan teacher reflected, "When you use a play method to deliver a lesson, the child may not forget that content. They will acquire and even retain that knowledge for the rest of their lives…so play is very necessary in the teaching and learning process." A head teacher in Ethiopia described another benefit: "When children play together, they develop communication and social skills." Another Tanzanian teacher highlighted the value of using physical movements to teach mathematics: "Maybe I want to teach addition, you can introduce the game of jumping by counting steps; for example, they jump 3 steps, leave a space, and jump 3 steps…then you tell them where there is a space, put an addition sign." These quotations elucidate the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits of LtP. The participants also believed that LtP supports creativity, problem-solving, stress relief, and joy. Interestingly, participants in Tanzania most frequently reported the cognitive benefits of LtP, followed by social-emotional development. They reported physical development less frequently, despite its prominence in their understanding of LtP.

Play Is for Younger Children

While the participants widely recognized the benefits of play, they expressed that LtP was more appropriate as a pedagogy for ECD children than for those at the primary level. One reported challenge was the curriculum: play-based approaches are more explicit in ECD curricula, as one ECD teacher in Tanzania elaborated: "The curriculum supports the use of play when teaching." Teachers reported that primary-level curricula overwhelm them, and many of them view LtP as time-intensive activities rather than as a beneficial method of delivering the curriculum. Teachers also reported feeling the pressure of tight timetables to focus on the subjects that are

assessed by the national system. As one Ugandan head teacher described, "Using play can also take a lot of time…but if it's a short play, it can fit within that time allocated on the timetable." This pressure increased due to the extended school closures related to COVID-19, which left many teachers struggling to implement the curriculum with only limited support or time.

Another explanation for participants' view of LtP as more appropriate for ECD than for the primary levels, particularly among those who understood LtP as free play, was a perceived lack of seriousness in play. Play was perceived as developmentally appropriate for younger children, but participants described having the expectation that children will become more serious as they grow older. As one teacher in Ethiopia explained, "When I was a small child, I used to play different cultural plays with my age mates. Yet as I grew up, work and study took precedence. Every adult discouraged me from playing and [said] to concentrate on the rather serious business of life." Parents and children alike, particularly at the primary level, were clear in their delineation between play, which they saw as a distraction, and academic learning. They felt that play is inappropriate in primary classrooms.

The participants also discussed boys and girls having equal opportunities to engage in school-based LtP. Teachers reported that they involved children of both genders equally in their classes and that LtP is an inclusive teaching methodology, which the researchers confirmed through their classroom observations. The researchers did observe physical separation between the two genders in the Somali region of Ethiopia, but both groups had equal opportunities to participate in classroom activities. This indicates that external gendered experiences of play do not extend into the classroom context.
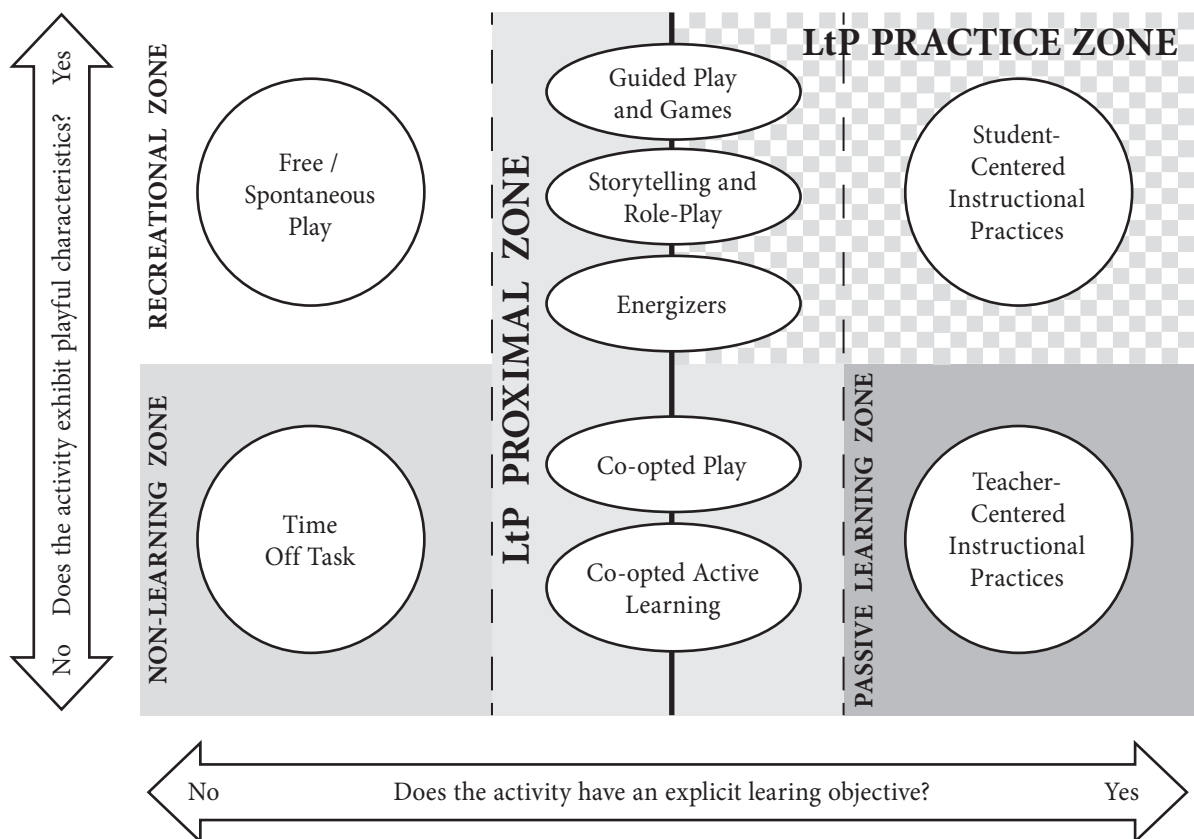
LtP Practices

The classroom practices reported by participants and observed by researchers (e.g., guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, energizers, student-centered learning, teacher-centered learning) were organized using a typology of classroom-based LtP methods, as shown in Figure 2. We developed this typology based on whether the activity has an explicit learning objective (in the X-axis), and whether it exhibits characteristics of play (in the Y-axis). We located the activities in fives zones, although they are not fixed. Learning objectives and playful characteristics may be introduced or removed from activities to shift between the five zones.

The LtP Practice Zone encompasses LtP activities that are facilitated by adults, include an explicit learning objective, and exhibit playful characteristics. When used with the intention of deepening learning, these activities are characterized by student-centered instructional practices and may include guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, and energizers.

The LtP Proximal Zone includes activities that exhibit playful characteristics but are not strategically implemented to deepen learning (guided play and games, storytelling and role-play, and energizers), as well as co-opted learning activities (use of student-centered methods in didactic ways). These activities are close or proximal to LtP practice but not fully characterized as LtP. This zone includes cocurricular physical education that is overseen by teachers. Such activities are important for children's holistic development and should be retained in school timetables, but they would not be considered LtP unless the teacher explicitly scaffolded curricular concepts onto physical education. This was not observed or reported.

This emerging typology includes three additional zones: the Passive Learning Zone, the Recreational Zone, and the Non-Learning Zone. Our line of inquiry focused on observing LtP practices, but we noted other classroom activities that did not exhibit playful characteristics.

Figure 2: Typology for Categorizing Classroom-Based LtP Methods

LtP Practice Zone

Student-centered and active learning instructional practices include activities that are led by the teacher and have a clear learning objective. These practices primarily involve social interactions and/or the use of TLMs. Social interactions were occasionally observed, often in group work or pair work. In Tanzania, for example, the researchers observed a grammar lesson in which children straddled a line that separated the room in two, with one side representing present tense and the other representing past tense. Each child held a card with a sentence written on it, read the sentence aloud, and announced the tense of the sentence. Other group members supported the correct answer.

A more prominent student-centered practice involved using TLMs and the school and classroom environments, as a Ugandan teacher explained: "When I am teaching [health habits], I take the children outside the classroom and teach them how to sweep, pick up the garbage, and dump it correctly." One Tanzanian teacher used everyday objects to model various processes: "If I want to teach children how to do laundry, I ask children to bring from home some common items like…soap, dirty clothes, and sneakers." A Ugandan teacher described using TLMs to concretize abstract concepts: "I use empty bottles and make children fill the bottles with water. This helps them to learn the concept of volume, as the water level continues to increase until the bottle gets full." The teachers in Uganda most commonly used models and drawings as an active teaching strategy, which was present in every lesson observed. Other TLMs commonly used in all three countries were flash cards made from cut-up folders, and locally available materials, such as those shown in Figure 3, which were used as manipulatives.

Figure 3: TLMs Used in Tanzania—Plastic Bottles, Fruit, and Corncobs

Other LtP Practice Zone activities were guided play and games that were connected to explicit learning objectives. Adults were sometimes directly involved, such as by facilitating a game, or indirectly involved by providing children with specific play materials. For example, one head teacher in Tanzania described using the game musical chairs in a mathematics lesson "so [children] will definitely understand the concept of subtraction more easily."

In Ethiopia, Learning Corners were an example of guided play in ECD centers. This was one of the most frequently observed ECD-level activities (see Figure 4). Learning Corners were stations the teachers created throughout the classroom that had selected learning materials for children to engage with. This enabled the children to engage in hands-on learning while focused on thematic or curricular topics. The teachers circulated around the room, intervening if necessary, but otherwise making sure the learning materials were in good order.

Figure 4: Children in Ethiopia Engaged in Learning Corners

Teachers also facilitated LtP activities by drawing from a tradition of storytelling and role-play to reinforce learning objectives. The participating teachers commonly used stories to teach concepts and ethics, generally at the primary level, as a way to scaffold learning. One primary teacher in Tanzania explained: "If you are teaching mathematics, you can use any fiction to catch [students'] attention…For example, by generating a story like, 'While you are at home, your grandmother sent you to get a certain number of items'; your main point as a teacher is addition. By starting with a narrative like this, students become more attentive to the lesson."

The teachers, primarily the Ethiopian primary teachers, also used role-play to fully engage students in stories. One primary school teacher in Uganda engaged children in role-play during an English language lesson about a local legend. The role-playing strengthened the children's learning by drawing from their prior knowledge (see Figure 5). The teacher guided the children to utilize their physical environment.

Figure 5: Primary School Children in Uganda Role-Playing Outdoors

The researchers frequently observed teachers using energizers during lessons. The energizers were understood and observed to be a way to introduce lessons, to give children a break during a lesson, or to reengage distracted students in the lesson. The following quote reveals how a teacher in Uganda introduced a lesson in an energizing and playful way: "When I am singing for them, I don't just sing anyhow…When I am introducing sanitation, I just compose a song concerning sanitation. When I sing for them, they get information about sanitation from the song." The teacher playfully connected the song's content to the curricular content.

LtP Proximal Zone

While some energizers observed by the researchers had an explicit learning objective, especially at the ECD level, most were not connected to the lesson content and were instead used primarily as a "brain break." These energizers included chants, singing and clapping, and body movements, such as sitting up and down. These playful activities are critical for children's holistic development and engagement and should be encouraged, but without intentional planning by teachers, they do not inherently achieve learning objectives.

Co-opted play and co-opted active learning were frequently observed, particularly in the use of pair or group techniques. For example, researchers observed one Ugandan ECD classroom where students were seated in groups at tables, but all the activities were completed as a full class. Another example was the use of storytelling in a language lesson in an Ethiopian primary classroom that was unrelated to the learning objective. The researchers frequently observed that, when the teachers attempted to implement LtP, they could have enhanced the quality of the learning experience by adjusting their lesson planning and delivery by connecting activities to the learning objectives or planning playful learning activities.

Other Zones

Teachers in the Passive Learning Zone frequently had explicit learning objectives, but their planned activities did not include playful characteristics. Teachers in every case-study school exhibited positive LtP practices, but teacher-centered instructional practices such as "chalk-and-talk" and choral recitation were still dominant in many classrooms. One teacher in Ethiopia explained that, while "the [education] policy supports participatory teaching methods, [in] practice teachers focus on the whole class question-and-answer method." This was confirmed by classroom observations, during which most of the instructional time involved teacher-centered practices. While direct instruction and lectures can be appropriate teaching methods, the researchers observed an overreliance on this method. In the case-study schools, teachers' understanding of LtP and their capacity to implement play-based and active methods influenced how LtP was practiced in the classroom.

Activities implemented in the Recreational Zone exhibited playful characteristics but lacked explicit learning objectives. This represents many stakeholders' predominant view of LtP: that it involves recreational play and physical activity. These activities were frequently observed during recess and break times, and also during instructional time. While these activities can support children's holistic skills development, planned physical education is often omitted from the school timetable, so these activities tend to take place on an ad hoc basis during instructional time.

Activities in the Non-Learning Zone were neither playful nor directed toward learning objectives. This time off task reduces the time available to pursue meaningful learning objectives. It occurs for a variety of reasons, including confusion among the students, time-consuming logistical processes like the distribution of books, or a teacher's intense engagement with a select group of students. This was observed primarily during lengthy times of transition, spontaneous lesson preparation, and large classes.

Opportunities for and Barriers to LtP

This study elucidates opportunities for and barriers to the successful integration of LtP in the case-study schools that lack explicit support for implementing LtP that is based on the positive deviant design. This indicates that there are opportunities for policymakers and practitioners to leverage or mitigate, respectively, to strengthen systemic support for teachers' delivery of LtP.

Opportunities

Supportive Policy Environment

While not explicitly named or defined as LtP, student-centered learning, active learning, and other similar constructivist pedagogies already exist in curricula and in education policies. Policy support for these practices can also be found at the subnational level, as one teacher in Ethiopia explained: "The regional education bureau and the city education office often advocate [for a] policy of play-based education."

Supportive School Leadership

School leaders play a critical role in implementing school-based policies that are supportive of LtP. The teachers in our study frequently cited supportive school leadership as key to the success of LtP. The head teachers who supported LtP set a timetable that was inclusive of LtP, and used discretionary funds to provide teachers with necessary TLMs, as described by one Tanzanian ECD teacher: "The school management is very supportive. The college management buys manila papers, ropes, marker pens…and so forth" for implementing LtP. The head teachers also provided pedagogical support and supportive supervision, as explained by one ECD teacher in Uganda: "Sometimes she also goes and sits in the class and monitors what we are teaching and advises us

on how to integrate LtP." School leaders also found opportunities to motivate teachers and engage parents and community members meaningfully in LtP.

Engagement of Parents and Community Members

Supportive and engaged parents positively influenced the uptake of LtP. Parents who participated in our study confirmed that they have a role in the school activities and in LtP, as one Tanzanian parent noted in an FGD: "I am a member of the school committee and a chair of the parents, in that accord I am obliged to have a role in promoting LtP." Some teachers in Tanzania and Uganda also reported collaborating with parents to procure play materials, despite the parents' limited personal resources, as a Ugandan teacher described: "Parents encourage us to teach using play because they know children can only study well through play. Even some parents have testified that their children force them to bring them here because of play materials in this school."

Barriers

Perceptions That Play and Schooling Are Not Compatible

One of the biggest barriers identified in this study is the word "play" itself. Many participants said they perceived play as not serious enough for learning and not appropriate in classrooms where students should be focused more on rote forms of learning. A Ugandan ECD parent described this in an FGD: "Playing is destructive—once children concentrate on play, they cannot learn." Many teachers and other stakeholders perceived play to mean only free play, and they did not see this as having value in the classroom. However, once prompted, they could see that play can be a useful method for active learning. Some teachers felt that LtP was not integrated well into the curriculum, particularly at the primary level, which indicated incoherence between policy and the realities of curriculum implementation. Parents who believed that academic learning is discrete from play could pressure teachers to limit their implementation of LtP.

Insufficient Teacher Training and Support

The teachers reported they did not receive enough training and support to implement LtP, even in the positive deviant schools. Teachers who viewed LtP as creating additional work or as recreation often struggled to implement LtP. Teachers who were aware of gaps in their capacity said they wanted more training on LtP, as one Ethiopian teacher explained: "I don't have enough knowledge and skill to teach through participatory methods. If there is training, I would be glad to receive it to enhance my capacity." Without sufficient support and training, teachers can be discouraged from practicing LtP. A Ugandan primary teacher explained: "One of the things I have found discouraging…is that I don't have knowledge on how to include some of the play activities to some particular content." While education policies encourage active learning methods, additional training is needed to strengthen teachers' capacity and confidence in implementing LtP.

Structural Constraints

Even teachers who had the capacity and motivation to implement LtP faced structural constraints that inhibited their practice. The perceived challenges included time to plan lessons that integrated LtP, especially those requiring specific materials, and time to implement lessons, as described by a Tanzanian teacher: "It consumes a lot of time to prepare for lessons through play because it involves thinking and finding material for teaching, but when you are teaching without games it doesn't consume time." Many also perceived LtP as a stand-alone activity that takes time from the allotted classroom and curriculum timetables, as one Ethiopian teacher stated: "The timetable is also overcrowded and we have to rush to cover contents, there is no space for flexible programming." Teachers who lacked the support they needed to integrate LtP into lesson planning and delivery viewed LtP as an overwhelming challenge.

Unsafe, Overcrowded, and Underresourced Classrooms

Effective LtP requires a safe environment in which children can engage with their teachers and peers. The use of corporal punishment and other hierarchical classroom management practices can be a barrier to LtP. For example, teachers in an ECD center in Uganda noted that students witnessed corporal punishment in the adjacent primary school, after which they expressed their fears about leaving the perceived safety of the ECD center to attend the primary school.

Safety issues are compounded in overcrowded classrooms, as highlighted by one teacher in Ethiopia: "The big number of children in one classroom, for example, around 60 students in a class, is a challenge for one teacher. When I deal with a group of children, some others engage in some unnecessary activities." The teachers struggled to identify LtP practices and positive classroom management strategies that could be used effectively in overcrowded classrooms. Underresourcing is another major concern. An ECD teacher in Uganda described what happens when there are not sufficient materials for large classes: "We also want to be provided with more play materials so that our children stop fighting over the few available materials." Establishing a school environment that provides teachers with adequate resources and time is critical to ensuring that they have access to the resources needed to implement LtP.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we describe perceptions of LtP and how it is practiced in schools in parts of East Africa that are affected by conflict and crisis. The findings reflect the importance of defining LtP within existing active learning methods and of positioning teachers within their sociocultural contexts in order to understand the factors that affect their teaching practice. We also share our typology of LtP practices that are grounded in East African realities, relative to active learning. We close by offering recommendations for research, policy, and practice.

Framing LtP for Acceptance

The study participants' divergent conceptualizations of the definition of play echo debates in the literature (Bergen 2014; Fung and Cheng 2012). A clear definition of LtP for practical application is needed in order to mitigate misunderstandings between education stakeholders that limit the implementation of LtP (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017; Mendenhall et al. 2021). For example, some teachers reported receiving complaints from parents about playful classroom practices, which reflects the fact that some key stakeholders understood LtP as unsuitable for use in classrooms. Play and the purpose of education are highly contextual, and the study participants perceived them as mutually exclusive (Kabay, Wolf, and Yoshikawa 2017). This required LtP proponents to either critically reexamine the epistemological rationale of school-based LtP or to redefine LtP in a way that aligned with accepted perceptions of quality education.

Defining LtP as being aligned with active learning methods rather than as a novel approach can dispel myths around the value of play in education (Tabulawa 2013). Moreover, defining LtP as an active teaching and learning method can help teachers understand LtP as a curriculum delivery method. This could reduce any ambiguity in teachers' perspectives on and motivation to implement LtP and reduce their perceptions of LtP as an additional time-intensive activity or something to do at recess (Ssentanda and Andema 2019).

Moving toward a Deeper Understanding of LtP Practices

Existing LtP continuums contain many categories to describe play experiences (e.g. "free play," "guided play," "structured play/games," "direct instruction"), which focus primarily on the spectrum of play and the learning opportunities inherent in each category. However, LtP continuums are disconnected from the active learning literature and not specific to the classroom context (UNICEF 2018; Zosh et al. 2018). While such continuums are valuable in recognizing the myriad benefits of different types of play, they perpetuate misperceptions that conflate free play and adult-led classroom-based LtP. Figure 2 presents our emerging typology of classroom-based LtP methods, which is the

first to situate LtP practices within the reality of low-resource classroom contexts and the active learning literature. To create this typology, we synthesized existing frameworks on play-based learning, Zosh et al.'s (2017) characteristics of playful learning, quality classroom pedagogy that includes an explicit learning objective (Mendenhall et al. 2015), and an inductive analysis of the practices identified in this study. This typology also applies Schweisfurth's (2013) "minimum standard" of learner-centered pedagogy to create an ideal LtP Practice Zone and an associated LtP Proximal Zone.

Experienced LtP teachers are likely to operate in the LtP Practice Zone. They incorporate LtP experiences into their lessons, which are strategically designed to exhibit playful characteristics and have clear, intentional learning objectives. Meanwhile, teachers who are newer to LtP or facing ongoing structural barriers are more likely to practice in the LtP Proximal Zone, meaning that they attempt new methods and could move into the LtP Practice Zone with additional support, but have not yet reached this level of performance. For example, a teacher who seats children in small groups but continues to conduct whole-class teaching could, with additional training or support, integrate meaningful group work to move this formerly "co-opted active learning" activity into the LtP Practice Zone. These zones demonstrate that certain LtP-adjacent practices should be encouraged for making progress toward LtP practices. This builds on the idea that co-opted play is on a spectrum that is incrementally closer to LtP (Bartlett and Mogusu 2013). Targeted support for teachers in the LtP Proximal Zone capitalizes on teachers' reported enthusiasm and desire to implement LtP. This framework, and LtP in general, is not a guarantee of education quality or children's holistic development. Teachers can design relevant activities that draw from their pedagogical repertoire to achieve their learning objectives. They may still exhibit activities in the Non-Learning Zone through time-off-task moments; in the Recreational Zone that are aligned with free play; and in the Passive Learning Zone via didactic teaching methods (Parker and Thomsen 2019; Vavrus 2009).

Systems' Approaches to Supporting Teachers

Teachers do not operate in isolation, and pedagogical interventions have been implemented in East Africa to improve education quality. Defining LtP within the broader active learning literature presents an opportunity to harness systems-based approaches to help teachers make incremental changes that will move them into the LtP Practice Zone. The existing research on implementing prior active learning interventions can mitigate the reproduction of mistakes and provide insights into promising opportunities. Structural barriers such as large classes, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of TLMs are known to limit the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy (Altinyelken 2010; Keski-Mäenpää 2018; Sakata, et al. 2021). This study found similar challenges, but it also identified promising solutions that arise from teachers' inventiveness and the benefits of systemwide support from parents and head teachers. This study reveals that all education stakeholders play a pivotal role in the implementation of LtP, such as

head teachers who allocate resources to procure TLMs and parents who provide locally available recycled TLMs and exhibit a desire to be engaged.

The teachers expressed a desire for quality TPD on LtP that so far has been lacking, which is indicative of the complex challenges teachers face in moving into the LtP Practice Zone. The teachers said they want practical, hands-on training to address gaps in their knowledge and viewed school leaders as a critical component of continuous TPD. Engaging and training stakeholders who have a mandate to be pedagogical leaders can influence teachers' classroom practices (Mendenhall et al. 2021). The supportive supervision and coaching they provide supports teachers' pedagogical practices and enables them to reflect, understand, and make varied and incremental shifts toward the LtP Practice Zone.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

LtP advocates should connect it to the existing active learning policies and interventions. They also should build on the synergies between LtP and active learning in an effort to engage all education stakeholders. Drawing from the existing active learning evidence base can focus limited resources on promoting effective TPD approaches and modalities.

Teachers whose work puts them in the LtP Proximal Zone need support so they can build on their existing practices by connecting classroom activities to learning objectives in order to enhance students' learning experiences. Incremental adoption of LtP practices should be celebrated so that teachers feel motivated and their ongoing development is reinforced. Education systems, particularly continuous professional development structures, should be strengthened by incorporating LtP and providing ongoing monitoring and support for teachers. Increasing the availability of child-level TLMs should be an explicit focus of LtP interventions, including guidance on developing locally available learning materials. Teachers also need explicit support to create safe and inclusive learning spaces. This should include training in positive discipline methods and strategies for using LtP methods effectively with large and overcrowded classes. Further research should focus on effective strategies and modalities that will enable teachers to move from the LtP Proximal Zone to the LtP Practice Zone, particularly from a systems perspective.

Finally, all stakeholders—school leaders, teachers, parents, and children—need to be sensitized to the importance and potential of using active and playful learning methods in classrooms. Rather than seeing play as an additional activity, they should be oriented to see LtP as a way to teach the curriculum and prepare students for examinations. Demonstrating that LtP improves children's holistic learning and wellbeing through continuous assessments and rigorous research will build confidence and trust in this approach.

CONCLUSION

The word "play" itself may invoke resistance among some education stakeholders in low-resource contexts and in those affected by conflict and crisis, but many stakeholders see the value of active and playful teaching methods. In fact, teachers in these contexts are already practicing playful teaching methods to some degree. Celebrating the steps teachers have made toward using playful methods while also addressing systemic barriers should allow more space for practicing playful teaching and learning in classrooms. LtP is a relatively new active learning method, and local schools and existing practices can offer clear lessons that can inform contextual LtP approaches and overcome barriers in project design and implementation, in East Africa and in other crisis-affected contexts. Some teachers already view play as foundational to learning, which demonstrates the potential of LtP to improve education quality in some of the most poorly resourced and challenging contexts.

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