

Finding the balance: Early Childhood practitioners' views on risk, challenge and safety in outdoor play settings

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Abstract

A growing body of research has provided evidence of both children's desire for challenging play that involves a degree of risk-taking and the role that positive risk-taking has in fostering children's optimal health and development. At the same time, there is mounting concern that Western societies are becoming increasingly risk averse with many everyday activities now being seen as dangerous and something to be avoided. Consequently, safety concerns and stringent risk minimisation strategies are eroding children's opportunities to take sufficient risks in play in order for their playground experiences to be interesting and developmentally challenging.

This paper presents the argument that factors such as the Early Childhood (EC) regulatory environment, high child-staff ratios, poor outdoor environments, fear of litigation and an inadequate understanding of the benefits of risk-taking contribute to minimisation of opportunities for risk-taking play. Possible outcomes resulting from these measures include changes to both the quality and quantity of physical play, poor evaluation of risk situations, and increases in unsafe risk-taking.

The present study examined these factors through semi-structured interviews with 17 Early Childhood practitioners (16 female, 1 male) recruited from 6 EC centres located in different regions of Sydney. The findings suggest that from a pedagogical perspective, practitioners believe opportunities for risk-taking are important for all aspects of children's development however the regulatory environment places constraints on their ability to provide sufficiently interesting and developmentally challenging experiences. The research findings support the call for more flexible enforcement of regulations and risk assessment procedures to allow practitioners to use their professional knowledge to make informed decisions in managing risk situations.

Introduction

Outdoor play is a natural and important context for all aspects of children's development. It is also a significant context in which children develop the ability to perceive and appraise risks as they learn to avoid injury whilst exploring their environment and learning about their body's capabilities. Within this context, a growing body of research has provided evidence of both children's desire for challenging play that involves a degree of risk-taking and the role that positive risk-taking has in fostering children's optimal health and development (Greenfield, 2004; Sandseter, 2007a; Stephenson, 2003; Waters & Begley, 2007). At the same time, recent years have seen a growing concern that opportunities for this type of play are limited as a result of a culture of risk anxiety (Gill, 2007; Madge & Barker, 2007).

Child development and play quality is enhanced when the environment allows children to safely explore their surroundings, experiment, accept challenges and take risks. Ideally, the playspace should contain a diversity of physical, social, intellectual and natural play elements. Despite the acknowledgement of the importance of outdoor play, there is mounting concern that as many Western societies are becoming increasingly risk averse children's freedom to play outdoors is restricted and many everyday activities that previous generations took for granted now being seen as dangerous and something to be avoided or regulated with over-protective safety measures.

Defining risk

Definitions of risk often adopt a very narrow viewpoint and often have negative connotations. Within the developmental psychology literature, risk-taking is usually defined as the engagement in behaviours that are associated with some probability of negative outcomes

(Boyer, 2006). Madge and Barker (2007) highlight the complexities of the concept of risk as it encompasses “an endless spectrum of behaviours and activities” (p. 8) that can result in both positive and negative outcomes and which are socially constructed varying from one context to another and both within and across cultures.

Risk-taking can, and does, result in positive outcomes. Being prepared to take a risk is fundamental to human learning as we endeavour to develop new skills and behaviours, and abandon the familiar to explore what we know less well. For children this is especially important as they try new activities and test their limits in their quest to become fully functioning, competent persons.

If we accept that the outcomes of risk-taking may be positive or negative, a broader definition of risk is required. Hence, risk is perhaps better defined as situations in which we are required to make choices among alternative courses of action where the outcome is unknown. Such situations often require us to weigh up the benefits against possible undesirable consequences as well as the likelihood of success or failure. When considered from this perspective risk is not necessarily a danger that needs to be avoided, but rather something that needs to be managed (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2008; Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008). A distinction needs to be drawn between hazard and risk. For the purpose of this paper the term risk is used to encompass situations where the outcome is uncertain regardless of whether that outcome is predominately positive or negative whereas the term hazard is used to refer to situations in which there is a source of harm that carries with it a high probability of serious injury or death. It is the elimination of these hazards that contributes to environments where children are safe to explore risk and learn (Lester & Russell, 2008; Tovey, 2007).

Characteristics of risky play

Play, by its very nature, involves uncertainty, unpredictability, novelty, and flexibility, with a focus on the process rather than the result (Caillois, 1962; Lester & Russell, 2008) and a certain element of risk comes with this unpredictable and unstructured behaviour. Contemporary research has begun to focus on risk-taking as an integral part of children’s play. In general, risky play might be defined as play that provides opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries and learning about risk (Ball, 2002; Little & Wyver, 2008). Recent studies have identified the characteristics of risky play. In her study of outdoor play in New Zealand preschools, Greenfield (2004) found the four-year-old children favoured activities such as bikes, swings and ‘zoom slide’ which had common features, “risk, speed, excitement, thrills, uncertainty and challenge” (p. 4). Similarly, Stephenson (2003) identified elements of four-year-old children’s play that were associated with risk-taking as: “attempting something never done before, feeling on the borderline of ‘out of control’ often because of height or speed, and overcoming fear” (p. 36).

These characteristics of risky play were further extended by Sandseter (2007a) in research conducted in Norwegian preschools. From her observations of three- to five-year-old children, Sandseter identified six categories of risky play, namely: height, speed, and rough and tumble play, along with dangerous tools that could cause injury, dangerous physical elements where children could fall, and secluded play where children could ‘disappear or get lost’. A common theme apparent from both observations of the children’s play and interview responses was the excitement and exhilaration experienced by the children and their obvious desire to seek out such experiences despite their acknowledgment that these evoked feelings of fear or could result in injury (Sandseter, 2007a). Overcoming fear and feeling ‘out of control’ was a significant element of the play. According to Caillois (1962), this sensation, which he referred to as *ilinx*, is often sought for its own sake.

It is apparent from these studies that many children are drawn to activities such as climbing high, jumping from heights, sliding fast and balancing precariously. These experiences allow children to explore the limits of their abilities and to learn to assess and manage the risks involved. The ability to assess risk and weigh up the benefits against possible undesirable outcomes is an important life skill (Boyer, 2006). With more and more children attending some type of Early Childhood education setting, these services have a vital role in providing supportive environments where children can safely take the types of risks that enable them to extend their current capabilities and learn about risk. However, recent research findings suggest

that teacher beliefs about risk-taking and the Early Childhood regulatory environment influence the degree to which such experiences are provided and supported.

Teacher attitudes and support for risky play in the EC environment

In a study of children's outdoor play experiences in New Zealand preschools, Stephenson (2003) concluded that opportunities for risky play depended on the teachers' attitudes. A wider range of risky experiences were catered for in settings where teachers "enjoyed being outdoors, were interested in physical play, and took a sensitive and liberal approach to supervision that allowed children to find challenges that were experienced as risky but did not put them in positions of hazard" (Stephenson, 2003, p. 38). Positive support for risk-taking was also demonstrated in Sandseter's (2007b) research with Norwegian teachers. The teachers in this study acknowledged that their tolerance for risk was probably lower than that of the children; however, they refrained from preventing risky behaviour purely on the grounds of minor injury. Risk was seen as an inevitable part of children's learning. Similarly, Waters and Begley (2007) compared two Welsh children's risky play at a 'traditional' preschool with that whilst in attendance at a Forest school. Observations of the children (one risk seeker, one reticent risk-taker) revealed that the practitioners at the Forest school adopted a "permissive approach" to risk (p. 368). This natural environment fostered greater diversity of risk-taking behaviours in both children. In particular, the 'reticent risk-taking' child only engaged in risk-taking in the Forest school environment and "the excitement shown ... was not observed at any other time" (p. 371).

Waters and Begley's (2007) study highlights that opportunities for positive risk-taking in the early childhood environment are dependent upon how risk is viewed by adults. Tovey (2007) reports that some teachers express anxiety about the risk-taking behaviour of children, citing fear of culpability and subsequent litigation as the reason, whilst others openly encourage risky play. Different beliefs about risk-taking were also a source of tension in the relationship between Welsh preschool teachers and Forest school workers in Maynard's (2007) study. The preschool teachers emphasised the negative aspects of risk-taking and felt the need to exert a high level of control in order to ensure the children's safety and meet curriculum goals. In contrast the Forest school workers emphasised the benefits of risk-taking for fostering children's self-esteem, confidence and independence.

Risky play and the regulatory environment

The comments made by the teachers in Maynard's (2007) study raise the issue of accountability and the need to meet curriculum goals and safety requirements. Australian studies (Bown & Sumsion, 2007; Fenech et al., 2006) conducted in Early Childhood education settings have also found accountability factors to impact on pedagogical decision making. The teachers in these studies saw themselves as operating in an environment of surveillance and discipline which led to unnecessary safety emphasis and greatly limited the teachers' capacity to use their knowledge to inform their practice. Consequently these teachers felt they were no longer able to provide children with rich and challenging play environments (Fenech et al., 2006). Similar concerns were also raised by primary school teachers in an intervention study conducted by Bundy, Luckett, Tranter, Naughton, Wyver, Ragen et al. (2009). The teachers in this study felt the introduction of the unstructured materials to the playground posed an increased risk of injury, despite acknowledging the benefits and no actual injuries occurring. They raised concerns about their duty of care, citing fear of litigation as a reason for their uneasiness.

Waller (2006) notes the contradictory discourses in contemporary constructions of childhood. On the one hand children are viewed as capable and resourceful and their autonomy is encouraged (Stonehouse, 2001). On the other hand, early childhood policy is often informed by the view that children are vulnerable and in need of protection (Waller, 2006). These contradictory discourses are potentially a source of tension as practitioners seek to reconcile their pedagogical beliefs against the accountability requirements of the contexts in which they operate.

The regulatory environment in NSW

Children's services in New South Wales (NSW), Australia are required to comply with more than 40 legal and regulatory requirements (Fenech et al., 2006). For the purposes of this study the term 'regulatory environment' is used to encapsulate all these requirements. Three key documents that govern the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in New South Wales (NSW) are the NSW Children's Services Regulations (hereafter referred to as the Regulations), the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS), and the recently introduced Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The Regulations cover the licensing and conduct of children's services and aim to "ensure the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children in children's services by promoting standards for those services and ... to reduce the risk of predictable harm to children" (NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS), 2004, p. 1). On the other hand, the QIAS (National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2005) and EYLF (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009) are administered at a national level and are concerned with the process indicators of quality such as interactions and relationships within and between the EC centre, family and community that support children's learning and development.

Of particular relevance is the section of the Regulations relating to playground equipment. The Regulations stipulate requirements in terms of the height and arrangement of equipment in accordance with the Australian Standards for playground equipment for use in supervised early childhood settings (NSW DoCS, 2004). It should be noted that the Australian Standards for playground equipment (Standards Australia, 2004) are a voluntary code of best practice and their enforcement is only mandatory when stipulated within other legislation (in this case the Regulations). In contrast, the QIAS and EYLF recognise the learning potential of well-managed risk-taking. The EYLF emphasises the importance of opportunities for children to take considered risks in their decision making to foster their "emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 22), and "become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing... when [they] make choices, accept challenges, take considered risks, manage change and cope with frustrations and the unexpected (DEEWR, 2009, p. 31).

Factors limiting children's opportunities for challenging 'risky' play

As can be seen from the preceding review of the literature, whilst risk-taking is a common aspect of children's physical play and has a significant role in facilitating children's development and well-being, a number of factors potentially work to limit children's opportunities for this type of play. In particular, adult beliefs about the beneficial outcomes resulting from risk-taking in play, the regulatory environment, and fear of litigation influence risk minimisation strategies and hence the extent to which risky play is supported or hampered. Whilst restrictive safety measures may appear to ensure children's safety in the short term, the resultant impact on the quantity and quality of children's outdoor physical play is likely to contribute to other short and long term negative outcomes.

Figure 1 shows pathways from the five main factors that lead to minimisation of risk-taking in early childhood contexts through to some of the developmental outcomes (Little & Wyver, 2008). These pathways are supported by the literature reviewed in this paper.

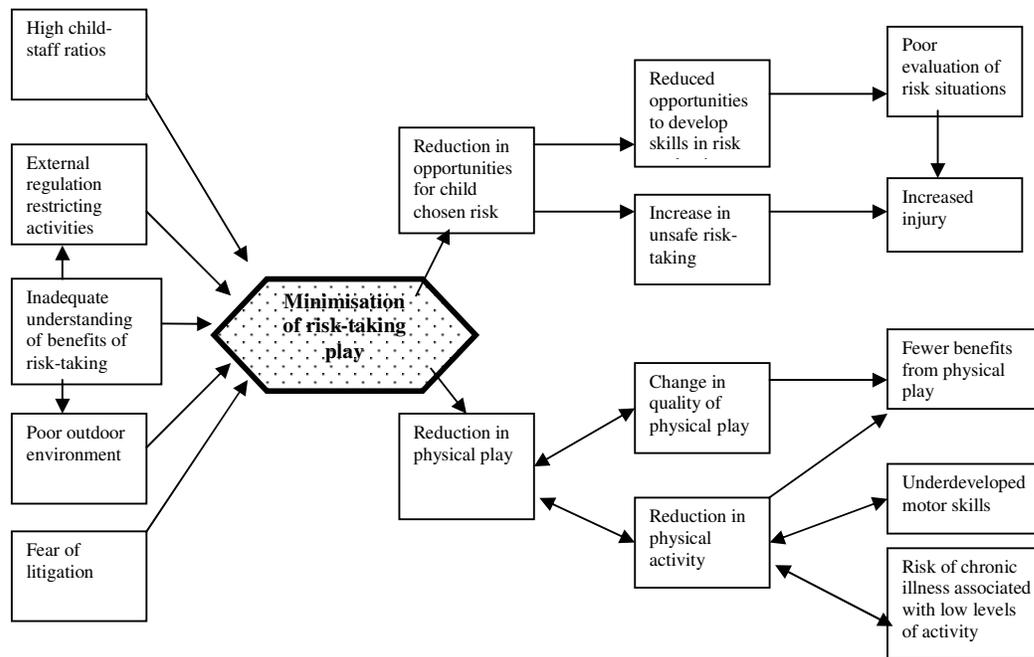


Figure 1. Possible pathways from the five main factors that lead to risk minimisation in early childhood play contexts.

The present study

The aim of the present study was to examine some of the factors outlined above by examining EC practitioners' beliefs about risk-taking and their pedagogical practices in relation to provision of opportunities for challenging, adventurous outdoor physical play. Specifically the study aimed to address the following research questions: Do teachers recognise the benefits of some physically risky activities? How do teachers provide physically active and competent 4- and 5-year-old children with a range of physically challenging experiences, particularly when many outdoor areas in EC centres cater for a mixed age group? How do teachers balance children's desire for challenging and perhaps risky activities against the need for safety in a regulatory environment that is becoming increasingly restrictive?

Methodology

Participants

Seventeen EC practitioners were recruited from six EC centres in different regions of Sydney. Centres were Preschools and Long Day Care services managed by a large not-for-profit organisation. Six practitioners had university qualifications in early childhood education, 4 had an Associate Diploma in early childhood, and 7 were untrained assistants. Participants had experience in the early childhood field ranging from 2 to 25 years ($M = 11.65$, $SD = 6.5$).

Data Collection

The EC practitioners participated in individual semi-structured interviews conducted at each EC centre. Interviews explored aspects of outdoor play provision and pedagogy including approaches to planning for outdoor play, beliefs about risk-taking and safety, and their views about the regulatory environment and implications for their teaching practice.

All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Analysis of interview transcripts was conducted at two levels: (i) coding and quantification of responses to individual questions, and (ii) qualitative analysis to identify themes emerging across all interviews. A

random sample of 50 percent of interviews was cross-coded by an independent person (with EC qualifications) to establish inter-rater agreement with reliability coefficients (Kappa) of 0.83 being obtained. NVivo8 software (QSR International, 2008) was used to facilitate the qualitative analysis to identify themes and relevant quotes.

Findings

Overall the majority of practitioners (n= 15, 88%) highlighted the positive outcomes and learning potential of opportunities for risk-taking. Of these, five practitioners (29%) acknowledged that risk taking could also have negative outcomes. Only two practitioners spoke about risk-taking only in terms of negative outcomes. The practitioners also believed that it was necessary for children to take physical risks when learning new skills, not only for skill development but also for confidence building and learning how to avoid injury. Finally, all the practitioners acknowledged that minor injuries were an inevitable part of children's play. Qualitative analysis of the interviews allowed for identification of specific beliefs about risk-taking and the regulatory environment.

Beliefs about the benefits of risk-taking

The practitioners believed *"risk-taking is part of that personal thing to feel confident in your abilities and the more time you've had to practice and master the skills, the more confident you are and the more risks you take"*. They also believed it is important for children to learn about risk and consequences. *"It is important for them to take risks because we all have to take risks in life and then we've also got to deal with consequence too, so it's definitely an important aspect of development"*.

Their beliefs about risk-taking also related to feelings of excitement and exhilaration and risk-taking being *"an adventure, like taking that extra step that you're wary about but there's that thing in the back of your mind that says 'that is a risk, that could be unsafe' but you just go and take the plunge anyway because it looks like so much fun"*. However, they also acknowledged the possibility of negative outcomes where *"there is an element of danger and they have to make a decision – is this safe or isn't it safe and am I able to do this, am I not able to do this?"*

Beliefs about supporting children's risk-taking

The practitioners' beliefs about risk-taking were clearly apparent in their approaches to supporting the children's risk-taking behaviour. *"My aim is to support them and challenge them and help them to be healthy adults"*. *"Everything comes with a risk so to stop children taking those risks I think is detrimental to their overall holistic development"*.

Observation and knowledge about individual children's patterns of risk-taking was an important element in determining appropriate responses to children's risk-taking behaviour. This knowledge guided their professional decision making in terms of planning and provisioning the environment to cater for both the varying abilities of the children and the children's risk-taking styles. This enabled them to make decisions based on the characteristics of individual children to manage the risks involved and accommodate some degree of calculated risk-taking.

I think you've really got to look at what the risk is they're taking and the child that's doing it because some children can handle things a lot better than others and for some you'll think 'they can do that, I'm not going to jump up' [to intervene]. I might see one of the five year olds standing on top of the cubes and about to jump and that's fine, I know they can do it. I might see a three year old and think 'no, they're not going to be able to do that'. So it's a bit of a balance and a bit of weighing up to do.

Children's risk-taking was supported by giving encouragement and physical assistance when necessary, *"encouraging them to take the risks and being out of that comfort zone... not just verbal encouragement but the physical support that they might need as well; like hold[ing] their hand to walk cross something or hold[ing] something while they're climbing"*.

The benefits and problems of the regulatory environment

The QIAS was seen as supporting the practitioners' perspective regarding the benefits of risk-taking. In particular, it justified their approach to managing and supporting risk based on the individual needs of the children. On the other hand, despite the QIAS providing affirmation for risky play provision, the practitioners' views about the Regulations were generally less favourable.

A number of central themes relating to the practitioners' views about the Regulations were identified. Firstly, there was recognition that the Regulations had a vital role in ensuring minimum safety standards. Those practitioners with extensive experience in the field, who had witnessed changes to the Regulations over time, even acknowledged that amendments were needed as perhaps approaches in the past had been too lax. *"I've worked in centres where you had swings and where children were running in front and there were no barriers. I've worked in centres where there was no soft fall at all so you had climbing equipment where children could fall and cause damage"*. Furthermore, many of the practitioners felt that the Regulations protected them in situations that could lead to litigation. They were comforted by the fact that as long as they complied with the Regulations that they had met their duty of care. *"I understand that they're in place because of the legalities and you know, being sued"*.

Despite this, however, there was a strong feeling that changes within the Regulations were the result of policy makers being overly concerned about litigation. The consequence was that things had now been taken too far and there was an overemphasis on safety. This severely constrained their capacity to provide sufficiently challenging experiences for the children in their care. *"It's just society in general that children are being put in cotton wool – not just with parents but I think litigation for playgrounds have impacted on what's acceptable for children"*. The sense of frustration that people working in the field were not consulted was also apparent. *"I think they really need to rethink the whole thing. I think they really need to listen to people who work in child care...but I know it all goes back to litigation"*.

Issues of accountability and fear regarding the policing of the Regulations were a concern. *"We always have that threat over our heads of DoCS walking through the door at any time. They could come today...so we have to stick to those Regulations and we've got to look and I think that fear of them coming in and going 'well you've broken all the Regulations because you've got that slide up on the top trestle'"*.

Hence when planning and setting up physical outdoor play experiences for the children, the focus was on compliance with the Regulations at the expense of providing stimulating and challenging environments.

"I find I set up something and go 'ah, great gives challenge and the kids are loving it' and then someone will remind me that it's too close to the board and to move it and because I have to move it I have to change the level and like I said the other day with the planks and the kids wanted to do that, 'I'm going, no guys, you can't do that...it would be great but you can't."

Beliefs about the impact of risk minimisation on children

The lack of stimulating activities that practitioners described often denied children the opportunity to challenge themselves and experience the thrill and exhilaration and 'feeling out of control' described by Stephenson (2003) and Sandseter (2007a). *"Children are not using their really challenging skills or risk taking skills to do climbing...that risky sort of adrenaline rush when they walk; you know, that 'don't fall' type of excitement"*. It also prevented the children from making decisions about what they can achieve. *"If you're doing a slide, you want to put that slide on the top trestle. You see kids wanting to put it... they'll put it there themselves and slide down... it's okay they can handle it but we're not allowed to have it up that high so we have to take it down"*.

Practitioners at all of the centres believed that their inability to provide challenging and stimulating physical activities for the children encouraged the children to seek challenge in other areas of the physical environment which then led to a greater need for monitoring and intervention to ensure the children's safety. Trees, fences and other structural elements of the environment were often used for climbing. *"They like the climbing – they're always finding things; even though there's no foothold on the fence they'll always try... they'll drag something over"*. *"They like to climb trees and this place is fantastic for that but due to regulations we can't"*

really allow them to climb ... because if they do[climb] the ones that aren't on the soft fall they could fall". Other play equipment was also utilized to provide structures for climbing. "I just noticed today they built with the big waffle blocks – stacked them and then they climbed on them and it was quite high. So they'll find ways".

Finally, the practitioners also felt that the Regulations devalue children and fail to acknowledge their capabilities. *"I think that children are really capable and there's so much [sic] safety things that you have to be aware of; but I think they're [the children] able to do more than the regulations are stating".* As a consequence, the practitioners felt that the lack of opportunities for risky play had a detrimental effect on children in terms of their confidence, self esteem and problem solving abilities.

Children have to take risks and do something and learn how to resolve the issue [and] then they're going to be able to deal with more complicated things at a later date. And at the moment what's happening is, mostly it's quite simple so that's not happening. If they're not prepared to take risks then they don't fail and so they don't realise that things are not always going to go their way. That's how they learn, by failing and some of the things we present them; they're not able to fail.

According to the practitioners, lack of challenging play also often contributed to behaviour problems. *"There are some children who are greater risk takers and always will be but in the general scheme of things I think that it's boring in the playground for some of these children and so therefore some of them come to have behaviour difficulties as a result of boredom".*

From these comments it is apparent that although the teacher's firmly believed that risk-taking was important for children's learning and development, they felt that for many of the children they were unable to provide those experiences. *"I think all risk's gradually been taken away". "I think it's going to get more and more safe but I think it's a bit extreme, and how will children know their capabilities? I do think 'how will children know what they can do' and in the end will it cause more damage?"* The resulting frustration felt by the practitioners echoed throughout their discussions: *"The more regulations there are the less we can do with them. I feel for them [the children]...if they ask for something and we can't do it, I don't like having to say no because obviously they want to experiment".*

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the extent to which practitioner beliefs about the benefits of risk-taking and the current regulatory environment lead to risk minimisation strategies that limit children's opportunities for developmentally challenging physical play that allows them to engage in healthy positive risk-taking. Whilst the views presented only represent those of a small number of practitioners, they nevertheless raise a number of significant issues. Overall the views of the practitioners reveal that from a pedagogical viewpoint, the practitioners believed that healthy positive risk-taking was an important aspect of children's play, contributing to children's holistic development. However, as with the teachers in the studies by Maynard (2007), Tovey (2007) and Bundy et al. (2009), this belief was over-shadowed by issues of accountability and constraints placed on their decision making by the inflexible, over-emphasis on safety inherent in the Regulations and the fear of litigation. These findings highlight a number of issues on relation to the regulatory environment.

The teachers' responses indicate that within children's services in NSW, the probability of risk has little to do with actual risk but rather how it is perceived, managed and hence regulated. Despite there being evidence to suggest that injury rates in child care are actually very low and mainly minor (Alkon et al., 2000; Kopjar & Wickizer, 1996), it would appear that EC legislation is informed by the view that any risk of injury or other negative outcome, no matter how minor or how remote is seen as unacceptable.

Contradictory discourses in the regulatory documents

The practitioners' responses to the regulatory environment are complicated by the by the different focus within the documents that govern the services and the contradictory discourses inherent within these. Tension exists not only between practitioners' pedagogical beliefs and compliance with the regulatory environment but also between the different levels of the

regulatory framework that operates in NSW. On the one hand the QIAS (NCAC, 2005) acknowledges the active role children play in their own learning as demonstrated by this document's perspective on risk which acknowledges the benefits of calculated risk-taking for children's development and confidence. This positive perspective on risk-taking continues to be espoused within the new national Early Years Learning Framework in promoting children as confident and involved learners (DEEWR, 2009). On the other hand, the Regulations take a more risk-averse stance. The contradictions between the Regulations and the QIAS and EYLF are further complicated by the fact that the Regulations take priority. This precedence is even explicit within the QIAS as the following excerpt illustrates:

Within the legislated guidelines, staff need to recognise the fine balance between child safety and the risks children take to create and meet new challenges in their physical world (NCAC, 2005, p. 23).

The views of the teachers in this study would suggest however, that in order to comply with the legislated guidelines (i.e. the Regulations) the balance is firmly tipped in favour ensuring safety at the expense of supporting positive healthy risk-taking. Thus the intent of the QIAS to "foster each child's developing independence and competence by supporting the child in some activities that involve risk taking" (NCAC, 2005, p. 25) is undermined.

Supervision and adult/child ratios

The findings from this study also raise issues in relation to the Regulations in terms of adult/child ratios. Numerous studies have highlighted that adult/child ratios and staff qualifications represent two of the key contributors to quality (Fenech et al., 2008). In terms of providing support for children's positive risk-taking both these factors are vital. Adult/child ratios need to be such that adequate levels of supervision are available to allow children to engage in risk-taking. Research by Peterson, Ewigman and Kivlahan (1993) found that both teachers and parents believe that higher levels of supervision are required as the level of risk increases. Similarly, the practitioners in the present study felt that supervision was crucial for responding appropriately to individual patterns of risk-taking. Current adult/child ratios possibly necessitate low levels of risk-taking as there are insufficient adults available to adequately supervise children in risky play situations. Maynard and Waters (2007) also found in their research that teachers were reluctant to allow children to engage in outdoor play due to the levels of supervision needed and concerns for children's safety especially in a culture of increasing blame and litigation by parents.

Space

Issues related to space allocated for outdoor play also need to be addressed as these have implications for the height of equipment and the fall zones required in accordance with the Australian Standards. Under the Standards, the maximum free height of fall for equipment for use in supervised early childhood settings is 1.5 metres. At this height a fall zone of 2 metres is required. Even a free height of fall of 0.5 metres requires a fall zone of 1.5 metres (Standards Australia, 2004). Fall zones determine the arrangement of equipment in proximity to each other and other features within the physical environment (trees, pathways etc.). When only the minimum space requirements are met, few centres have sufficiently large outdoor areas to allow staff to spread equipment out and provide stimulating activities involving a range of heights and complexity whilst still ensuring the appropriate fall zones are maintained. Lack of space also excludes the use of equipment such as swings, an issue raised by many of the practitioners in this study. These restrictions severely limit the provision of experiences involving play with heights, speed and the other elements of risky play as identified by Stephenson (2003) and Sandseter (2007a).

Conclusion

Although in recent years there has been increasing emphasis by many writers from around the world concerning the impact of risk averse approaches to safety, to date there has been little empirical evidence to support this view. Thus, the findings from this study provide some support for these views by illustrating the detrimental impact on the quality of children's play as a consequence of restrictive, over-protective risk management practices within Early Childhood

settings. The practitioners raised a number of concerns about the impact of unchallenging play on the quality of children's play and the children's development, confidence, problem solving skills and self esteem. These findings also support the model presented in the introduction that a lack of risky play opportunities may contribute to other long term risks impacting on children's optimal health and development. Exposure to calculated risk-taking in supportive environments such as Early Childhood settings helps foster children's developing ability to perceive and appraise risks related to both the physical environment and their own behaviour. Approaches to policy development need to be mindful of this and ensure that practitioner efforts to support this aspect of children's development are not hampered by restrictive safety policies.

It is neither possible nor desirable for all risk to be removed from children's play environments. Rather than the overly controlling risk management measures adopted by the Regulations, approaches to policy need to draw a distinction between excessive risk and positive, 'healthy' risk (Bundy et al., 2009) if positive developmental outcomes are to be assured. Playground design and approaches to playground safety should be approached from the standpoint espoused by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA, n.d.), that is, as safe as necessary not as safe as possible. Whilst it is important to eliminate hazards, opportunities for challenge need to be maintained to ensure that children experience the perception of risk without being placed at actual injury-risk (Mitchell, Cavanagh & Eager, 2006). It is this perception of risk that is experienced by the children in the outdoor preschools of Norway in Sandseter's (2007) research and the children in the Forest school in Waters and Begley's (2007) study that is important. The findings of the present study suggest however, that in these Early Childhood centres not only actual hazards have been removed but the outdoor play experiences have become so sterile that the thrill and exhilaration that provide a perception of risk have also been removed and opportunities for positive, healthy risk-taking are limited. To overcome this, it is important for policy makers to move on from approaches where the emphasis is on protection and 'surplus safety' (Buchanan, 1999) towards finding a balance between safety and children's exposure to healthy levels of risk.

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