Risk, Challenge and Safety in Outdoor Play: Pedagogical and Regulatory Tensions

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Abstract

Early Childhood services are becoming an increasingly significant part of children's lives. As such they offer vital opportunities for children to engage in physically challenging active play in a safe and secure environment. However, in an increasingly 'risk averse' society an over-emphasis on safety has seen such play opportunities eroded. This qualitative study explored Early Childhood practitioners' ($n = 17$) beliefs about risk-taking and their provision of 'risky' play opportunities in the outdoor environment. 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 challenging experiences. The research findings support the call for more flexible enforcement of regulations to allow practitioners to use their professional knowledge to make informed decisions in risk situations.

Keywords: risk-taking, outdoor play, regulations, early childhood practitioners' beliefs

Introduction

Pellegrini and Holmes (2006) have argued that increased accountability in early childhood educational settings has had a negative impact on both the quality and quantity of play available to children. In many Western countries, accountability includes stringent safety measures that have resulted in the removal of all risk, and

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hence challenge and stimulation, from children's playgrounds and outdoor play experiences (Lester & Russell, 2008; Madge & Barker, 2007). It has been argued that such risk minimization measures are likely to have a detrimental impact on children's health and development (Bundy, Luckett, Tranter, Naughton, Wyver, Ragen et al., 2009; Little & Wyver, 2008). Despite these concerns there has been little research examining physical play and factors that may impact on its provision.

To date, studies have either focused on children's experience of risky play with the teachers' role often being a secondary consideration (Sandseter, 2007b; Waters & Begley, 2007) or the focus has been on teachers' perceptions of the regulatory environment in general and the impact this has on their pedagogical decision-making (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2006). In the Australian early childhood education context, this latter research has identified the highly regulated early childhood sector as an issue of concern. The present study aims to combine these two areas of research focus by specifically examining Early Childhood practitioners' views of the regulatory environment with regards to opportunities for risk-taking in outdoor play provision.

Risky Play in the Context of Early Childhood Education and Care

Recognizing the significance of the early childhood years for children's long term learning and development, the Australian government is committed to providing universal access to 15 hours-a-week, affordable, quality early learning programs, delivered by a four-year university-trained teacher, for all children in the year before school (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Early education and care services then have a vital role in providing facilitative environments where children can safely take the types of risks that enable them to extend their current capabilities (Greenfield, 2003). Environments that support risk-taking allow children to demonstrate that they are capable and resourceful, empowering them to become constructors of their own learning (Stonehouse, 2001).

Children actively seek challenge and opportunities to test their limits and this will inevitably mean encountering risk (Ball, Gill, & Spiegal, 2008; Greenfield, 2004; Sandseter, 2007a; Stephenson, 2003). They enjoy the thrill, excitement and feeling

'out of control' that comes from experiences that involve height, speed, rough and tumble play, and other elements that may involve a degree of risk (Sandseter, 2007a; Stephenson, 2003). However because such activities are potentially associated with injury risks, adults may seek to curtail children's engagement in risky play.

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. Interviews with these teachers suggested that whilst they acknowledged that their tolerance for risk was probably lower than that of the children, 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) within the natural environment that 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 (2007) highlight 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) research. The preschool teachers placed an emphasis on 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. Underlying their approach was the central belief "that children are naturally curious and capable, and that adults should be respectful and convey their sense of trust in the child's abilities" (Maynard, 2007, p. 382).

Similarly, an observational Australian study examining risky play opportunities at park playgrounds compared to preschools (Little, under review) found differential opportunities for risky play in these two settings. The children engaged in significantly more risky play at the park playground than their preschool playgrounds. The regulatory environment in which the preschools operated was proposed as a possible reason for these differences.

Other Australian studies (Bown & Sumsion, 2007; Fenech et al., 2006) conducted in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) 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). Despite acknowledging the benefits and there being no injuries resulting from the introduction of the unstructured materials to the playground, teachers in this study felt there was an increased risk of injury, and 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 (Malaguzzi & Gandini, 1993; 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 early childhood practitioners seek to reconcile their pedagogical beliefs against the accountability requirements of the contexts in which they operate. These tensions are clearly apparent in the teachers' responses to risk-taking in the research discussed previously.

The research reviewed demonstrates that in addition to teachers' own beliefs and attitudes towards risk-taking, the regulatory environment in which practitioners operate is a significant factor that impacts on the decisions they make in response to risky play. The aim of the present study was to examine teachers' beliefs about risk-taking, its role in fostering children's development and confidence and how the teachers provide 4-and 5-year olds with a range of physically challenging experiences, particularly when many outdoor areas in ECEC settings cater for a mixed age range. The extent to which the regulatory environment impacted on teachers' ability to provide challenging (risky) play opportunities was also examined.

Method

Participants

Early childhood practitioners with responsibility for 4 to 5 year old children were recruited from six Early Childhood (EC) centres located in different regions of Sydney. Centres were Preschools and Long Day Care services managed by a large not-for-profit organization. Seventeen EC practitioners (16 females, 1 male) with ages ranging from 18-20 years to 56-60 years participated in the research. Six had university qualifications (UNI) in early childhood, 4 had an Associate Diploma in early childhood (AD), and 7 were untrained assistants (UA). Participants had experience in the EC field ranging from 2 to 25 years ($M = 11.65$, $SD = 6.5$).

The Research Context

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), hence for the purpose of this study the term 'regulatory environment' is used to encapsulate all these requirements. Two key documents that govern the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in New South Wales (NSW) are the NSW

Children's Services Regulations (hereafter referred to as the Regulations) and the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). The Regulations cover the licensing and conduct of children's services and aim to "ensure the safety, welfare and well-being 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) is administered at a national level and is concerned with the process indicators of quality such as interactions and relationships within the environment that support children's learning and development.

Of particular relevance for this study 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 are a voluntary code of best practice and their enforcement is only mandatory when stipulated within other legislation (in this case the Regulations). It should also be noted that the Australian Standards for playground equipment specify different requirements for supervised early childhood settings as opposed to other play contexts, for example, the Free Height of Fall for supervised early childhood settings is 1.5 metres compared to 2.5 metres in other contexts (Standards Australia, 2004).

Data Collection

As part of a larger study, EC practitioners participated in individual semi-structured interviews conducted at each EC centre. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and explored aspects of the play environment including beliefs about risk-taking and safety, approaches to planning for outdoor physical play, and their views about the regulatory environment and the implications for their teaching practice. At the conclusion of the interview each teacher provided details of their age range, qualifications and early childhood experience.

All interview data were transcribed verbatim. Qualitative analysis of transcripts

using constant comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify themes emerging within and across all the interviews was conducted. NVivo8 software (QSR International, 2008) was used to facilitate the qualitative analysis of the interview responses to identify themes and relevant quotes.

Findings

Beliefs about Risk-Taking

Overall the majority of the practitioners highlighted the positive outcomes and learning potential of opportunities for risk-taking. All the practitioners 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. 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" (AD4). 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" (UNI6).

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" (UNI6). On the other hand, 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?" (UNI3). However, all the practitioners acknowledged that minor injuries were an inevitable part of children's play.

Beliefs about Supporting Children's Risk-Taking

The practitioners' pedagogical beliefs about risk-taking were clearly apparent in their approaches to supporting the children's risk-taking. "Everything comes with a risk so to stop children taking those risks I think is detrimental to their overall holistic

development" (AD4). "My aim is to do the best for the children. My aim is to support them and challenge them and help them to be healthy adults" (UNI3).

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

Things that are more challenging for those that want to take extra risk and that's within their developmental abilities ⋯ so for the four to five year olds we will provide that for them. Then again for the younger ones we have the environment set up so that it's appropriate for their development as well. So we always have lots of mats around, so if there are quite high planks then we'll always have mats to support the two and a half year olds (UNI6).

I think you've really got to look at what the risk is they're taking and the child is 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 (UA4).

Knowledge about individual children meant that some practitioners were more flexible in their approach to safety.

I think I'm pretty relaxed. I feel what they want to do is more important to me. I don't want them to come to any harm or anything but I feel that if I can be there to support them then I think that's more important. I want them to be able to try new things; I want them to explore everything in the environment (AD3).

The practitioners were particularly aware of those children who were wary about taking risks. "We assess how they are with taking risks ⋯ especially not taking the risk and seeing other children take the risk affects their self esteem. I think we really need to address it because then they feel like they're not succeeding." (UNI6).

In general the practitioners stated that they responded to children's risk-taking by giving encouragement and physical support.

Supporting the child would be encouraging them to take the risks and being out of that comfort zone. That would be our role ⋯ 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 something while they're climbing (UNI4).

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.

Analysis of the practitioners' responses revealed a number of central themes relating to their views of the Regulations. Firstly, there was recognition that the Regulations had a vital role in ensuring minimum safety standards. "I didn't have a problem with them, I have to admit. Once Id worked out the height you had to have and the fall out level that you had to have I could see why those regulations existed" (UNI2).

Those practitioners with extensive experience in the field, who had witnessed changes to the Regulations over time, even acknowledged that amendments were needed and saw some of the changes as beneficial 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." (UNI3). 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" (AD2). "We need our regs ⋯. I think they're there to protect us and to protect the centre as well" (UNI2).

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 that 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" (UNI3). 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" (UA2).

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' (UA7).

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, you can't do that' ··· it would be great but you can't (AD4).

It's totally boring ··· there's no challenge there for the children. They're not given that bit of challenge to actually build their confidence and in actually doing what we used to be able to do even a few years ago. I mean we don't want them to have accidents ··· but it's like we're wrapping them up in cotton wool and they're becoming softies and then they won't go out and they're not challenged in taking risks and building confidence (UA2).

In addition, whilst the aim of the Regulations was to ensure children's safety,

many of the practitioners felt that they actually had the opposite effect and at times contributed to accidents occurring.

In our environment, our soft fall to me is more of a hindrance if they fall over than what the grass was. If they run on it and the sand's on it they slide and get grazes. So to me having that [soft fall material] as opposed to having something that's natural for them to run and fall on … that's a risk thing I find here (UA2).

Beliefs about the Impact of Risk Minimization on Children

The lack of stimulating activities 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" (UNI1). 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 (UA7).

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. "Even the poles, they want to climb up them … there's no way" (AD3). "They like climbing－ they're always finding things; even though there's no foothold on the fence they'll always try … they'll drag something over … but we keep a pretty close eye on it so it doesn't happen" (UA4). "They like to climb trees and this place is fantastic for that but due to regulations we can't really allow them to climb very high or on any of the trees－because if they do [climb] the ones that aren't on the soft fall they could fall" (AD3). 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" (UA2).

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" (AD3). 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 whats 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 realize 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 (UNI3).

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" (UNI3).

From these comments it is apparent that although the practitioners 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. "They're able to do things ⋯ and you're always there and showing them how to do it; you're not just leaving them to their own devices but I feel we could do more" (AD3). "I think all risks gradually been taken away. All the challenging [sic] and all that learning and gaining confidence in what they can do out in the playground and risk-taking" (UA2). "I think it's going to get more and more safe but I think it's a bit extreme, and 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?" (AD3). 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" (UA5).

Discussion

Whilst the practitioners' pedagogical beliefs acknowledged the benefits opportunities for children's calculated risk-taking provided for children's learning and development, it was apparent that aspects of the current regulatory environment negatively impact on the practitioners' capacity to provide sufficiently physically challenging experiences for the four to five year old children. The EC practitioners in the present study expressed similar views to those of the teachers in Sandseter's (2007b) study, in that they believed that risky behaviour should not be prevented purely on the grounds that it may result in minor injury. However, as with the teachers in the studies by Tovey (2007) and Bundy and Luckett, 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.

The practitioners' responses would 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, Raglan, Tschann, Genevro, Kaiser, & Boyce, 2000; Kopjar & Wickizer, 1996; Rivara, DiGuiseppi, Thompson, & Calonge, 1989), 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.

Restrictive approaches to safety and risk management that seek to eliminate all risk from children's environments result in what Buchanan (1999) terms 'surplus safety'. 'Surplus safety' results when the regulatory environment places greater emphasis on controlling institutional risk (e.g. avoiding litigation) rather than giving consideration to the actual risks encountered by children (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2008) and how these should be managed to allow children to engage in

risky play. The 'surplus safety' resulting from the over-emphasis on risk minimisation within the Regulations raised concerns with the practitioners about the children's ability to appraise risks for themselves. Exposure to calculated risk-taking in supportive environments such as ECEC 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. The findings from research examining young children's risk appraisal suggests that young children are capable of identifying factors within their environment that contribute to injury-risk (Coppens, 1985; Hillier & Morrongiello, 1998) but further development of this ability is dependent on the feedback they receive from more knowledgeable others. Hence EC practitioners have a vital role to play in providing opportunities for children to enhance their ability to accurately appraise the risks they encounter in their environment.

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, Tranter, Naughton, Wyver, & Luckett, 2009; Little, 2006; Little & Wyver, 2008) if positive developmental outcomes are to be assured. Playground design and playground safety should be approached from the standpoint espoused by Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), that is, as safe as necessary not as safe as possible (Champion, 2008). 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 (2007a) study 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 for these Australian EC 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.

The practitioners' responses to the regulatory environment are also complicated by the different focus within the documents that govern the services and the contradictory discourses inherent within these (Waller, 2006). Tension exists not only between their 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, 2001) acknowledges the active role children play in their own learning, as demonstrated by this document's perspective on risk-taking which acknowledges the benefits of calculated risk-taking for children's development and confidence. Furthermore, this positive perspective on risk-taking continues to be espoused within the new national Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). The Framework 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). This is achieved when educators:

Plan learning environments with appropriate levels of challenge where children are encouraged to explore, experiment and take appropriate risks in their learning (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009, p. 35).

The perspective expressed in these documents echoes the views held by the practitioners in this study. On the other hand, the Regulations position children as vulnerable. The practitioners raised concerns that the positioning of children as vulnerable and in need of protection within the Regulations results in a devaluing of children and their abilities contributing to a loss of confidence and lower self esteem in children. This also has implications for what Stephenson (2003) referred to as a 'risk-taking disposition'. Stephenson noted that the children who were confident physical risk-takers in the outdoor environment were more likely to take risks during indoor activities. Hence, lack of opportunity to take physical risks due to concerns for

safety may undermine children's confidence to take risks in other contexts as well. The development of a risk-taking disposition encourages children to accept challenges and persevere in the face of adversity thus building resilience. Gill (2007) argues that as a society we need to "embrace a philosophy of resilience: an affirmation of the value of children's ability to recover and learn from adverse outcomes" (p. 82).

The contradictions between the Regulations and the QIAS 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 recognize 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 practitioners in the present 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.

The findings from this study also raise a number of other issues in relation to the Regulations in terms of adult/child ratios and space requirements for outdoor play provision. 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 is insufficient staff 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.

Another issue relates to 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 aversive 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 ECEC 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 provide support for the arguments put forward by Tranter (2005) and Little and Wyver (2008), that lack of risky play opportunities may contribute to other long term risks impacting on children's optimal health and development. The views expressed by the practitioners in this research also support

the conclusions and recommendations made by Gill (2007), Madge and Barker (2007), and Ball (2002) that we cannot continue to over regulate and control the experiences of children through restrictive, over-protective public policies if we are to foster resilience in children. By continuing to do so we risk future generations of children growing up to become adults who lack the skills and confidence necessary to face the challenges that life presents them. Risk management cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach. As the practitioners in this research recognized, risk is contextual and subjective. The regulatory environment should not restrict or prevent teachers' use of their knowledge of individual children in determining the appropriate response to particular risk situations. Guidelines have the potential to play an important role in practitioners' deliberations on the benefits in conjunction with any negative outcomes in making risk assessments (Ball et al., 2008). In this way children can be provided with experiences that genuinely provide challenge and stimulation to satisfy their needs.

It is important for policy makers to move on from approaches where the emphasis is on protection and 'surplus safety' towards finding a balance between safety and children's exposure to healthy levels of risk that allows them to build a personal duty of care. A process of risk reframing (Bundy, Tranter, et al., 2009; Gill, 2007) may increase the likelihood that opportunities for positive, healthy risk are promoted and safety strategies are only focused on eliminating excessive risk.

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