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Early Childhood Teachers’ Beliefs about
Children’s Risky Play in Australia and Norway

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ABSTRACT Positive risk-taking in the context of outdoor physical play is important for fostering children's optimal health and development. Despite this, there is mounting concern that many developmentally beneficial activities are now seen as dangerous and something to be avoided. However, perceptions of risk are very much subject to cultural interpretation, and the growing risk aversion evident in some developed Western societies, such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, is less apparent in other developed countries, notably some of the European and Scandinavian countries. To explore some of these cultural differences, early childhood practitioners from Australia and Norway were interviewed regarding their provision of outdoor play experiences for children and their attitudes towards risk-taking in play. Practitioners from both countries recognised the importance of risky play for children's development and well-being. However, differences in the extent to which children’s risky play was supported were evident. Factors associated with the quality of the outdoor environment, regulatory requirements, and a litigious environment were identified as constraining teaching practice for the Australian practitioners. The findings have implications for the development of policy that supports teachers' pedagogical decision-making in providing developmentally challenging play environments for children.

Introduction

Outdoor play provides an important context for children to explore, to experiment; to move, be themselves and make the most of the opportunities afforded by the environment in a less restricted manner (Henniger, 1994; Rivkin, 1995). Within this context, children naturally seek challenge and take risks as they expand their world view, develop an understanding of themselves and others, and endeavour to gain competency in a vast range of skills (Children’s Play Council, 2004).

For more than a decade, however, there has been growing evidence that as many developed Western societies become increasingly risk averse, children’s independent mobility and freedom to play outdoors is restricted or controlled (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Kelley et al, 1998; Soori & Bhopal, 2002; Weir et al, 2006; Gill, 2007; Madge & Barker, 2007). Consequently there is mounting concern that children are being denied opportunities for responding to challenge and exploring risk in the context of outdoor play.

Gill (2007) puts forward for children having opportunities to explore risk in play. Firstly, it allows children to learn how to manage risk and hence understand safety. Secondly, it satisfies children’s innate desire for risk through controlled risk-taking, thus reducing the likelihood that they will seek out greater unmanaged risks for themselves. Thirdly, responding to challenge and

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exploring risk in play has obvious benefits for development and learning. Through exploratory and risky play, children become familiar with their environment, its possibilities, and boundaries. They find out what is dangerous and how to handle the risks they come across (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Smith, 1998; Adams, 2001; Apter, 2007). Children who engage in challenging play in nature areas show improved motor and spatial skills (Grahn et al, 1997; Fjortoft, 2000; Fiskum, 2004). Through risk-taking in play, children learn to assess and master risk situations which is important in the transition from adult-regulated to self-regulated risk-taking (Aldis, 1975; Stutz, 1995; Boyesen, 1997; Adams, 2001; Ball, 2002; Apter, 2007). This transition is an important adaptive function of play that involves progressive mastery of risks, and serves as preparation for appraising and managing potentially dangerous situations both in childhood and later in adulthood (Aldis, 1975; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Smith, 2005). Finally, through engaging with risk and at times having to deal with failure or the negative consequences of their decisions, children build resilience and self-reliance by having acquired coping strategies to deal with such situations.

Part of the problem contributing to risk aversive practices is that definitions of ‘risk’ often adopt a very narrow viewpoint and 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). However, Madge and Barker (2007, p. 8) highlight the complexities of the concept of risk as encompassing ‘an endless spectrum of behaviours and activities’ that can result in both positive and negative outcomes which are socially constructed varying from one context to another and both within and across cultures.

As stated previously, it has been argued that contemporary urban Western society appears to be characterised by a growing risk aversion (Gill, 2007). However, Wyver et al (2010) suggest that restrictions on play freedom are not necessarily a product of modern Western environments. Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004) argue that ‘risk and risk anxiety are socially constructed ... so, just as with childhood, it is important to contextualize ‘risk’ within socioeconomic, cultural and institutional frameworks’ (p. 445). For example, European children have less play restrictions allowing them to experience greater diversity of creative and challenging play environments (Ball, 2002). It is therefore likely that this freedom to explore and respond to challenges afforded by the environment would also be evident in institutional practices, such as early childhood education. In countries, such as Norway, where valuing the natural environment is part of the culture (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2000), many early childhood settings provide children with a vast array of experiences, such as hiking, climbing trees, and water activities in natural outdoor environments.

As the arguments presented by Gill (2007) suggest, risk-taking is a common aspect of children’s physical play and has a significant role in facilitating children’s development and well-being. However, a number of factors potentially work to limit children’s opportunities for this type of play. In particular, Little and Wyver (2008) suggest that adult beliefs about the beneficial outcomes resulting from risk-taking in play, the regulatory environment, and fear of litigation influence the extent to which risky play is supported or denied. Whilst restrictive safety measures and risk minimisation strategies 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 for children’s health and development.

This article focuses on the role of positive physical risk-taking in the context of children’s outdoor play in early childhood settings, and explores the potential influence of teacher beliefs about risk-taking on children’s engagement in risky play.

**Characteristics of Risky Play**

Play, by its very nature, involves uncertainty, 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. 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 (Stephenson, 2003; Greenfield, 2004; Sandøseter, 2007a, 2009a, 2009b; Waters & Begley, 2007). Child development and play quality are enhanced when the physical and social environment allows children to safely explore their surroundings, experiment, accept challenges, and take risks. 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 an observational study of outdoor play in New Zealand preschools, Greenfield (2004) found that four year old children favoured activities which involved ‘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 observations of 3-5 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’ (See Table I).

Table I. Categories and sub-categories of risky play (revised from Sandseter, 2007a, b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Great heights</td>
<td>Danger of injury from falling</td>
<td>Climbing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jumping from still or flexible surfaces</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Balancing on high objects</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hanging/swinging at great heights</td>
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<tr>
<td>B: High speed</td>
<td>Uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something (or someone)</td>
<td>Swinging at high speed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sliding and sledging at high speed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Running uncontrollably at high speed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bicycling at high speed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Skating and skiing at high speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Dangerous tools</td>
<td>Can lead to injuries and wounds</td>
<td>Cutting tools: Knives, saws, axes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strangling tools: Ropes, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D: Dangerous elements</td>
<td>Where children can fall into or from something</td>
<td>Cliffs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Deep water or icy water</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fire pits</td>
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<tr>
<td>E: Rough-and-tumble</td>
<td>Where the children can harm each other</td>
<td>Wrestling</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fencing with sticks, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Play fighting</td>
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<tr>
<td>F: Disappear/get lost</td>
<td>Where the children can disappear from the supervision of adults, get lost alone</td>
<td>Go exploring alone</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Playing alone in unfamiliar environments</td>
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</table>

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 Cailliois (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, 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 (Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008). According to Ball (2004), exposure to injuries and sustaining minor injuries is a universal part of childhood through which children learn the consequences of their behaviour and understand their competencies and limitations. This ability to assess risk and weigh up the benefits against possible undesirable outcomes is an important life skill (Boyer, 2006).

Governments increasingly recognise the importance of early childhood education in lifelong learning. In Australia, there has recently been an investment of government funds to increase access to and quality of early childhood education (Australian Government Department of

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Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2011). Early childhood services have a vital role in providing supportive environments where children can safely take the types of risks that foster their development, whilst also learning about risk management. With more and more children attending some type of early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting, it has been argued that these services 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, 2004). Environments that support risk-taking allow children to demonstrate that they are capable and resourceful and empower them to become constructors of their own learning (Stonehouse, 2001). However, recent research suggests that a number of factors potentially influence the degree to which teachers provide and support such experiences.

**Teacher Attitudes and Support for Risky Play in the Early Childhood Environment**

Stephenson’s (2003) observational study of children’s outdoor play experiences in New Zealand preschools found that opportunities for risky play depended on the teachers’ attitudes. A wider range of risky experiences were catered for in settings where teachers had an interest in physical play, enjoyed being outdoors, and adopted an open-minded approach to supervision, allowing children to find challenges that the children perceived as risky, but did not involve actual hazards (Stephenson, 2003). 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 liberal approach to risk. 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’ (Waters & Begley, 2007, p. 371).

Both Stephenson’s (2003) and Waters and Begley’s (2007) studies highlight that opportunities for positive risk-taking in the early childhood environment are dependent upon how risk is viewed by adults. In contrast to the views of the teachers in these studies, 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 study (2007). 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.

Australian studies (Fenech et al, 2006; Bown & Sumison, 2007) conducted in early childhood education settings have also found accountability factors to impact on the provision of challenging play for children. The teachers in these studies saw themselves as operating in an environment of surveillance and discipline which led to an unnecessary safety emphasis. 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 et al (2009) aimed at increasing physical activity through the introduction of unstructured materials to the playground. Despite acknowledging the benefits, and with no increase in injuries occurring, the teachers in this study felt that the materials posed an increased risk of injury. They raised concerns about their duty of care, citing fear of litigation as a reason for their uneasiness.

The literature reviewed thus far highlights the significance of adult attitudes towards risk-taking in the provision of challenging play environments that support children’s positive risk-taking. As previously discussed, risk and risk perception are framed within different sociocultural contexts, hence this study aimed to compare the beliefs of early childhood teachers from different cultural backgrounds to further understand variations in beliefs about risk-taking and their pedagogical practices in relation to provision of opportunities for challenging, adventurous outdoor physical play.
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Method

Data from two recent separate studies from Australia (Little, 2009) and Norway (Sandseter, 2010) were used for this investigation. Both studies used a range of methods and informants to examine risk-taking in outdoor play. Each study included interviews with early childhood (EC) practitioners. Data from these interviews are used in the present study. Interviews were semi-structured and explored aspects of outdoor play, outdoor provision, and outdoor environment, with a particular focus on risky play and safety, and interviews were analysed for themes (Little, 2010; Sandseter, 2012). Although different questions were used in the Australian and Norwegian interviews, it was considered that the similarity in intention of the questions, the similar format of the interviews, and the method of analysis allowed for the datasets to be used retrospectively for direct comparison between countries. Methods used in these studies have been reported in more detail elsewhere (Little, 2010; Sandseter, 2012).

Participants

For the Australian study, a not-for-profit organisation which is one of the largest managers of EC centres and employers of early childhood practitioners in New South Wales was approached to take part in the research. Six EC centres managed by this organisation were purposely selected from different regions of Sydney to represent a range of families from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. All practitioners at each centre who had responsibility for the four and five year old children enrolled in the centres were invited to participate in the study. The final sample consisted of seventeen EC practitioners; six practitioners had university qualifications in early childhood education, four had a Diploma in early childhood, and seven were untrained assistants.

In Norway, fourteen EC practitioners were recruited from four EC centres in the middle part of Norway (Sør-Trøndelag County). The centres were purposely selected to represent both ordinary Norwegian EC settings and nature and outdoor preschools (the latter kind of preschool being quickly growing in Norway). The centres were also recruited to represent preschools situated in both urban and rural areas, and with different kinds of management. All the practitioners in the study had responsibility for children from the age of three to six years old. Five of the Norwegian practitioners had university qualifications in early childhood education (preschool teachers), two had a high school specialisation in childcare, and seven were untrained assistants.

Description of the Settings and Outdoor Play Environments

In Australia, the six centres (five preschools, one long day care service), varied in terms of outdoor space and the availability of natural elements, such as trees and other plants, rocks, and natural ground surfaces (e.g. grass, bark). The gross motor equipment at the centres consisted of individual pieces of moveable apparatus, such as ladders, climbing apparatus, balancing beams, jumping boards, and small trampolines. One centre also had sufficient room to accommodate a fixed composite play structure consisting of ladders, slide, and sway-bridge, as well as a separate swing with interchangeable parts (ladder, single and double swing, tyre swing).

In Norway, the four preschools varied in management (one municipal preschool, two owned by private companies, one parent-owned) and outdoor provisions (two ordinary preschools, two nature and outdoor preschools). The outdoor environments of the two ordinary preschools consisted of a fenced in playground with some natural elements, such as rocks, trees, bushes, natural ground surfaces, and some small hills. The outdoor environment of the ordinary preschools also had fixed play equipment, such as slides, swings, ladders, climbing towers, as well as some moveable equipment, such as bicycles, sticks, large building blocks, and boxes. The outdoor environment of the two nature and outdoor preschools consisted mainly of nature elements, such as climbing trees, rock walls and cliffs, grassy hills and fields, dense forest, and so on. One of the nature and outdoor preschools did not have a fence around its playground, and the children had access to a large forest area where there also was a small lake nearby. All the four preschools frequently (from one to four days a week) made hikes to various nature areas in the neighbourhood where the children could play freely with and in a variety of nature elements.
Data Collection and Analysis

Both the Australian and Norwegian EC practitioners participated in individual semi-structured interviews conducted at each EC centre. The Australian interviews were conducted at different times at each centre across a twelve month period, whilst the Norwegian interviews were conducted over a period of nine months. 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.

For the purpose of this article, themes identified from the original analyses of the two data sets of interviews were compared to categorise common issues. A content analysis of the interview data in each of these themes was then conducted to identify areas of agreement or dissimilarity in relation to the practitioners’ beliefs about risk-taking, their responses to the risk-taking behaviour of children, and factors that potentially contribute to risk minimisation in play. Illustrative quotes provided in the following section have been designated codes which identify the location (Australia [Aust.], Norway [Norw.]), and for the Norwegian practitioners the type of centre (ordinary [Ord.], outdoor [Out.]).

Findings

Of particular interest was whether the Australian and Norwegian practitioners held different beliefs about children’s risk-taking, its significance for learning and development, and how this was balanced with concerns for safety. Aspects of the practitioners’ pedagogy that influenced their responses to children’s risk-taking were also explored.

Beliefs about Risk-taking

Many aspects of the practitioners’ beliefs about risk-taking were similar and often focused on the benefits of risk-taking in play. Australian and Norwegian practitioners shared the understanding of risk-taking as experiences that involved being out of one’s comfort zone and attempting new activities:

Risk-taking can be attempting something that you’ve never attempted before because you’ve always been a bit worried about doing it. (Aust.2Centre2)

It’s about trying something you’re not 100 percent comfortable with and just pushing yourself that little bit further. (Aust.12Centre3)

Testing their boundaries and testing their limits. Some children are very adventurous and some aren’t. (Aust.10Centre4)

Thrill and exhilaration were also identified as components of risk-taking:

As soon as I say risk-taking, I think about adventure, like taking that extra step that you’re sort of wary about but you really want to do it but then there’s always that thing in the back of your mind that says ‘that is a risk ... that could be unsafe’. Or it could be something that’s really going to be a challenge and you might not be able to do it but you just go and take the plunge anyway because it looks like so much fun. (Aust.15Centre6)

When the Norwegian practitioners were asked what they considered to be high-risk play, they described activities and play at great heights, great speed, play with dangerous tools, and play close to dangerous elements:

Well, generally, I have the impression that it’s related to heights [laughs a little]. Or ... yes, where you think that if they lose control or if this or that happens. It’s mainly play up high, in my opinion. It’s mostly falling that I consider as risky. (Norw.1Centre1Ord.)

High-risk play is when something can happen to the kids ... that they can fall down or get hurt, or something. Then it’s often things such as them falling down or that something can fall down on them. That they can cut themselves on something is also a risk ... that they can get hurt in some way. (Norw.3Centre1Ord.)
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Well, it's maybe in situations ... it's maybe more during winter activities when the speed increases. It's the speed. It's the speed that makes it high-risk. For as long as things are ... well, I have to say slow [laughing] it's ok - then they can do whatever, really. (Norw.4Centre2Out.)

The Australian practitioners similarly identified high risk as involving heights and the possibility of falls. In contrast to the Norwegians, they further indicated that such activities were not acceptable:

Things that involve jumping off high things are less acceptable. (Aust.12Centre5) Climbing is a big risk taking [issue] because of the possibility of falling. (Aust.16Centre6)

They also identified issues related to inappropriate use of equipment:

Some [things] you shouldn't do like climbing on the tables and chairs ... you will slip and fall because they're not meant to be climbed on. (Aust.8Centre3)

There are some children that you know can climb on the outside of the fort but because you're trying to keep that consistency among the children and that safety you have to stop one [child] that may be able to confidently do it. (Aust.9Centre4)

Supporting Risk-taking in Play

Both the Australian and Norwegian practitioners acknowledged the contextual nature of risk and risk-taking. They explained that risk is subjective in terms of both how risk is perceived and actions that constitute a risk for different people based on their ability and prior experiences.

The practitioners believed that observation of the children's play was a key to providing appropriate support for children's risk-taking. Both the Australian and Norwegian practitioners emphasised the staff's practice and knowledge of each individual child's abilities as important to support and allow children's risk-taking.

You observe, you take documentation, you then program for those development areas, you model the correct procedure, you go through - you guide them through slowly, encouraging them, supporting them and you keep repeating; repetition is great, it's developing confidence and then you can change to something else. Once they've mastered it, they go on to something else. (Aust.16Centre6)

I think you've really got to look at what the risk is that they're taking and the child that's doing it because some children can handle things a lot better than others and some you think 'they can do that, I'm not going to jump up'. You know you might see one of the five year olds standing on top of one of the cubes 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. (Aust.10Centre4)

I consider children's risk-taking according to the situation and who is playing ... what the child can manage ... and I consider the child's age. For instance one of the boys on my department, he is allowed to climb higher than ... some of the girls, you know, because I know that he has a bodily control that is unique! I feel sure that he can manage it. (Norw.8Centre3Ord.)

Some of the Norwegian practitioners stated they also initiated risky play among the children.

Yes, I take initiative to risky play with the children sometimes. Sometimes I want to do thrilling things myself, and then I could start some thrilling activities with the children. We have started rock climbing, in a way, hung up a rope at the top of the cliff that the children can hold on to when they climb up the wall ... and a rope swing from a tree in the forest where they can feel the thrill! (Norw.11Centre4Out.)

All the Australian practitioners reported that approximately one third of the daily program was devoted to outdoor play throughout the year, although often slightly longer during the summer months. The practitioners reported that decisions about how to provision the environment were mainly based on observations of the children related to their current interests and abilities. In general their aim was to offer a range of activities with varying degrees of challenge to cater for the
children’s diverse abilities and patterns of risk-taking and the changes in the children’s abilities as the year progressed.

At the beginning of the year we have very simple things. The trestles will be on the bottom rung. We might not even have them out; we might just have the small wooden frame ... a balancing beam. We notice that some of the younger children won’t even approach the big fixed equipment ... but as the term goes on and they get more confident the experiences change. (Aust.16Centre4)

Beams and stuff like that I think are the really challenging area. We try to have one low one and a high one at the same time ... towards the end of the year we tend to have more challenging stuff because we know they’re [more capable] – a lot of them are five so we start having the beams a lot higher. (Aust.12Centres3)

The responses of the Norwegian EC practitioners in relation to time spent outdoors varied according to what kind of preschool they were. Practitioners from the nature and outdoor preschools indicated that they spent most of their daily time outdoors, both during summer and winter, while the ordinary preschools spent about half of their time outdoors, a bit less in the winter, and a bit more in the summer. All the Norwegian EC practitioners expressed in the interviews that the children in their kindergarten had great opportunities for risky play. All the practitioners emphasised the outdoor environment’s importance for affording children the opportunities for risk-taking in play. The practitioners mentioned available play features, such as large trees, varied sorts of terrain, places to hide, places to jump, play huts to climb on, and slides as important for children’s risky play. One of the kindergartens had an unfenced playground which was considered important for the children’s freedom to move around as they liked.

I think the children have great opportunities for risky play in our kindergarten – our play environment is well suited for that, we have no fences or anything like that – we have the forest with steep cliffs where the children climb and balance, and the large trees outside here where the children love to climb up very high. They seem to make use of the varied terrain we have in our kindergarten. (Norw.11Centre4Out.)

The Australian practitioners reported that they often involved the children in decisions about what equipment would be available. This provided opportunities to foster children’s autonomy and problem-solving skills.

A lot of the time we’ll ask the children ‘how should we set up the obstacle course today?’ So that fosters emergent curriculum. That also provides the opportunity with their suggestions to say ‘do you think everybody will be able to climb over that? What else can we do for those that don’t want to climb up there? How else can we put the ladder?’ (Aust.16Centre6)

However, for the Australian practitioners, supporting children’s decision-making at times caused tension between what the teachers might have liked to allow the children to do and their accountability under the regulations. This issue is explored further in the section on the influence of external regulations.

Children’s decision-making in Norway related less to the structural features of the environment and more to utilisation of the provisions. The Norwegian practitioners explained that all of the constructed equipment, the loose and flexible material, and the nature elements are available all of the time for the children’s free play. In that way the Norwegian children do not have to join the practitioners in decision-making, rather they make continuous decisions throughout their play when they respond individually to the affordances provided in the environment. This goes for all the equipment apart from dangerous tools, such as knives, axes, hammers, and nails. In the ordinary preschools, the children had to ask one of the staff to bring these tools out if they wanted to play with them:

In principle only the oldest children are allowed to use knives, and I can’t have too many of them whittling at the same time. I have to have some restrictions about that. This is mainly because the parents want us to restrict it. My opinion is that if someone cut themselves it’s no big deal ... it’s manageable, that too. It’s just one of those things that happen. (Norw.14Centre3Ord.)
Despite a desire to provide the children with a wide range of physically challenging outdoor play experiences, many of the Australian practitioners expressed concern about no longer being able to achieve this aim. According to the practitioners, affordances in the environment that invited risky play were limited for the Australian children. In particular, the teachers identified swings and apparatus that involved upper body strength as activities they would like to provide but were unable to do so due to regulatory safety and space restrictions:

I wish we could have swings ... monkey bars, climbing ropes. All that type of stuff. I miss that and I wish we still had that. They used to have swings here and they took them out because you've got to have so much clear space ... and monkey bars are just a no-no. (Aust.12Centre5)

There was a tunnel too which cost $15,000 to make and it was ripped out in one weekend just to make sure it's a safe environment. (Aust.1Centre1)

In comparison to the Norwegian kindergartens, the Australian practitioners reported that children had fewer opportunities to experience play with heights. Although the Australian Standards for playground equipment in supervised early childhood settings allows for a free height of fall of 1.5m with appropriate soft fall material underneath (Standards Australia, 2004), few practitioners reported that they provided activities that involved such heights:

I hear of other centres that don’t put [the boards] more than 30cm off the ground. I'd rather go 80cm and put lots of mats under and protect [the children]. (Aust.1Centre1)

Ours [the playground] is a bit sad at the moment because our soft fall no longer complies [with the Australian Standards]. It’s really wiped out some of the higher equipment so at the moment it doesn’t look very challenging considering we’ve got older children. The only equipment we can put out given what our height level came out at in the impact test is only those very low trestles. It’s about knee high. So the children aren’t meant to be able to jump off anything higher. (Aust.2Centre2)

In particular, lack of space was identified as a significant issue that influenced what the teachers could provide for the children.

With this outdoor environment we don’t have much space so we can’t have as much ... sometimes it gets a bit simple, like at this time of year when they’re getting older. All the regulations about the space around each (piece of) equipment so you can’t have out as much as you’d like. (Aust.14Centre5)

The lack of sufficiently challenging activities reported by the Australian teachers often resulted in children seeking challenge and at times inappropriate risk-taking in other areas of the physical environment. The teachers felt that this behaviour necessitated greater monitoring and intervention to ensure children’s safety.

The rules and regulations have cut down a lot of the risk-taking. But they’re [the children] inquisitive ... The equipment that you put out, they’ll find another use for.

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 ... so that would be classified as a risk, climbing, but we keep a pretty close eye on it so it doesn’t happen. (Aust.10Centre4)

They love climbing trees. There are other things they could climb here but they’re drawn to something else. We stop them from doing that but they’ll try. (Aust.11Centre4)

The teachers’ decision to intervene in these circumstances was clearly related to the teachers’ duty of care and accountability under the regulations. When parents were there to take over supervision of the children (when collecting children at the end of the day) the situation changed:

They like to climb trees and this place is fantastic for that but due to regulations we can’t really allow them to climb any of the trees because if they do the ones that aren’t on the soft fall then there’s an issue. When their parents are here, they’re always climbing up the trees. (Aust.14Centre5)
If you see a lot of parents out in the playground, they’re not noticing anything that’s happening ... we’ve got this sense of responsibility about having other people’s children and meeting licensing and duty of care, and I think for parents a lot of them haven’t been exposed to the Regulations and it’s ‘oh, they’re just playing’. (Aust.2Centre2)

Even though the Norwegian EC settings offered more opportunities for risk-taking in play due to a more varied and challenging play environment, the Norwegian practitioners agree with the Australian practitioners that having responsibility for other people’s children makes them more restrictive towards risk-taking:

I’m really conscious about the fact that I have the responsibility of other people’s children ... so I guess I’m a bit more careful than if it had been my own children. (Norw.10Centre3Ord.)

Nevertheless, the benefits to be gained by allowing the children to engage in risky play were acknowledged and this type of play was actively supported:

One has to allow children’s risk-taking. For the children to be able to meet challenges one must let them take risks, even though I would walk around with my ‘heart in the throat’. So, I rather stay close to them and watch them, and let them take risks. (Norw.8Centre3Ord.)

Both the Australian and Norwegian practitioners explained that their responses to children’s risk-taking varied with judgements regarding the level of involvement based on child characteristics, context, and the activity. The practitioners stated that in some situations adult involvement was seen as important to ensure safety or provide support, while at other times they believed it was counterproductive.

We sometimes discuss rules about risk-taking and supervision, and for the most time we agree that the children must be allowed to meet the challenge. In practice the decisions made by the practitioners are individual in each situation and depending on who [practitioner] is watching and what child is involved. (Norw.14Centre3Ord.)

As long as we cover ourselves with providing the right, you know, adequate supervision; things are prevented. (Aust.15Centre6)

There’s always a teacher in that area ... just watching what they’re doing and if they have fallen just to give them that guidance so that hopefully they don’t do it again and show them actually how to do ... help them. (Aust.13Centre5)

Factors Limiting Opportunities for Risky Play

There were clear differences in the extent to which the regulatory environment influenced the pedagogical decision-making of the Australian and Norwegian practitioners. The comments from the Australian practitioners suggest that the regulatory environment was a particularly significant influence on their decision-making. The Australian practitioners noted both the positive and negative influence the regulations had on their teaching practice. On the one hand, they felt that the regulations had a positive role to play in ensuring minimum safety standards. On the other hand, the regulations were also seen as constraining the teachers’ pedagogical decision making.

The more regulations there is [sic] the less there is we can do with them. They [the children] ask for something and we can’t do it. I don’t like saying no because obviously they want to experiment on that particular thing. (Aust.11Centre4)

The kids at the present time are really into moving the planks and doing things for themselves. I personally would allow that because that’s problem solving, that’s cooperative play, that’s team building, that’s them working together, challenging and it’s also fitting into emergent curriculum ... but unfortunately you can’t do that anymore, so you’ve got to say to them ‘sorry guys, you can’t put that plank on the blocks even though it’s a great idea and I love it and I know you’d play really well’ but ... three years ago [when at a centre in another state] I would have done that and tied them[the planks] in and not had that problem but now I can’t even do that because one accident and I’m liable. (Aust.16Centre6)
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Accountability and compliance with the regulations was a key concern for the Australian teachers.

We always have that threat over our heads of DoCS [assessors from NSW Department of Community Services] walking through the door at any time. They could come today, umm... 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...’ (Aust.1Centre6)

Obviously if you put an A-frame up really high and somebody falls off and does an injury to themselves then questions will be asked – ’how high was it?’ Yeah, so it’s duty of care and it’s our responsibility that we have to adhere to so we don’t make up the rules but we’ve got a responsibility to follow through. (Aust.7Centre3)

The issue of litigation, whilst not utmost in the teachers’ minds, did nevertheless have implications for their decision-making.

We want children to experience all these things but there are consequences too and how can we as a service provider face that if case goes to court. (Aust.1Centre1)

I think it’s just the whole legal side of being sued; people just don’t want to go there. You know if we take away the risk we take away the liability and you know...you do have to make it safe and you have a responsibility for these children but at the same time accidents happen. It’s not... someone didn’t fall over and bang their head because we weren’t watching them... you could have been right next to them and they still would have done it. (Aust.12Centre5)

It’s [litigation] the reason why we have what we have; why the regulations have changed. At home you’d have the same sort of accidents. I can’t see what DoCS is policing... you can’t have the couch more than three centimetres off the ground because the kids are going to jump off it and break a bone and you can’t have a coffee table with pointed edges because they could [hurt themselves]... it’s ridiculous... but it’s people protecting themselves because we’ve got to a point in our society where we’re suing everybody and everybody’s liable so we’ve got to have it... believe it or not even though I hate them we’ve got to have them because that’s what protects us and that’s what protects the companies that we work for, the industries, and that’s what protects the government. (Aust.16Centre6)

There was however a belief that the situation had been allowed to go too far and consequently outcomes for children were being compromised.

We have a duty of care so we have to obviously abide by that but I think everyone was... a few years back when everyone was suing everybody, it was just ridiculous the things that were going on, and kids just couldn’t be kids – they couldn’t run, they couldn’t explore, you know, don’t run on the concrete, don’t do this, don’t do that. But in saying that it was our responsibility to make sure that the children in our care didn’t get hurt. Personally I think a lot of it has really inhibited their imagination. (Aust.10Centre4)

In contrast, even though one of the Norwegian EC practitioners mentioned that the focus on children’s safety had grown over recent years, the Norwegian practitioners did not report litigation or regulations as a reason for restricting and worrying about risky play among children.

We’re conscious about safety for children, since there is a growing focus on child safety in preschool, but we think that the children must have some challenges. (Norw.14Centre3Ord.)

Although some of the practitioners at times worried about risk-taking, this was because of the harm it could do to the children:

I think about this, actually, when it comes to doing risky things – that I worry a lot, so I have to do something else rather than telling the children ‘no, no’. Then I’d rather go for a walk and let the others decide. (Norw.2Centre1Ord.)

After working here for a while I got to know the children better, and become more familiar with what they’re able to manage. For instance, I found the children whistling with knives very scary
and too risky in the beginning ... and I thought: ‘oi ... are they allowed playing with knives?’ But of course we keep close attention when they whistle with knives! (Norw.9Centre4Out.)

Rather, the most common perception of children’s risk-taking among the Norwegian practitioners was that this was beneficial for children’s development in regards to motor skills, self-image, mastery, psychological development, and so on.

I believe that it’s [risky play] good for them. I think they develop from trying out things and maybe from having hurt themselves as well. I believe that ... because then they know the next time ... they learn to know their own boundaries and their own bodies, what they can handle and accomplish. I don’t think it’s dangerous for them, no ... I think it has to be that way ... that they learn through their own experiences. It’s no use for an adult to say that it’s dangerous to climb a tree, they have to try it themselves! (Norw.3Centre1Ord.)

It is apparent from these comments, that in contrast to the Australian situation, the Norwegian practitioners were able to use their own judgement and knowledge of individual children’s abilities in ensuring the children’s safety, rather than purely adhering to external regulations.

Outcomes of Risk Minimisation

Both the Australian and Norwegian practitioners believed that opportunities for risk-taking were important for children’s learning and development. Nevertheless, the Australian practitioners felt that the overemphasis on safety limited children’s opportunities to learn from risk-taking.

That’s how children learn, by failing, and some of the things we present them, they’re not able to fail. (Aust.5Centre3)

Consequently, they felt this had implications for both children’s confidence and skill development:

I see overall children aren’t as confident when it comes to decision [making] ... they tend to hesitate a lot before they actually commit to something. I think their problem solving skills have decreased. (Aust.10Centre6)

Although the Norwegian practitioners agreed that it was their responsibility to make sure that the risk posed by the children was not too high, leading to severe injuries, or, in worst case scenario, death, they were nevertheless of the opinion that it was their responsibility to make sure the children had opportunities for adequate challenges and stimulation.

We can’t make children’s play too Safe ... that everything becomes too safe and children can’t climb a tree because they could fall down. If we do that, we would hinder children’s development ... their motor competence, ability to encounter challenges and so on ... We would restrict an important part of children’s development. (Norw.13Centre3Ord.)

Discussion

Little and Wyver (2008) identified five factors – high child-staff ratios, external regulation restricting activities, inadequate understanding of the benefits of risk-taking, poor outdoor environment, and fear of litigation – that potentially lead to risk minimisation strategies that limit the quality of outdoor physical play. Analysis of the interviews indicates that Australian EC practitioners had greater difficulties with four of these factors when compared to Norwegian practitioners (the exception was high child-staff ratios, which was not identified as an issue by practitioners in either country). In the case of concerns about litigation, as noted previously, such concerns were only expressed by the Australians and not by the Norwegians. Responses relating to benefits of risk-taking and external regulations are discussed below as these are the key areas in which there were different responses requiring further examination.

Understanding of the Benefits of Risk-taking

Overall, both the Australian and Norwegian teachers acknowledged the importance of opportunities for risk-taking in play for children’s holistic development. They believed that risky
play fostered not only children's motor skill development, but problem solving, confidence and self-esteem. Qualitative and quantitative differences were apparent, however, in how these beliefs translated into teaching practice. Although the Australian practitioners reported that they supported children's attempts to challenge themselves and attempt activities beyond their current skill level, the degree of challenge they were able to provide for children was limited. On the other hand, Norwegian pedagogy has a significant focus on physical activity and outdoor play (Fjørtoft & Sageie, 2000) which is likely to have a significant role in supporting the translation of beliefs and knowledge into practice. Consequently, the Norwegian practitioners reported their perception of risky play as an important and beneficial form of play for children's development as the main argument for including this kind of play in their pedagogical practice. This is seen both in the way they use nature areas for frequent hikes as a means to offer children a greater variety of play environments and natural challenges, and in the way they support, allow, and sometimes take initiative to risk-taking and challenges. This is also supported by previous research pointing out that there are cultural differences in the way EC practitioners handle and include risk-taking in children's play, with Scandinavian countries having a more liberal approach to risky play (New et al, 2005; Little, 2010).

Impact of External Regulations

In line with previous studies (Fenech et al, 2006; Bown & Sumison, 2007; Bundy et al, 2009), the Australian practitioners in the study identified accountability issues, the environment of surveillance, and policing of the regulations as placing constraints upon their pedagogical decision-making. Although thoughts of litigation did not inform their routine decision-making, the Australian practitioners acknowledged the impact of the culture of litigation within the broader society on the regulatory environment. They felt that the overemphasis on safety inherent in the regulations was aimed at reducing liability and safeguarding centres. Consequently, their focus became one of compliance with the regulations at the expense of providing developmentally challenging physical play experiences for the children in their care, thus creating tension between their pedagogy and their accountability in relation to the regulatory environment.

On the other hand, the Norwegian practitioners expressed awareness of the responsibility weighed on them by having the care of other people's children. Still, this was not based on accountability issues to the safety regulations, but rather the fact that they would not allow the same amount of risk to other people's children as they would for their own children. The fact that the Norwegian standards are not as strict as the Australian standards, and the culture of litigation from parents is not a common issue or phenomenon in Norway, may give the Norwegian practitioners a more liberal approach to children's risk-taking, enabling them to provide children greater opportunities for risky play without the fear of being held responsible or sued if any injuries should occur (New et al, 2005; Little, 2010).

The regulatory environment also potentially impacts on the provisioning of the outdoor environment to support risky play. Australian outdoor play areas are highly regulated with regards to minimum space requirements and height and arrangement of play equipment (see for example, Community Services, 2004; Standards Australia, 2004; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). For example, in Australia, the current minimum required outdoor space per child is 7m² (Community Services, 2004), whereas the Kindergarten Act (NMER, 2005) and the Norwegian safety standards (DSB, 1996) do not stipulate a minimum requirement for outdoor space in Norwegian early childhood settings. As a general guide, Mauffette et al (1999, cited by Herrington & Lesmeister, 2006) recommend 13.5m² as necessary for the provision of diverse outdoor experiences that meet safety standards, and Norwegian centres typically have outdoor areas much greater than this (Moser & Martinsen, 2010). Consequently, the practitioners in Australian centres reported that the restrictions and policing of the regulations within the Australian context severely limited the diversity of play, especially activities involving play with heights, speed and the other elements of risky play as reportedly experienced by the children from the Norwegian preschools in this study.

Therefore, the issue of the impact of the regulatory environment for the Australian practitioners is a significant one. ECEC policy in Australia is currently undergoing change with the
move towards the first national curriculum framework and quality standards. With the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQS) in Australia (DEEWR, 2009, 2010), it is important that the intent of both these documents is complementary in how issues relating to risk management are approached. The EYLF recognises that natural environments are an important context for children’s learning: ‘These spaces [natural environments] invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16). Interpretation of and accountability under Quality Area 2: Children’s Health and Safety of the NQS needs to support practitioners’ ability is achieve the aims of the EYLF rather than being perceived as a constraint if greater consistency between teachers’ beliefs and pedagogical practices is to be encouraged. The issue of finding ways to manage risks in play is one that has received increased attention in recent years. Strategies, such as the risk-benefit approach (Ball et al, 2008) developed by Play England to help play providers manage risks in play and ‘provide challenge whilst offering protection from unacceptable harm’ (p. 10), may be a useful resource for professional development workshops and pre-service teacher training for practitioners to support their provision of opportunities for risky play, whilst still meeting their obligations under the regulations.

Whilst the views expressed by both the Australian and Norwegian practitioners highlight some important issues that impact on how risky play might be supported in the ECEC context, the limitations of these findings need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the interviews in both countries were only conducted with a small sample of teachers. A much larger participant base is likely to contribute greater diversity in opinions and practices in both contexts. Furthermore, the interview responses analysed for this article were drawn from two separate studies, hence there were differences in the questions asked of the practitioners and how the interviews were conducted. A single study utilising the same interview regime and methods would provide a more focused approach and greater consistency in the responses elicited.

Conclusion

Comparison of beliefs of Norwegian and Australian EC practitioners has revealed shared definitions of risky play, a shared belief in the importance of risky play, but differences in the way these beliefs are translated into practice. Although both groups of practitioners experienced barriers in translating beliefs into practice, these barriers appeared more significant for the Australian practitioners and were mainly factors that were outside of the practitioners’ direct control (litigious environment, regulatory requirements, and quality of outdoor environment). Even the pedagogical differences identified are to a large extent outside an individual practitioner’s control as these differences are associated with emphases of educational institutions involved in early childhood practitioner training in each country. However, it is apparent that the regulatory environment in which the Norwegian practitioners operate provides greater flexibility, allowing these practitioners to exercise their own professional judgement to manage children’s risky play. On the other hand, the Australian practitioners believe they have less power to do so. The development of professional development programs that include strategies for managing risk as suggested above may be an important step in empowering early childhood practitioners to support children’s risk-taking in play. In addition, research examining the philosophical and theoretical approaches that underpin pedagogy in each country is needed to further elucidate factors associated with the apparent differences between teacher beliefs and their practices.

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Beliefs about Children’s Risky Play


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