

Educator Decision Making about Outdoor Learning Spaces in Early Childhood Education and Care Services

Annie O'Sullivan¹⁾

Macquarie University

Abstract

In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) invites educators in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services to view children as learners who are confident and involved (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) while the National Quality Standard (NQS) contends that the “educational program and practice of educators are child-centred, stimulating and maximise opportunities for enhancing and extending each child’s learning and development” (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2017, p. 95). Additionally, article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) advises that it is a child’s right to contribute and their opinions need to be considered in decisions that affect them (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 1996). Nonetheless, limitations appear to exist in supporting educators’ decisions and provisions in the environment and use of the outdoor learning spaces that contrast with the documents that underpin educator practice. This literature review examines the tensions between the ideal and the reality of children’s and educators’ decision making in outdoor learning spaces. It shows that strong policy alone is not sufficient unless underpinned by an environment in which educators are able to make decisions without fear of litigation and children’s perspectives are heard, respected, and enacted.

Keywords: outdoor play, outdoor spaces, educator decision making, Early Years Learning Framework

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ anne.osullivan@students.mq.edu.au

Introduction

There is no denying that the outdoors is an important space for children (Clark, 2007). There is now a significant body of research to demonstrate that outdoor experiences promote physical activity, social interactions, and emotional well-being as well as improved academic performance (Merewether, 2015). The outdoors provides opportunities for children to explore and experiment (Little, Sandseter, & Wyver, 2012) with space to move freely, experience natural wonders such as weather and seasons, and construct on a larger scale than indoors (Maynard & Waters, 2007). Furthermore, Maynard and Waters (2007) cite research proposing that the outdoors provides space for children to engage in imaginative play that is more real, which is especially significant for boys who participate in the running and chasing of superhero play. Additionally, guidelines for educators promote the outdoor environment as being conducive to greater physical activity (Australian Government, 2009). The Australian Government Department of Health (2017) promotes encouragement of physical activity due to its related benefits: maintaining a healthy weight; supporting brain development; improving balance and co-ordination development and skills; and building strong muscles and bones. Furthermore, researchers such as Little and Sweller (2015) argue for the importance of active spaces in ECEC settings as patterns established in early childhood contribute to the participation in physical activity during later life.

Declines in Play and the Role of ECEC Services

Despite research clearly stating the benefits of outdoor play and physical activity, outdoor play is declining according to Staempfli (2009) offering that the “reasons for these changes are diverse and multilayered, rooted in ever-evolving sets of social and parental expectations and the children’s needs for entertainment and self-expression” (p. 268). Ball, Gill, and Spiegel (2008) agree stating that children since the 1980s are being increasingly more restricted and controlled, spending more time being supervised by adults. Furthermore, environments being supervised by adults rather than parents are regulated to a greater degree with increased accountability according to Little, Wyver, and Gibson (2011),

growing evidence of a risk adverse society (Little et al., 2012). When reflecting on this research, one could question what role educators can play in ensuring children continue to reap the benefits of outdoor play and physical activity.

ECEC services are the ideal spaces to aid in the development of the physical activity habits of children and to influence and share information with families (Australian Government, 2009). The importance and responsibility of ECEC services and educators is emphasized by ECEC attendance numbers. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) censuses (2014) reveal that 48% of children aged 0-12 years attend formal or informal care, revealing that the largest percentages are in prior to school settings with 55% of these being 2-3 years old (ABS, 2014). Additionally, the recent Australian 24-hour movement guidelines for birth to 5 years advise that children under 12 months need to be physically active in a variety of ways several times per day while toddlers and pre-schoolers require at least 180 minutes per day, proposing that pre-schoolers require 60 minutes of this to be energetic play (Australian Government Department of Health, 2017). Consequently, in considering the number of children and the time spent in attendance in ECEC services, it would be justifiably considered a significant responsibility that these guidelines should be included in the provision and curriculum decision making related to outdoor play.

Little (2015) surveyed ECEC services in Australia. The 245 responses revealed that services were well resourced to promote physical activity with the majority, providing 1-2 hours in both morning or afternoon or all day indoor/outdoor play. Furthermore, the majority of services had more than the 7m² per child of outdoor space required under the national regulations, contributing to more outside play (Little, 2015). Despite evidence of adequate resourcing, there is evidence that Australian ECEC educators acknowledge that liability issues impacted on their curriculum decision making with an overemphasis on safety in the regulations and the Australian culture of litigation (Little et al., 2012). Little (2015) argues that there are inconsistencies in how the regulations are interpreted and applied by ECEC services and educators. Consequently, as a result of the removal of hazards, outdoor play spaces in ECEC services have become sterile with an imbalance between safety and the value of the play (Little et al., 2011).

According to Staempfli (2009), play related safety and risks is influenced by societal beliefs and values and the legal system. Staempfli revealed that Europeans believe

excessive supervision is detrimental to child development with the responsibility placed on the child to keep themselves safe. Consequently, children experience less restrictions in their play and engage in environments with equipment that is more diverse and challenging, yet the rate of accidents and injuries are lower (Staempfli, 2009). Furthermore, research according to Staempfli proposes that minor injuries and risk naturally occur during childhood, suggesting that children have a greater understanding of their own capabilities when exposed to the consequences of their actions. Most injuries in playgrounds are regular and less severe such as bruises, fractures, concussions, and contusions while the largest amount of injuries occur to a small percentage of children (Ball et al., 2008, Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Sandseter and Kennair (2011) and Sandseter (2009) concur suggesting that the environment and equipment are not common risk issues or risk related to the quantity of supervising adults. Further, injuries more commonly occur due to children's behaviour and rash decisions and improper use of equipment (Sandseter, 2009). Yet Australian ECEC practitioners have difficulty in shifting their positive beliefs about the benefit of risky play involving speed, heights, and other risks into their practice and provisions (Little et al., 2012) due to perceived "restrictions and policing of the regulations" (p. 312). There is, therefore, a tension between what policy and curriculum documents advocate, what educators believe, and what actually happens in outdoor play.

Australian National Quality Standards and Early Years Learning Framework

The guide to National Quality Standards (NQS) advises that educators need to support children to make appropriate decisions about their own well-being with an understanding that these choices may have an impact on others (ACECQA, 2017). The importance is underscored by the view that when educators allow children to make choices and have control, children link their actions and the consequence of those actions. This is seen to be an important aspect of learning to assess and manage appropriate risks (ACECQA, 2017). Furthermore, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) proposes that outdoor learning spaces should invite risk-taking (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The dilemma appears to be how educators

provide challenge and risk in outdoor learning environments while “offering protection from unacceptable harm” (Ball et al., 2008, p. 8). Research and the documents that underpin ECEC provision and practice offer the answers.

Development of Positive Risk Taking

Ball et al. (2008) advise that adults are capable through their own childhood experiences and observation and knowledge of children and of assessing “good risks” (p. 30) that will support children’s growth, development, and learning. Conversely, “bad risks” (p. 30) have no obvious benefit for children, require expert knowledge, and are identified by industry standards (Ball et al., 2008). In an ECEC service, these standards are the national regulations and Australian standards. Furthermore, Ball et al. (2008) advocate the creation of an environment that balances risk and benefit by implementing and conducting a “risk benefit assessment process that is properly acted upon” (p. 10). This approach when used in an ECEC service would, as Ball et al. (2008) suggest, include the development and implementation of a play policy which clarifies the “values, understandings, principles and criteria on which judgements are based” (p. 41). The play policy would, therefore, include statements about the benefits of play: the reasons for the creation of the play spaces provided; the inclusion of risk taking opportunities for children; and being supported by the services philosophy and other supporting documents (Ball et al., 2008). Furthermore, they recommend the use of formatted tables within the policy, setting out the benefits of play and the risk associated with play, including descriptive comments on each in an attempt to make more considered judgements by educators. Interestingly, ECEC services nationwide “must be able to provide evidence to the authorized officer that they have weighed the obligation to protect children from harm against the benefit of providing children with a stimulating play environment” (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2017, p. 374). Consequently, risk benefit assessment proposed by Ball et al. (2008) is authentic and valid for use in ECEC services.

Prior to undertaking the risk benefit approach (Ball et al., 2008), an ECEC service may benefit from professional learning opportunities, as Little (2015) suggests, about the definition and benefits of risky play and how educators can create environments that afford

opportunities for children's engagement. Little reveals that many ECEC services' conceptualisation of risky play relate only to physical play with the principal provision of risk associated with gross motor equipment. Consequently, Little recommends that ECEC educators need to consider the entire outdoor environment. Researchers agree that there are benefits of promoting risky physical play that includes heights, speed, and rough play as well as play with tools and elements that are dangerous and play that includes disappearing or being alone (Kleppe, Melhuish, & Sandseter, 2017; Sandseter, 2009). The EYLF (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) also approves maintaining that outdoor environments offer an immense variety of opportunities and possibilities and invites "open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connection with nature" (p. 16). The approach to professional learning would depend on the ECEC service and the needs of the service. Some may benefit from formal and expert professional development while others may have an established "lively culture of professional inquiry" (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 13) where all educators are encouraged and participate in a cyclic process of reviewing policies and practice, constantly updating their knowledge and incorporating new ideas (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The latter may choose to use action research in a whole service approach to collectively question, transform, or maintain practice as well as their understandings of practice and the environment in a critical and self-critical approach (Kemmis, 2009). Action research gives educators and involved stakeholders a transparent and deeper understanding (Kemmis, 2009) of provisions and practices and the consequences, ensuring valuable information and evidence for the development of a play policy and consequent curriculum decision making related to the outdoor learning space.

Children's Perspectives

Ultimately and perhaps most importantly, the voices of the children need to be valued and respected in recognition of their capabilities and their right to be included when making decisions that will affect them (ACECQA, 2017; Australian Government Department of

Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; UNICEF, 1996). In doing so, educators are supporting children to share ideas and ask questions about the world around them (ACECQA, 2017). Merewether (2015) concurs offering that as users of the outdoor space, children's insights are crucial. Furthermore, children enjoy expressing their views and have awareness when adults listen to them (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). In respecting the child's voice, an environment that allows time for educators to listen to children needs to be created, where they feel safe and comfortable and are offered ways of sharing ideas that are appropriate to them (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). The strategies used in research studies could be used by educators to give a clear picture and deep understanding of what children want in their particular ECEC service's outdoor environment. Research by Merewether (2015) involved the use of photography and conversations with 3-4-year-old children in their ECEC services in Australia while Clark (2007) used a "mosaic approach" (p. 352) which also included observation and drawings from children in a study of children's viewpoints of ECEC outdoor environments in England and Iceland. While consulting with children, Harris and Manatakis (2013) used movement and role play, music and dance, and storytelling as well as photography and art.

Research can also inform what children universally want in their outdoor environment. Merewether (2015)'s proposal that children do not think the outdoors is just for relaxing or letting "off steam" (p. 104) is supported by research that discovered children valued moving, pretending, socializing, and observing in the outdoor environment. The desire for privacy by children featured in both environments studied by Clark (2007) which coincides with Sandseter (2009)'s risky play category of disappearing/being alone and may be a perceived safety risk in Australian ECEC services. Interestingly, Clark (2007) highlights the use of a "children-only room" (p. 355) in Icelandic playschool where children can play unsupervised whereas English children found other ways to seek privacy. The research in England led Clark (2007) to recommend the creation of flexible outdoor environments where children can be in charge of their environment and have choice and freedom to create change. Therefore, the creation of private places for children requires no barriers or permanent structures placed by adults as these can be created by children using natural or manufactured materials (Clark, 2009). Merewether (2015) agrees that loose and unstructured materials increase activity levels as well as unlimited possibilities for play.

Furthermore, Merewether (2015) discovered that enclosed spaces, especially elevated ones, provide opportunities and encourage children to observe both up close and at a distance, satisfying the child's "eye for detail" (p. 105) and "the bigger picture" (p. 105) which children favoured in the study. Interestingly, heights also feature in Sandseter's (2009) risky play categories. However, Little (2015) found that in Australian ECEC services, children's opportunities for play at heights were limited with few services, allowing the climbing of trees and many restricted the height of equipment to one metre. Additionally, in relation to other risky play categories (Sandseter, 2009), Little (2015) found only half of Australian ECEC service encourages play with tools. Ironically, it is the challenge and thrill of risky play that children desire and actively seek (Little & Wyver, 2010). Furthermore, children as young as four through awareness of their own capabilities are capable of making risk judgements which inform their behaviour and participation in experiences (Little & Wyver, 2010). Sandseter and Kennair (2011) note that, during infancy, children naturally develop fears of certain stimuli, such as heights, to protect themselves from situations that they are unable to maturely cope with. Risky play exposes children to these stimuli and allows them to cope and ultimately master these experiences (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011). Ironically, it is the emotions that children enjoy experiencing that adults attempt to protect them (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). Consequently, by really listening to the child's voice regarding their capabilities and needs and having a deep knowledge of the skills and development of each individual child, educators can equip themselves to create an outdoor learning space that benefits all children's growth and development.

Conclusion

This literature review has revealed that limitations are placed on children in ECEC services in Australia, which restricts the outdoor learning environment and provisions offered to children in this space. Despite strong national policies and public discourse in Australia, educators are not adequately alleviated of fears of litigation or other adverse outcomes associated with providing opportunities for risky play. Likewise, the good intentions to acknowledge children's voices are not readily translated into practice. The

consequent development and implementation of future policies related to outdoor play need to balance the risk and benefit in the quest to fulfil the needs of all children while valuing and respecting their capabilities and voices. “Children are important. They bring their own value and influence to the world as well as being shaped by the world around them” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 7).

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