What barriers, perceived or actual, do educators face when implementing risky play in preschool environments?

Introduction

Once, children would spend vast amounts of time playing outside, creating their own play environments without the supervision of adults. The play was fraught with risks and danger and was social by nature. These environments created rich learning and developmental opportunities. Over the last three decades a slow erosion of children's freedom to choose their play has swept across, not just Australia, but most of the western countries. Preschool environments haven't escaped its reach. This literature review looks at studies that examine the barriers educators face when creating these rich learning environments in their own services. It will achieve this by looking at the definition of risk, its benefits, the perceived barriers, how risk perception is formed, and how to re-calibrate risk perception. The argument over whether to engage in risky play or not is beyond the scope of this review, with thousands of research papers published regarding the benefits there is no real argument. Opposing views of the benefits to risky play will be looked at only to help frame some of the barriers educators face.

The definition of risks.

The term 'risk' usually has negative connotations. Often interchangeable with the term hazard (Lupton & Tulloch 2002, p.8), risks are seen as adverse actions to be avoided. Some sort of loss will be incurred, to the detriment of the participant (Hansen Sandseter 2010; Little 2015, p.25). Schwebel et al (2006, p.153) go as far as suggesting, the aim is to fully eliminate any risk which may lead to childhood injury. Speiegal et al (2014) propose this one way view of risk was born from the risk-management methodologies employed by systems engineering. While avoiding risks, absolutely, is ideal when working with complex engineering problems, those same systems when translated to human behaviour,

fail to address human complexity (Checkland & Poulter cited in Speiegal et al. 2014). A neutral definition of risk put forth by Little and Eagar (2010, p.499) maintains that risk is a situation requiring alternative pathways leading to unknown outcomes. The suggestion that risk may have positive outcomes, is a new concept in the risk-averse western countries (Furedi cited in Little & Wyver 2008; Niehues et al. 2013).

Risk benefits

Scandinavian countries allow infants to sleep outside in winter, Japanese schools allow children to manage other's behaviours without adult intervention, and Norwegian forest schools allow children to whittle with sharp knives (New, Mardell & Robinson 2005). Even the European Committee for Standardisation (cited in Little & Eager 2010) states risk is important for development, and injuries such as cuts, bruises, and even the occasional broken arm, are acceptable in the pursuit of competences gained in physical, emotional and social learning. It is believed that looking at the negative characteristics of risk without considering the benefits is an unbalanced view (Gill 2007; Little & Eager 2010). Through risky play psychological benefits develop as children learn to address phobias and fears, (Sandseter, E 2009, p.68), cognitive benefits develop as children problem solve and make sense of their surroundings (Greenfield cited in Dowdell, Gray & Malone 2011), gross and fine motor skills are improved along with co-ordination, agility and balance (Chivers et al. 2012; Dowdell, Gray & Malone 2011; Gill 2007; Louv 2010) and physical health concerns, such as obesity, can be addressed as risky play is often physically demanding by nature (Coleman & Dyment 2013; 2012). One of the salient benefits of risk taking is, it enables children to learn about their capabilities and limitations, and how to manage uncertainties involved with risks and, through success or failure, learn how to become confident, resilient adults (Cevher-Kalburan 2014, p.2; Dowdell, Gray & Malone 2011; Gill 2007, p.16; Niehues et al. 2013, p.224). With so much evidence supporting the benefits of risky play it would seem

implementation would be straightforward, unfortunately there are many barriers risk benefit practitioners face.

Barriers to risky play

Litigation is seen as a major barrier to risky play as practitioners weigh up the risk of litigation compared to the learning benefit the children will gain (Esch & Cox 2012; Little & Wyver 2008; Martin & Cooper 2005; New, Mardell & Robinson 2005; Spiegal et al. 2014). Manufactures of play equipment are also effected by the fear of litigation. Not only does the fear represent itself in the design of the equipment, it is also used as a selling tool, hyping the safety qualities of their designs (Spiegal et al. 2014). Councils and schools, through fear of litigation, have installed less risky equipment, such as spring rockers and composite structures (Martin & Cooper 2005) while others have removed playgrounds, all together, rather than bring them up to standards (Gill 2007; Murn 2008; Spiegal et al. 2014). Newspaper headlines such as 'Lawyer sues for son hurt in game of 'chasey' at St Finbar's Parish Primary School (Thompson 2015), and 'Kids in playground are dicing with danger' (Berry 2004) give the impression Australia is a litigious country, yet even before the 2002 Tort reforms addressed the concerns of litigations over negligence, Australia was not a litigious society (McDonald 2005).

The fear of nature is an obstacle to implementing risky play environments (Louv 2010, p.130; MacQuarrie, Nugent & Warden 2013).The fear, dirt carries germs, rain makes you sick, the sun burns and adverse weather is a hazard, can shape educators and parents views on environmental risks (Curtis 2007, p.663; Louv 2010; Waite 2010). Educators cite the uncertainties of natural environment as an un-necessary risk to be avoided (Waite 2010, p.119).

Safety standards, regulations, and policies are often cited as major barriers to risky play environments (MacQuarrie, Nugent & Warden 2013; Spiegal et al. 2014). Playground safety standards can easily be viewed as an actual barrier to risky play when studies suggest tightening playground safety standards, by

recommending lower fall heights, increased impact absorbing materials and increased playground inspections (Martin & Cooper 2005; Schwebel et al. 2006; Sherker & Ozanne-Smith 2004; Sherker et al. 2009). Little and Eager (2010, p.510) argue, playground standards rely upon wide-spread evidence-based research, spanning decades, compiling child injury and mortality statistics, with an aim of eliminating hazards, an argument supported by Martin and Cooper (2005). However, much has been written about the politics of safety standards. Spiegal et al (2014, pp.6-7) reject the notion that playground standards are scientific and true. They argue, standards are interleaved with value judgments, with an overwhelming focus on injury elimination and little concern regarding the benefits of risk. They also maintain standards concern themselves with ideals beyond safety, with economic and trade aspects addressed (Vogel 2001) , as is evident with the press release issued from the Australian standards where they state 'This series of standards will allow playground equipment manufacturers in Australian and overseas to trade with reduced barriers' (Standards 2014). It's insinuated, this may lead to ulterior motives related more towards economic gains, than child development (Spiegal et al. 2014). Spiegal et al (2014, p.6) agree, standards are necessary, however the focus should be on engineering concerns, such as cross-beam strength, and material thickness, not value-saturated concepts such as risk-benefit. Playground inspection is also viewed as value-laden and not scientific. While fall heights, soft fall depth, and entrapment hazards are measured , the inspectors rarely dismantle or measure structural integrity as the cost are prohibitive (Spiegal et al. 2014) .

Parents are also perceived as a hindrance to risky play (Little & Wyver 2008; MacQuarrie, Nugent & Warden 2013; Niehues et al. 2013). Apter (2001) suggest some parents tend to gravitate to the telic, or risk-protection state. They wish to control children's experiences, and avoid risky play (Niehues et al. 2013). Some parents can even affect how learning is implemented as educators have denied children experiences that facilitate development for fear of litigation if an injury is sustained (Little & Wyver

2008, p.35; Murn 2008). Parent's beliefs regarding risk illustrates a salient concept when looking at barriers faced when implementing risky play in preschools, namely, risk perception.

Risk perception

There are many factors to consider when examining risk perception. Cultural views differ in regards to what constitutes risk (Little & Wyver 2008; Lupton & Tulloch 2002; MacQuarrie, Nugent & Warden 2013; New, Mardell & Robinson 2005; Pachur et al. 2012; Sandseter, EBH 2013). Little and Wyver (2008, p.37) examine the Indigenous Australians concept of risk, and attained most Aboriginal cultures see play as a survival mechanism in which risky play is an essential aspect, and Guldberg (cited in Sandseter, EBH 2013) reports, Norwegian culture is strongly connected to nature, and Norwegians are reluctant to refuse children the opportunity to learn through risky nature play, a view supported by Cevher-Kalburan (2014). Lupton and Tulloch (2002, p.115) endorse Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978) as a way societies construct an understanding of risk. They advocate the theory that risk perception is dynamic and contextual, reflecting historical cultural values. Gender is a cultural construct, and studies have shown males are more willing to engage in risky activities (Dowdell, Gray & Malone 2011; Sandseter, EBH 2013). Not only is this witnessed in children; it is also witnessed in male educators (Sandseter, EBH 2013).

The media is another factor shaping people's perceptions of risk. Through skewing statistics, focusing on novelties and rarities, the media fosters beliefs that some phenomena are more prevalent than they really are (Pachur et al. 2012). In a study that confirms this statement, parents stated, even though, statistically, they knew their child was safe in a park, they restricted access due to perceived 'stranger danger', a concept fed to them via television (Little 2015). Pachur et al (2012) states affective heuristics are shaped through sensationalizing stories. When views are based on emotions, as opposed to available data, risk perception can be skewed.

Sandseter (2010) reports the telic, or Serious state, and paratelic, or playful state in Apter's (2001, p.8) Reversal Theory contribute to peoples risk perception. A paratelic child engaged in risky play is engrossed in the process with little value given to the outcome, while an over-protective telic adult may see the perceived outcome of injury and terminate the activity. The paratelic child may shift to a telic state, and weigh the outcome, or chance of injury, against the process, while the telic adult may shift to a paratelic state and give more value to the learning process. Both states exist simultaneously yet one is in the foreground and one in the background (Apter 2001).

Calibrating risk perception.

Studies have found (Niehues et al. 2013; Pachur et al. 2012), experts form judgments based on correlated research, while laypeople' judgements are formed through heuristics. The Pachur et al (2012) findings report, when lay people rely upon availability heuristics, or information based on personal accounts within their society, excluding media, as opposed to affective heuristics, then risk perception was closer to statistical data. Instead of expecting adults to shift to an academic paradigm, the study suggest the availability heuristics will suffice. The Niehues et al research (2013), examines ways to reframe risk perception. Using re-framing workshops, they focused on what thought patterns are used to come to conclusions, such as the 'thinking fast' heuristic approach, or 'slow thinking' analytic approach. The participants were asked to see risk benefits from various perspectives. The Lupton and Tulloch study (2002) created discourse between educators and parents, on the self-improvement benefits of risk taking. When parents identified how they benefit from risks their risk perception changed.

Conclusion

While children's risky play is no longer at the levels seen historically, the current literature highlights the movement towards a balance between hazard avoidance and risk benefit learning environments. Reflecting upon all stakeholders perceptions of risk is the key to the cultural shift required to make this happen. While actual barriers such as standards, regulation and polices exist, the barriers of fear, perception and bias can be transformed into understandings of risk benefits. The challenge for the future educators in Australia is deciding what strategies are needed to bring about this shift. Looking at the work done by Niehues et al, with their reframing risk workshops, and the many studies done by Helen Little, evidence of success in an Australian context is apparent. More research has to be conducted into how Australian educators can translate overseas models to suit the Australian culture. No one is calling for the return of monkey bars over asphalt, yet common sense and an affective free view of research data will help services create rich learning environments.

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