

RISKY PLAY FROM THE STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The importance of nature in the context of the development of quality childhood was discussed in the works of well-known theorists such as Pestalozzi, Hahn, Wilson, Froebel, Piaget, Vigotsky, Bruner, and many others. More recently, new pedagogies which put nature in the focus of their work have emerged and they go under the common name of Outdoor Curriculum. Outdoor curriculum is defined as a place that provides a child with a multi-sensible environment in which the child is given the freedom of exploring nature with many challenges, and it gives a them sense of satisfaction and free choice (Stine, 1997; Wilson, 2018; Waller, Ärlemalm-Hagsær, Sandseter, Hammond, Lekies, Wyver, 2017; White, 2014).

While observing the Outdoor Curriculum and risk play, we have to take into account a wider social context, governed by statutory provisions passed by the UN, OECD, EU and many others. Waters (2017, p. 41) mentioned “[...] considerations are highly relevant in the international context of development of both early years’ provision, including the use of outdoor space, as well as educational provision more generally, and can be aligned with enactment of aspect of the United Nations Convention the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly those related to agency, voice, education and play.” The Scandinavian countries take their focus on living with nature, which is a big part of the national culture. This results in an Outdoor Concept which is embedded in the national curriculum most of countries. One example is Icelandic and their curriculum issued by the law of Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2011). The main starting point of *The Icelandic preschool curriculum – guide for preschools* is that preschool activities should encourage health and wellbeing, in an environment that contributes to a healthy lifestyle and improves motor skills. Outdoor risky play contributes to all of these things and more. The main concern when it comes

to risky play and children seems to be safety. The Early Years Foundation Stage sets the standards that all early years' education providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe (EYFS, 2014).

Risky play and *Outdoor Curriculum* are well-known terms whose importance has been recognized as one of the segments of education of early education and preschool children. A number of authors, such as Hill and Bundy (2014), Sandseter and Kennair (2011), and Sandseter (2007) are focused on this topic and are presenting the importance of the Outdoor Curriculum and risky play through their research.

However, there is no adequate term in Croatian language that would allow for terms *outdoor* and *risky play* to be translated. Those terms are used only by a few professionals from the education system with the desire to bring the profession closer to the meaning and importance of the implementation of these concepts in everyday practice. Future kindergarten teachers do not receive this information as part of their formal education and are thus deprived of important information that is the basis for their overall professional development. That fact was the main driver for this research.

Outdoor Play

Values and vision of outdoor play are based on the high quality of activities offered in nature. Outdoor play has a strong potential and a significant role in many fundamental aspects of child development. DCSF (2008) gives an overview of five outcomes according to the *Every Child Matters* act, namely: health, safety, satisfaction and achievement, contribution and economic well-being. By acquiring these elements, the basis for the overall progress of each individual child is being built. According to White (2008, pp. 2–3), “[...] an outdoor play offers the child: access to places that offer a wealth of natural vegetation and sounds of nature; fresh air and experience of different weather conditions; contact with animals living in nature; curiosity, freedom of exploration, adventure, innovation and contempt; a wide range of actual experiences that are meaningful and relevant; endless possibilities of discoveries, play and conversations which enables this experience to be processed, understandable and useful; environment that offers stimuli and information for all senses at the same time; an environment that gives the whole body a deeper meaning and physical health, a movement that helps develop essential structures within the brain and the nervous system; emotional and mental health and the development of self-confidence and self-esteem; social interactivity in the development of relationships, social skills and enjoyment of socializing with others; a lot of opportunities to develop their own challenges and learn to maintain their own security; a place that meets the need for learning and expressing emotions, thoughts and ideas in the way that best suits them”.

Being outdoors brings new and different activities that can lead to the emergence of certain risky behaviours that may result in children's injuries (Little, Wyver, 2008). However, being outdoors and exposing children to such activities can also help them develop the skills of spotting and avoiding risky situations (Louv, 2015).

Risky Play

While staying outdoors, it is necessary to ensure safety for the child, while also challenging them and allowing them to find the balance between these elements (Little, Wyver, 2008). Stephenson (2003) conducted a research with four-year-old children, which brought us the overview of activities that require taking a certain dose of risk. Those activities included skating, swimming, spinning, jumping, climbing, and cycling. While being outdoors, children are tempted by climbing, sliding down the hill, and jumping from the rocks and trees. They also get the chance to play with long branches, bows and arrows, knives and hammers as tools which can help with performing tasks or as part of the fun – these are just some of the risky situations in which children can find themselves while staying outdoors (Sandseter, 2010). Another research included children from the ages of three to five Sandseter (2009) and it defined six categories of the risky play: height – danger of falling (climbing, jumping, hanging, rocking, balancing); speed – uncontrolled speed causing a collision with objects or persons; playing with dangerous tools – rope, knife, nails, hammer, bow and arrow; playing near dangerous places – water, fire, cliffs; rough and tumble – wrestling, fencing, fighting; getting lost in the woods – lack of supervision or enclosure which can cause the child to get lost.

An overview of the division of risky play and activities will enable a better understanding of the term. It is important that adults reaffirm the need to provide children with an opportunity to actively participate in potentially risky situations, so that they can develop self-awareness about dangers and their avoidance through the development of their abilities and skills (Little, Wyver, 2008). If a child never had a chance to climb a tree, one cannot expect that skill to develop by just seeing someone climb (Wilson, 2018; White, 2008). The experience of climbing a tree will enable the child to recall their abilities, and will help them to observe and avoid dangerous elements such as a thin branch that will not withstand their weight. The most important thing is for children to learn how to rationally evaluate their potential and to prevent the risky situation. In this process, a child needs support from an adult who understands the importance of activities that contain a certain risk. In the pursuit of these facts, research was carried out to see the attitudes and opinions of future kindergarten teachers towards risky play (Sandeters, 2008; Waters, 2017; White, 2014).

Communication and building partnerships with parents are key in promoting the benefits of nature and risky play, according Little (2010). Kindergarten teachers should explain to the parents the ways of child learning and development through the activities they are involved in, in different environments. If the teacher is confident about the risky play policy, this will help ease any parental anxiety (Richardson, 2013). That is why it is important to work on the development of the competencies of kindergarten teachers. Many regulations and increasing concerns about children's safety influence beliefs of preschool teachers, making it difficult for teachers to find the right balance between allowing children to encounter risks and challenges in the playground while at the same time preventing serious injuries (Sandseter, 2010). In a Norwegian preschool Sandseter

(2009) conducts research between kindergarten teachers about dealing with risk-taking play. She revealed four strategies teachers use when dealing with risky play, these are: restricting/constraining, supervising, not present/distance and contributing/initiating. The results show that although some of the teachers allowed the children to continue with risky situations, others made decisions for the children that ended up with the children stopping the activity. The choice of reaction is based on the knowledge and attitudes of the teachers. The results of research point to a reflection on the importance of educating future teachers. That is why research has been conducted among students to see how they relate to risky play and the possibility of changing the educational program, and potentially making changes in National Curriculum for Early and Primary Education.

Research

A quantitative survey was carried out to determine students' opinions about the Outdoor Curriculum and the tolerance of risky play, as well as their attitude towards activities that could have certain consequences. The data subjects are full-time and part-time students of the Faculty of Teacher Education with the focus on early and pre-school education, who have agreed to participate in this research anonymously. All participants have been presented with the aim of the research and its purpose, as well as the purpose of this scientific article. The research was conducted in June 2018 during their last year of study.

For research purposes, a questionnaire TRIPS (The Tolerance of Risk in Play Scale, 2014) was used by authors Hill and Bundy, who have provided an email authorization for use. The risk tolerance scale consisted of 30 claims to which participants could respond with YES/NO answers. The research included $N = 204$ students, of which $N = 105$ were full-time students and $N = 99$ were part-time students, with a number of them working as kindergarten teachers in institutions of early and preschool education. Early and preschool education in Croatia covers children aged 1 to 6 (MZO, 2007).

All participants were female since the kindergarten teachers are traditionally mostly women. This can be related to the greater involvement of women in child education in general (Jurčević-Lozančić, 2011). The average age of respondents was 25.68 years, $SD = 7.026$. Of the total number of respondents, $N = 57$ (27.9%) of them were familiar with the concept of Outdoor Curriculum at the faculty and in conversation with colleagues at work, $N = 146$ (71.6%) of respondents have never heard about it. When asked *How often do you think children should be allowed to play outdoors at the kindergarten?* the results were as follows. $N = 97$ (47.5%) of the respondents believe that they need to take children outdoors twice a day, $N = 86$ (42.2%) think that once a day is enough, while $N = 21$ (10.3%) think that only a few times a week would be enough.

Being outdoors can be affected by weather conditions as they are one of the most important elements in organizing outdoor activities within kindergarten (Harrison, Goodman et al., 2017). When asked *Do weather conditions have any influence on taking children outdoors?* $N = 126$ (61.8%) of the respondents said yes, while $N = 78$ (38.2%)

of the respondents did not see weather as an element that had an effect on the outdoor activities. Going outdoors while it rains would be the choice of $N = 134$ (65.7%) of the respondents, while $N = 70$ (34.3%) of the respondents would not do so. Taking children outdoors in the snow would be acceptable for $N = 196$ (96.1%) of the respondents. Pearson's correlation test establishes a mild connection between the length of the outdoor stay and the weather conditions with rain and snow. The most significant correlation is between the time interval in the outdoors and the rain (Table 1). This statement can be confirmed with the fact that rain as a natural phenomenon can greatly disturb outdoor activities if there is no adequate equipment. If the child does not have adequate footwear and clothing, it becomes wet and that can greatly affect further activities.

Table 1. Correlation between the length of the time spent outdoors and weather conditions

	Time spent outdoors	Weather influence on the outdoor stay	Rain	Snow
Time spent outdoors	1	0.075 0.285	-0.027 0.702	-0.056 0.423
Weather influence on the outdoor stay	0.075 0.285	1	-0.441** 0.000	-0.003 0.965
Rain	-0.027 0.702	-0.441** 0.000	1	-0.040 0.574
Snow	-0.056 0.423	-0.003 0.965	-0.040 0.574	1

** $p \leq 0.01$

* $p \geq 0.05$

Research on students' opinion regarding the risky play tolerance included various types of activities that could cause certain injuries to children. The importance of developing a positive opinion on the possibilities of children is the basis for accepting different choices in children's activities. When asked T19 – *Would you allow a child to play in the yard without your supervision?* only $N = 60$ (29.4%) answered yes, while $N = 144$ (70.6%) answered no. Such results may indicate a high degree of protective attitude towards children caused by a large number of children in the group, as well as a low degree of trust in the children. When asked T6 – *Would you allow a child to play with hammer and nails without your supervision?* $N = 177$ (86.8%) answered no, which confirms a high degree of fear and distrust in children's abilities. This can be attributed to the status of the respondents and their knowledge of the characteristics of children. When asked T5 – *Would you allow the child to continue playing if they received some scratches while playing?* $N = 145$ (71.5%) of the respondents said yes. The results of the descriptive analysis of those claims indicated the need to analyze the correlation between the age of respondents and the time they have spent working as a kindergarten teacher. By using the T-test, the correlation between the age of the respondents and the outcome of the asser-

tion was established. The answers to T2 – *Would you allow a child to play hide and seek outdoors?* show the correlation at the $p \leq 0.05$ level, while claims T4, T10, T17, T25, and T26 showed a correlation at the $p \leq 0.01$ level considering the age of the respondents and the amount of time they have spent in the profession (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation of the TRIPS claims, with the age of respondents and the time they have spent working as kindergarten teachers

Claims	Age	Internship time
T2 – Would you allow a child to play hide and seek outdoors?	0.139* 0.047	0.173* 0.013
T4 – Would you allow a child to go down the slide head-first while sliding?	-0.213** 0.002	-0.256** 0.000
T10 – Would you allow a child to participate in a game where they would hit each other with bats?	-0.228** 0.001	-0.220** 0.002
T17 – Would you allow a child to swim near the shore while you are supervising from the shore?	0.222** 0.001	0.201** 0.004
T25 – Would you trust a child to play safely?	0.235** 0.001	0.201** 0.004
T26 – Would you allow a child to use a sharp knife?	-0.207** 0.003	-0.155* 0.027

** $p \leq 0.01$

* $p \leq 0.05$

Conclusion

According to the results of this research, we can see that full-time students as well the part-time students of the Faculty of Teacher Education with the focus on early and preschool education have a certain degree of insecurities and distrust towards children and their abilities. The reason for such an attitude can be found in insufficient formal education about the Outdoor Curriculum. Better insight into the Outdoor Concept would provide them with a deeper understanding of the child's potential in outdoor activities, especially regarding the use of natural computing in the development of cognitive, physical and psychological development of a child. Besides the change in the way students are thinking, it is necessary to start implementing the State Pedagogical Standard (2010) which insists on having a smaller number of children in a group. The current large number of children per kindergarten teacher brings some pressure that is based on ensuring a safe and controlled environment which reduces research and creative activities outdoors. It is also important to emphasize the pressure of parents who are primarily seeking safe conditions that will contribute to reducing the incidents that can cause scarring and injuries of the children. Overprotective attitude of parents prevents children's natural need for movement and exploring, as well

as adopting skills and abilities that will prevent the possibility of injuries. The best way to prevent an injury is to enable a child to be active and to explore their opportunities, as well as to develop critical thinking that will be a key element in their choices of activities. The choice of the outdoor activities should never be limited to weather conditions, since rain and snow can contribute to expanding the child's knowledge and skills. The learning process will facilitate adequate clothing and footwear that will provide the child with a basic starting point based on feelings of comfort and safety, because there is no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing and footwear. A new dimension of childhood opens up by getting acquainted with the importance of being outdoors.

This research is relevant in the Croatian context due to the need to change the curriculum of future kindergarten teachers. Considering the initial status is a fundamental guideline for planning future programs that include kindergarten teachers' preparation for a more professional approach to risk play and an Outdoor Concept in general.

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Abstract

The interactive process involving play as a main component of children's activities enables children to identify existing knowledge, skills and abilities, and to enhance and enrich them with new cognitive elements. Outdoor play is certainly an inspiration for a child's holistic development. Children have the opportunity for motor, psychological and cognitive development in an environment that provides countless situations that are changing due to constant natural variations that occur under the influence of meteorological changes, changes in plant and animal life. Along with the above elements, it is necessary to add an element of risky play that is equally important in the process of childhood education and learning. Today's overprotection of children by parents has taken away the segment of risky play, which is an important element of childhood. Parents' attitude towards risky play also defines the attitude of kindergarten teachers who, under the pressure of parents, create an artificial environment in which a child is unable to explore this important segment of play, or take risks in their activities, decisions and procedures. That exact segment is the subject of this research, which aims to explore the opinions of the future kindergarten teachers about risky play and their attitude towards it. The research was conducted through a questionnaire in which students of their 3rd year of undergraduate studies and 1st year of graduate studies of early and pre-school education took part. According to the results of this research, we have observed the need for changes in the education of future kindergarten teachers. This can be done by expanding the content related to the Outdoor Curriculum and risky play.

Keywords: children of early and preschool age, education of kindergarten teachers, nature, Outdoor