

Preschool teacher's courage and physicality in risk-filled play

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Abstract

The purpose with the article is to make visible and discuss the role of preschool teachers in working with risk-filled play in a physical and didactic perspective.

Risky play is defined as: 'An exciting and challenging game that involves uncertainty and the risk of physical injury. (Sandseter, 2010). These are activities where children balance on the verge of losing control. The play is exciting precisely because there is a risk and fear of the unknown. In order to create such possibilities, preschool teachers need to create frameworks that both allow and contain opportunities for risky play.

Building on the research project 'Risky Play in Day Care' the focus of this article is on preschool teachers' courage and physicality. Reflections is made as to which considerations the preschool teachers make in relation to challenging and/or counteracting a precautionary culture, where the adults are the ones preventing the children from engaging in risk filled play, based on their own norms and values.

This will be linked to a theoretical framework regarding the development of preschool teachers personal competencies within their professional role. This personal aspect of their profession, will in the article be linked with preschool teachers' work with risk-filled play in educational environments, where their physicality comes into play.

The outcome of the article is to bring forth and discuss the role of preschool teachers in working with risk-filled play in a physical and didactic perspective. The research project shows, through interviews with preschool teachers, that risky play has the potential to help individuals think about play in a different and challenging way.

Introduction

This article is written on the basis of a research project “Risky Play in Day Care” (Risikofyldt leg I dagtilbud) which offers a look at the relationships between risky play and personal, motor and social skills in children, as well as the role of preschool teacher in risky play.

The research project Risky Play in Day Care Services investigates the work of 12 day care centres with courageous and risky play.

The research project was initiated in spring 2017 at UCC University College (now KP, Copenhagen Higher Education School). All day care institutions in a selected municipality sent 1-2 preschool teachers to the Educational Diploma Program (PD) in the Body and Education (Krop og dannelse) module, where pedagogical work with risky play was included as a key element. After graduation, several networks were established among the participating preschool teachers and their institutions in the municipality. Through joint meetings, activities in these networks were discussed, considered, and planned. The research project has followed one of these networks (of around 15 preschool Teachers) in their efforts to set goals, plan, initiate, document, and evaluate activities based on the educational curricula as well as their follow-up reflections.

The questions we seek out to shed light on in this article is: What is the impact of an educational programme (PD) in relation to risky play.

We do so, with the empirical study of experiences of the before mentioned 15 select preschool teachers along with a discussion of the theoretical framework in connection to these. The new angle in this article is that we address the impact of an educational programme (PD) in relation to risky play. The article focuses on preschool teachers that have participated in an educational programme (Body and bildung) where risky play has

been emphasized and how the preschool teachers after the program implement and consider risky play in daycare.

Methodology

The project includes seven qualitative interviews conducted with ten selected preschool teachers, all of whom have completed a PD module in Body and Education, which was part of the network we followed. The interviews were conducted after we had observed the preschool Teacher interacting with the children in risky play.

The interviews are carried out using a semi-structured questionnaire, where we both prepare general research questions primarily for ourselves, and specific questions for our informants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

This is based on theoretical and practical knowledge of the field and a sparingly knowledge of the informants. The focus is on being open to new perspectives and information that the interviewed can produce, and we are thus trying to understand the lives of the informants from their own perspective. The interview is thus approaching an everyday conversation, but "(..) has as a professional interview a purpose and involves a special approach and technique: it is semi-structured-it is neither an open daily conversation nor a closed questionnaire" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:45).

The primary target group is preschool teachers who have implemented PD in body and bildung. In addition, the target group is nursery- and kindergarten children in local kindergartens, where activities are carried out on the basis of the curriculum theme of body and movement.

The observations of the preschool teachers and children are carried out prior to the interviews in order to be able to 'get to know the field' and go into the work of the teachers and the target group (Hastrup, 1992). By conducting pre-interview observations, it becomes possible to have a different and more insight into the work in question with risky play.

Using observation as a method, there are both advantages and disadvantages. One of the positive aspects of the method is to observe the direct behaviour of people. One observes the individual's actions in the given situation and therefore it is not possible to

lie about his behaviour. However, by observation as a method, it is not possible to question the observed and its motives for action, therefore it is advantageous to combine observation and qualitative interviews. Finally, the behaviour of the observer can be influenced if you are aware that you are being observed, which can lead to uncertainty regarding the data (Aagerup, 2015).

In our study, we have processed data ethically, in the sense that personal information is anonymised. In addition, oral consent is given for data to be used in the project for further processing and analysis.

Results & Discussion

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Based on a thematic analysis of the empirical material (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), three themes emerged: personal development, motor development and social development and wellbeing. In relation to children in kindergarten and their development. This result supports working with risk-filled play. With regards to the preschool teachers' courage and physicality, the study shows that the approach to risky play and the role of the preschool teacher are crucial. The preschool teacher mentions that it requires comfort in one self, knowledge concerning risk-filled play, along with the will to work with it.

Partly what the preschool teachers express regarding their own role in creating the boundaries for risk filled play in daycares, and partly regarding what the preschool teachers think can limit the risk-filled play for the children. Further, the article reflects on what thoughts the preschool teacher does in relation to challenging and/or counteracting a precautionary culture, where it is the adults who stop the children in their risk-filled play, based on their own norms and values.

The above is linked to the theoretical framework concerning the evolution of the preschool teachers' personal competencies within their professional role, which can be described as a trinity between the personal, the professional, and the physical (Winther, 2012). In the article, the personal/professional relationship is coupled with preschool teachers' work with risk-filled play in an educational environment, where their physicality is brought into play. The purpose with the article is thus, to make visible and

discuss the role of preschool teachers in working with risk-filled play in a physical and didactic perspective.

To lead the way in risk-filled play and support the child's play with the risky, it is required of the preschool teachers to have a connection to their own body and to feel what they have the courage to.

Risk-filled play is defined as; *“An exciting and challenging game, which involves uncertainty and the risk of physical injury”* (Sandseter, 2015: 16). It is activities, where the children are balancing on the edge of being in control. Sandseter divides risk-filled play in the following categories: Play with heights, play at high speed, play with dangerous tools, play near dangerous elements, wild play, and “getting lost” play (Sandseter, 2015). The game becomes exciting just because there is a risk and a fear of the unknown. To create such opportunities, it is required that the preschool teachers create the boundaries, which allows and accommodates the possibility of risk-filled play.

New strengthened curricula

In the new pedagogical curricula (2018), there is a special focus on educational environments:

“(…) The partners of the deal agree that in the bill for daycares, to make clear a direction and common pedagogical foundation for working with the local pedagogical curricula and the local planning of pedagogical educational environments. The common pedagogical foundation means among other things, that personnel and leadership in day cares has the responsibility to establish an educational environment with a focus on cultivation, play, children's perspective, teaching, and children fellowships” (Aftaletekst, Børne- og socialministeriet, 2017).

The *educational environment* is described as fundamental in children's ability to learn. Thus, it becomes the preschool teacher's responsibility to organize and plan educational spaces, which can motivate and provide children with the opportunities to learn and grow in an (educational) environment, where they experience a basic trust towards the

adults and the other children, enabling them to explore and meet the world with joy, curiosity, and enjoyment of life (Stærke dagtilbud – alle børn med i fællesskabet, 2017). In this article the link between creating educational spaces and the work of preschool teachers to establish the boundaries for risk-filled play in special types of educational environments is made. The new curricula builds on a broad definition of learning, to support children's physical, motor, social, emotional and cognitive learning and cultivation (Bahrenscheer, Kortbek og Sederberg, 2018). We do not just see learning as a phenomena that occurs in the formal educational space through scheduled activities in a few hours a day. It should be thought into the everyday routines of the pedagogical work and in the conditions regarding the informal educational space eg. In the free play of the children. We want to promote the importance of also making more room for informal educational spaces in risk-filled play eg. At the playground, when climbing trees, cycling downhill, crawling on the roof of the play house etc. In these instances, the preschool teacher takes on a supporting and observing role with less influence. Thus, the children's own imagination, creativity and contemplation are brought into play (Næsby, 2014).

What does our study reveal about the possibilities of risky play?

One of the preschool Teacher expresses her ideas on riskiness as follows:

'It is important that they [the children] know their body. For example, if they get up and climb a tree, they know their strength and they can sense if the branch begins to break now or [...]. But risky play can also be tag, it's about hurrying to run between each other and get away. And risky play for nursery-age children can be a small thing like climbing onto a chair by themselves. So [risky play is a way] to make them aware of doing it and strengthening their body awareness, their senses, and their courage, and making them ready for what many people see as truly dangerous [...] And if they fall, so what? It's something to learn from.'

Here the teacher illustrates the versatility of riskiness, explaining that it depends on the individual child's assumptions. It may involve a child falling down – but 'so what?', as she says. Obviously, it is a difficult balance: when does play become too risky and decidedly dangerous? One teacher says:

'It's one thing to get hurt; I don't think it means anything to get a little bit hurt, but it's when they become injured that it's getting too dangerous. '

The above quotes can be seen in relation to Gill's points that risky play can help them cope with situations they may face later in life (Gill, 2007). Helle Marie Skovbjerg Karoff, Denmark's first professor of play, describes the dangerous as gasoline in all kinds of play. The dangerous helps ensure that the play remains fun and inspiring and makes sense of the play. At the same time, the dangerous poses a risk of collapsing if that sense of fear takes over too much (Karoff, 2015). Although there is a built-in fear in the play, the dominant feelings should preferably be joy and mastery, so the children seek out the play again (Sandseter, 2010; 2015). As one teacher said, 'Thus, they [the children] grow a mile when they master something they didn't think they could do.' There are of course individual differences, and not all children necessarily enjoy the same level of excitement. There may be differences in how children respond to risky play in relation to the challenges they face. If the play is associated with pure fear, the child loses control of the play, and may respond with flight or resistance against continuing (Karoff, 2015).

The approach to risky play and the role of the preschool teacher are crucial. The preschool teacher mentions that it requires comfort in one self, knowledge concerning risk-filled play along with the will to work with it.

The feeling that occurs most often in children who participate in risky play is the feeling of excitement, bordering on fear, and it is this feeling and condition that is often the child's goal in the play. The art is to find the balance just before the fear takes over and the play is interrupted (Sandseter, 2010; Csikzentmihalyi, 2005). Of course, preschool teachers have an important role to play here. There is a difficult balance between taking over the play and letting the children control the play, but by paying attention to the children's play, preschool teachers can become more astute at reading the children's bodily and verbal signals and expressions.

The professional/personal competencies

A preschool teacher describes what is required of preschool teachers to work with risk-filled play:

"Firstly, I think you have the security in you, so that you express that you are in control, both towards yourself but of course also towards the children. That way, they have some safe conditions for them to challenge themselves (...) and then I think that you have to want it (...) and of course it also requires some knowledge (...). So, knowledge, security, and the will has to be there. I think it is difficult to establish safe conditions for the children, if you yourself are not secure in this".

The preschool teacher mentions that it requires *comfort* in one self, *knowledge* concerning risk-filled play along with the *will* to work with it. In relation to these aspects we gather inspiration from scientific researcher in the psychology of movement, Helle Winther, and her study which shows the importance of the body in the capabilities of professionals. The preschool teacher is engaging with their body in the meeting with the children, and it is important that the preschool teacher is aware of the significance of his or her body in that meeting. If the preschool teacher eg. signals with the body that what the child is doing is dangerous, it can reflect on the child's courage and willingness to challenge themselves. Winther calls it the 'professional/personal competency', which means that the body is an important part of the professionalism of the preschool teacher (Winther, 2012).

Professional/personal competency is a trinity between the personal, the professional and the physical. The body is seen in a phenomenological perspective as our or foundational condition of existence – it is always present, also in the professional meeting. Likewise is the personality always a part of the professional (Laursen, 2003). The art as a preschool teacher, is in creating a trinity between the personal, the professional and the physical in the professional/personal. According to Winther it requires practice to get the three dimensions (person, body, and profession) to support each other, and is very much dependent on learning the signals of your own body. The professional/personal competency contains:

- Contact with self – is about the preschool teacher being in contact with their own body and personal emotions and ability to be focused and present.
- Communication and social contact – is about the preschool teacher's ability to see, listen, sense, and feel both the verbal and non-verbal communication and to create trust and set up boundaries.

- Leadership of a group or situation – is about the preschool teacher’s ability to create the professional overview, glow, centralization, clear leadership of the group or situation. It is the ability to take over a room and keep it with physically anchored authority (Winther 2012).

To have professional/personal competency is thus about being in contact with one's own body and knowing its signals and expressions, as well as being able to read others verbal and non-verbal expressions. Furthermore, it is required to be able to create a space, dare to be on the spot and be physically, professionally and personally present in that space. (Winther, 2012).

When the preschool teacher in the quote above talks about it being about security, knowledge and will, it can be seen in relation to the professional/personal competencies. It is about feeling secure in one's own action in the risky games, and it is about daring to stand up, which is related to security and the will. Another interviewee says:

“I believe that there are quite a few preschool teachers that can be somewhat scared of the chaos-like, because you cannot keep an eye on the children at all times. But with experience it becomes okay to try things and to let go a little bit, and then all sorts of things can happen”.

The preschool teacher talks about the chaos-like situation, which can happen in risk-filled play and how they can seem scary. It can be that as a preschool teacher you have to reflect on what it is, that makes it seem chaotic. And to “let go a little” as the interviewee says. But in order to let go, it is required that you know your own professional/personal competency and are aware of the body’s significance in this. Because it is a (physical) emotion that it seems chaotic – and this emotion occurs in relation to your own boundaries. It takes practice and reflection to become aware of one's professional/personal competency, and it is not necessarily something that happens by itself. The preschool teacher will thus have to differentiate between a long list of possible actions to take in the specific activity, and that estimation builds on experiences, sensations and intuition (Nygren, 2009). The experiences, sensations and intuitions are related with the professional/personal, as it is seen in relation to the experiences of the personality and the body. Any action is this dependent on the specific situation and the specific preschool teacher. The main activity of a preschool teacher is active, and with a starting point in Aristoteles’ bodies of knowledge it can be argued

that a application oriented competency development, is build on doing something through one's professional skills (knowledge) and abilities (practical) (Bahrenscheer & Sederberg, 2017). Seen in relation to risk-filled play it is therefore concerning the preschool teachers building their knowledge and experiences around what risk-filled play is, as well as gathering specific, physical experiences with the universe of risk-filled play themselves, so as to be able to form the supporting boundaries and challenges for the children.

The rush

At one of the joint days of activity, where the institutions in the municipality would meet and do risk-filled games, which were planned and developed by the network preschool teachers, one reflected on the purpose of these days She stressed the fact that pushing boundaries, to feel the rush flowing through you – both for the children and the adults as valuable in working with risk-filled play. She addressed the role of the adult as important especially concerning physical participation in the activities. To lead the way with their own body and motivate the children to participate requires courage, as many of the preschool teachers also spoke about in the interviews. One example is:

“I have to dare to do some of it, because if I do not dare, then I am not encouraging the children to participate. As an adult you play a big role in that. It is not helpful for me to just be on the sideline. I can be that sometimes, but I also have to be leading the way in order to get some of the children to go along, who wouldn't normally do it. The ones that need some supporting and guidance”.

It then becomes about entering the universe of risk-filled play – either to support the children's initiatives or to be leading the way instead of backing down. If the preschool teachers experience that it is too dangerous, the tasks become to reflect on why they feel this insecurity and/or lack of will to participate in the risk-filled game? Maybe it is about their fear for what can go wrong? But as a network preschool teacher says, when she is reflecting on her new role to the colleagues: *“I would say; instead of taking them [the children] off the slide, get behind them. Stand by them, and see if they can do it. And if they should fall, well, then you will be there to support them”.*

Norms, values and body

The pedagogical work with risk-filled play requires a consciousness regarding one's own role. It is about challenging and counteracting a precautionary culture, where it is the adults that are stopping children's (risk-filled) play. Thus, the focus is on the role of the "resource person" of the institution, concerning ensuring children's opportunity to participate in risk-filled play, based in the collective reflexively reasoned norms and value of the institution, and not just adults stopping children in their risk-filled play, based on their own norms and values. The empirical data shows that the preschool teachers, which are part of the network, actively use their knowledge, their reflections, and their courage to create new norms and values for risk-filled play in the day cares. In this article, we have linked the preschool teacher's knowledge, reflections and courage in working with the risk-filled, with the professional/personal competencies of the preschool teachers. In Winther's terminology it is thus about the preschool teachers ability to clearly signal security and comfort through their contact with self, communication and leadership (Winther, 2012). A preschool teacher quotes:

"The adult who is having fun, rubs off on the children. If the children can see; this is something the adult also enjoys, they will think it too. It does something to the children that are a little insecure. They can see that the adult also finds it enjoyable. (...) Many, many adults and educated professionals have a hard time using their body when playing with children. Especially if the playing gets wild. Then we would like the male colleagues to handle it, right? (...) Children are pretty good at it [risk-filled play], if they are shown how to".

Through the preschool teacher's reflections it can be seen how the physicality in play is addressed as a challenge (especially when playing wildly) for many preschool teachers. With Helle Winther's theoretical outlook on the professional/personal can the work with risk-filled play in diverse educational environments give the preschool teachers new opportunities for bringing their own physicality in play through planning and participation of the risk filled play.

Didactic in the risk-filled

It has apparent importance that preschool teachers are leading the way of working with risk-filled games. Both in order to support the children who are not engaging in risk-filled games themselves, but also to support the children that are actively seeking to be

challenged. The preschool teachers in the project highlight the importance of observing and supporting children's play with the risk in both the formal and informal educational space. In the free play at the playground, the preschool teacher has a more supporting and observing function with less influence, where the children's own imagination, creativity, and immersion is brought into play. The preschool teachers highlight further, how the preschool teacher's role in the formal educational space with risk-filled play in a physical and didactic perspective, should have a central role in pedagogical practices of the institution.

A preschool teacher states:

“You have to be prepared like the paper I gave to you, the one that says you can't stand there and think; what should I do now. I think that is important. Also the ones you are together with, that they also now, what is about to happen”.

By working systematically with risk-filled play through didactic planning and reflection, the preschool teachers can get a new outlook on a number of teaching- and development opportunities through intentional activities in the formal educational space, where the focus is on adult created education, with the adult leading the way establishing boundaries, targets etc. (Næsby, 2014; Sederberg, Kortbek & Bahrenscheer, 2017).

Conclusion

The preschool teachers and selected children met across institutions in the network, where they, in turn, arranged to initiate activities within the risky play universe (e.g. chopping wood with axes, riding cable cars, play-fighting, rappelling down a steep slope, playing on the playhouse roof, etc.). In addition, we participated in joint activity days where all institutions in the network participated (also those preschool teachers who had not been on the PD module in Body and Education). Thus, observations and spontaneous discussions with the children and adults involved were included as a background for the interviews we conducted subsequently. That way, it became possible to talk with the preschool teacher about common experiences which arose.

Based on the preschool teachers reflections and thoughts, the project provides a range of suggestions on what risky play can do and why it is important in relation to children's

personal, motor, and social skills. Empirical and research project analyses show the importance of preschool teachers' understanding of risky play, their ability to reflect on possibilities and barriers, and of how to translate it into action in practice. Risky play can help create new and different play possibilities, but if it is to be made possible, preschool teachers' nuanced image of what risky play is becomes important. The focus must be on what risky play can accomplish, and so it is about creating frameworks, norms, and values for the work of risky play in the institution. The risk can be objective and real if the children are doing something decidedly dangerous. But it is also about looking beyond the risk so that the play does not stop automatically, just because the preschool teacher thinks the play is risky. It's about trying to reflect on how risky play can create development opportunities for the child and making a real assessment of whether an activity is really dangerous or simply challenging. Our observations showed that risky play often takes place in communities of practice where the children learn to read the situation and cooperate with each other to cope with the physical challenges. Based on empirical observation and the selected literature, the research project shows that it is important that preschool teachers are aware of the new opportunities that may arise within the risky play universe. Risky play can develop children's motor skills and their faith in their own physical abilities and drive. Last but not least, risky play can strengthen the children's feeling of mastery and experience of success with significance for their personal and social development.

It becomes very obvious; it is a shame for the children, if preschool teachers are limiting them in the universe of risk-filled play. By working actively with one's own professional/personal competencies as well as didactic reflection in collaboration with colleagues, this article has shed light on the thoughts, reflections, and specific practical experiences of selected preschool teachers, with working with risk-filled play and the opportunities for development and challenges this brings.

It is about becoming aware of and perhaps challenging the norms and values of the institution of working within the universe of risk-filled play and the physicality and courage of preschool teachers to explore the risk-filled, that plays a crucial role in this work.

For other researchers wishing to investigate risky play in practice, we can recommend the qualitative survey method (here through observations and interviews). If we were to

expand the project, we would take a child's perspective on risky play as well as a greater focus on how risky play and child communities mutually affect each other with an impact on children's social skills.

Reflection

Below are four questions that can form the basis for reflection and discussion about educational work with children's risky play universe in relation to personal, physical, motor, and social development.

Questions for reflection

1. What strengths and challenges do you see in work with risky play – in relation to the development of children's personal skills?
2. What relationship between physical and motor development and risky play do you see on the basis of the article?
3. How would you like to organise a course of activity that encompasses risky play and the development of children's communities and social skills?
4. Discuss the interfaces between when play is risky and when it becomes too risky (i.e. dangerous).

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