

Challenges Early Childhood Educators Face in Promoting Outdoor Play - A Qualitative Study

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Background

Outdoor play (e.g., climbing, running, hiding), and the inherent risk-taking that comes with it, is crucial for children's social, physical, and intellectual development, emotional well-being, self-confidence, and risk management (Brussoni et al, 2015). However, early childhood education centres often restrict outdoor play due to limited understanding of its importance, excessive safety fears, and liability concerns (Canadian Public Health Association). Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) play a vital role in supporting children to engage in unstructured outdoor play, they yet identify unique challenges when promoting outdoor play, as well as when incorporating outdoor play in their pedagogical approaches.



Aim

To determine the challenges Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) identify in promoting outdoor play

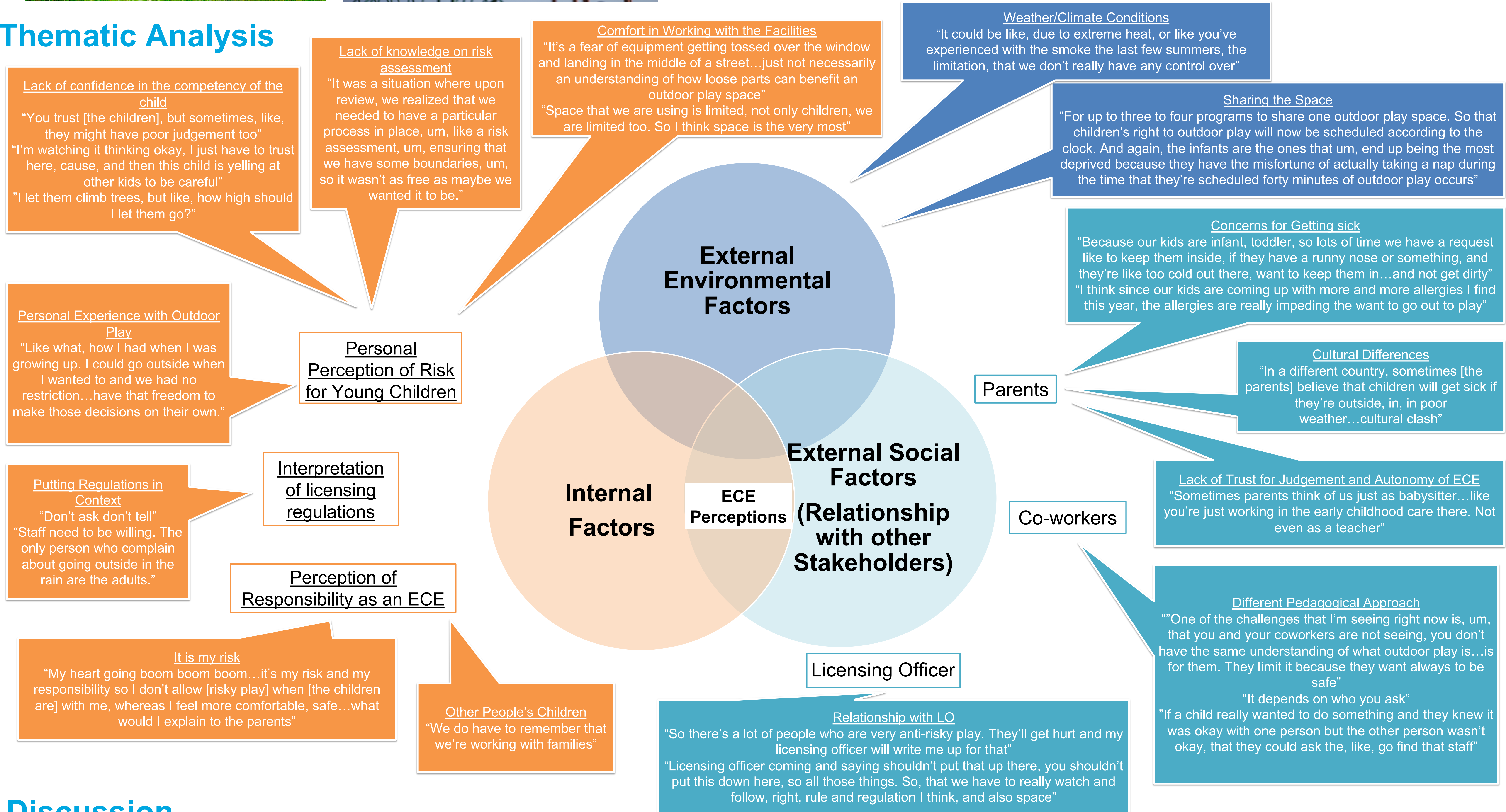
Method and Participants (n=40)

Five focus groups were conducted with BC professionals working in the ECE field. Participants discussed their experiences with outdoor play including: how it impacts the children in their centres and their professional practice, challenges, and their needs for support when promoting outdoor play. Focus group data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Participants Demographic

- All participants were female
- 32% of the participants hold multiple roles: e.g. was an ECE and now a Licensing Officer
- Over 50% of the participants indicated children in their centres get more than 2 hours of outdoor play daily (current requirement for licensing)
- 78% of the participants have experience working with Indigenous, lower income and newcomer families

Thematic Analysis



Discussion

Both internal and external factors influence ECEs' perceived barriers. These results suggest that although ECEs may recognize the potential benefits of outdoor play, the perceived lack of resources and supports makes promoting outdoor play particularly difficult. The ECE's confidence in professional competency can be affected by relationships between ECEs and colleagues, licensing officers, children, and parents, which are seen as foundational to support outdoor unstructured play successfully. Supporting resources should help ECEs to (1) improve the quality of the outdoor play space, (2) gain skill and confidence to address other stakeholders' concerns (i.e., parents, co-workers, and licensing officers), and (3) increase perceptions of young children as competent and capable.

Conclusion

The qualitative data shed insights on ECE's view on the importance of outdoor play, risk perceptions, managing safety and liability fears, and guide the development of a plan for changing service delivery. Resources such as risk assessment guidelines, samples, and examples of outdoor play would likely help ECEs in promoting outdoor play. Ultimately, these findings are to be incorporated into a larger Early Childhood Outside study, which aims to develop a digital risk reframing tool to educate and promote outdoor play within ECE staff, administrators, students, faculty members, or licensing officers.

Acknowledgement

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Selected References

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