Risk taker or risk averse? Stories from early childhood leaders that demonstrate the complexities involved in empowering young children | tamariki to take safe risks in the outdoors

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ABSTRACT

Risk-taking in the outdoors provides opportunities for young tamariki to develop their physical skills and learn to self-manage risk. Within an early childhood setting many policies and regulations are in place to ensure that tamariki are kept safe from harm. Early childhood leaders are tasked with the challenge of managing the tension between providing sufficient opportunities for tamariki to engage in risk-taking while following regulations to successfully eliminate any hazards that could cause serious harm. The scenarios and voices of the key informants presented in this article demonstrate ways that safe risk-taking opportunities can be implemented while navigating this tension.

INTRODUCTION

Risk taking can be defined as the act of engaging in play where the outcome is uncertain (Little, 2006). If we consider this definition in relation to tamariki in the early childhood environment this can be seen as tamariki engaging in play that explores and tests their physical abilities through engagement in safe risk-taking opportunities with heights, speed, tests of strength and the use of real tools (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). However, the concept of 'risk' is subjective and what one kaiako might see as a safe risk-taking opportunity, another might see as an unsafe risk (Little et al., 2012). A further complication is the term risk-taking can have negative or positive connotations associated with it which can be framed by the individual's perspective. A recent study by Little (2022) found that adults' attitudes influence their practices in relation to supporting risk taking opportunities for tamariki. Early childhood kaiako who are risk averse and concerned about the safety of tamariki limit the opportunities provided for safe risk taking to occur, where kaiako who have a more credit-based view of outdoor play, encourage risk-taking (Little, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review sought to explore the topic of risk-taking in the outdoors and to understand the current definitions and views of risk-taking for young tamariki in outdoor early childhood education environments. The literature review was viewed through a constructivist lens. Constructivism focuses on how the individual constructs knowledge and makes sense through their experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Defining risk-taking

Engagement in safe risk-taking in the outdoors provides opportunities for tamariki to learn more about their own limits, learn to manage risk and to develop an understanding of safety (Gill, 2007; Little & Wyver, 2008). However, if teachers have a fear of risk this can potentially result in the overprotection of tamariki, which may result in tamariki becoming overly cautious towards risk-taking and being less prepared to cope with challenges (Madge & Barker, 2007).

Little, Sandseter and Wyver found that definitions of 'risk' tended to view risk in a negative light, hence leading to risk averse practices (2012). How parents define what constitutes an unsafe risk can significantly influence teachers' and centre managers' decisions, values and beliefs in relation to providing safe risk-taking opportunities in the outdoor environment (Little, Sandseter & Wyver, 2012). When people who are not the child's parents are in charge, the accountability level can feel higher and ultimately impact on pedagogical practices and experiences offered that support risk-taking (Little, Wyver & Gibson, 2011). This high level of accountability and kaiako individual views on risk can be factors that can impact adversely on the provision of risk-taking opportunities in the early childhood environment (Van Rooijen & Newstead, 2017). Little and Wyver (2008) found that opportunities for tamariki to explore risk in the outdoors are limited by those who view risk in this negative way.

In contrast to this negative view, Little (2019) believes that risky play can be perceived as "...thrilling, exciting, physically challenging activities like climbing, jumping, balancing, or rough and tumble play..." (p. 1). Furthermore, risk-taking opportunities can generate positive outcomes, such as, the delight in overcoming fear and mastering a specific skill (Hanrahan & Duncan, 2019). Brussoni et al. (2015) agree that engaging in risk-taking is exciting play for tamariki but add that this thrilling type of risk-taking may also include the possibility of being physically injured. In contrast to the view that risk-taking may include the possibility of risk, Nicol (2013) suggests that to be deemed an acceptable (or safe risk) where learning occurs, the tamariki must not be harmed in any way; physically, cognitively or emotionally. Stephenson (2003) defines risk-taking as a tamaiti trying something new to them; "...feeling on the borderline of 'out of control' often because of height or speed and overcoming fear" (p. 36).

Sandseter (2007) conducted a study that observed tamariki aged 3-5. From this Norwegian study, Sandseter labelled risky play into six categories "play with great heights; play with high speed; play with dangerous tools; play near dangerous elements; rough-and-tumble play; play where the children can 'disappear'/get lost" (p. 243). A New Zealand study of tamariki aged four, that was carried out by Greenfield (2004) found that climbing was the most obvious and frequent form of risk-taking that tamariki engaged in. Greenfield's findings

support Sandseter's view that playing at height is a significant element of risk-taking. Greenfield's study also identified a range of equipment that can support risk-taking in the outdoors, such as bikes, slides, sandpit and swings (Greenfield, 2004). When tamariki use equipment such as that outlined by Greenfield (2004) to engage in risk-taking, the activity can elicit a range of emotive responses, such as a feeling of exhilaration and excitement or a feeling of trepidation (Little, Sandseter & Wyver, 2012). Taylor (2015) views risk-taking through a positive lens and claims that the positive benefits from engaging in risk-taking are more important than the limited detrimental effects. Tamariki need access to opportunities that challenge and stimulate them enabling them to develop physically and mentally (Sandseter, 2012). Mastering a challenge empowers a tamaiti and develops their physical competency.

With the introduction of the revised version of ***Te Whāriki: He Whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa*** *Early childhood curriculum*, greater prominence has been placed on the role of risk-taking in the early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). The mandating of the early edition of *Te* ***Whāriki*** was intended to raise the status of early childhood education and for the workers in this profession. Prior to the development of a national early childhood curriculum, early childhood centres were simply seen to be a place where tamariki were cared for and a place to play (Mutch, 2004). Mandating a curriculum that was underpinned by a sociocultural approach to learning meant that play was not prominent in the early edition of the curriculum (Stover & McLachlan, 2017). Between the inception of the first edition and the revised edition, more tamariki are now enrolled in early childhood education for longer periods of time and as such "the pendulum of reform has moved back and 'play' is now more visible in *Te Whāriki* 2017; perhaps as a reminder that the institutionalisation of children does not necessarily lead to wellbeing, and that children's capacity to build resilience requires risk taking" (Stover & McLachlan, 2017, p. 3). The previous 1996 version mentioned risk only once, as a learning outcome for tamariki (Ministry of Education, 1996). The current 2017 version mentions risk or risk-taking positively seven times, either in relation to what tamariki should experience, or how kaiako should support tamariki to take risks (Hanrahan, 2018). The revised version of *Te* ***Whāriki*** (MoE, 2017) states that tamariki should:

> ...have opportunities to make choices, take risks, and engage in a wide range of play, both inside and outside, with the support of kaiako, and that the environment should be "challenging but not hazardous... [and] while alert to possible hazards, kaiako support healthy risk-taking play with heights, speed, tests of strength and the use of real tools. (p. 28).

This has promoted a more positive view on the role of provision of safe risk-taking opportunities and the associated learning that can occur for tamariki through engaging in risky play. ***Te Whāriki*** posits the view that tamariki need opportunities to engage in safe risk-taking while supported by their kaiako (MoE, 2017).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This article reports on findings from a larger research study which aimed to examine the perspectives and practices of early childhood kaiako and centre managers in relation to risk-taking for tamariki in the outdoor environment of early childhood settings (Hanrahan, 2018). This larger study had a dual focus on both kaiako and early childhood education leaders' perspectives, however, the findings and discussion presented in this article focus on the role of leaders. The overarching research question posed in the original study was: What factors influence New Zealand early childhood kaiako and centre management perspectives and practices related to children's risk-taking in the outdoor environment? The research question was explored in relation to the impact of regulations and policy and barriers and enablers. As the research sought to investigate key informants' personal experiences, a qualitative research approach was used to guide the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A constructivist approach was used to seek out early childhood managers' individual meanings and perspectives in the context in which they work. Utilising open-ended questions ensured participants could share their opinions and understandings (Creswell, 2014).

To gather data from the perspective of ECE leaders, interviews were semi-structured, using open-ended questions to ensure a rich conversation could unfold (Drever, 2003). The aim of the interviews was to obtain a leadership perspective on factors that influence centre leaders' perspectives and practices in relation to supporting tamariki risk-taking in the outdoor environment. To access the views of ECE managers, key informant interviews were employed. Three ECE service managers, one from each of the three differing types of services, a Kindergarten, a privately-owned service and a community-based service, were approached to participate. The decision to select a leader from one of each of these services was to gain an understanding of a range of perspectives across different contexts and within different leadership structures.

The potential participants for the key informant interviews were selected intentionally, via purposive sampling (Mutch, 2013). The prerequisite for selection was that services catered for tamariki aged 3-5 years old, provided ample access to the outdoors, operated at least 6 hours per day, and were on a 3–4-year review cycle with the Education Review Office (ERO) (Education Review Office, 2013). All ECE service managers were qualified, with a minimum of a Diploma of Teaching (ECE) and held a full teacher | kaiako registration.

Data analysis involved the generation of themes from interviews, drawn from the semi structured questions posed. Thematic coding was utilised for its appropriateness as a tool for qualitative analysis, as it enabled the researcher to form categories grounded in the data (Mutch, 2013). The key informant interviewee responses were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interview transcripts were created as Microsoft Word documents and stored as one file for thematic analysis. Data was analysed initially via open coding by noting categories emerging from the data line by line and in relation to relevant literature. The data was revisited multiple times, enabling summarising and subsequent pulling together of categories into key themes (Punch, 2009). Key comments were highlighted. Many of the responses from participants traversed themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research study had a dual focus and included two phases. In the first phase, early childhood teachers teaching within the Canterbury district of New Zealand were invited to participate in an online questionnaire. The second phase involved interviews with key informants who were Centre Managers or Head Teachers working in a management role within an early childhood setting in the Canterbury region. The findings from the research study were discussed in three sections: external factors that influence teachers' perceptions, professional factors that influence teachers' perceptions and the role of leadership. Within these three sections eleven themes were discussed. The themes that are explored in this article are, the role of leadership in safe risk-taking in the outdoors, educating staff, optimal outdoor environments and the influence of media reporting on significant incidents in the outdoors.

The role of leadership in safe risk-taking in the outdoors

Early childhood leaders are responsible for the safety and education of tamariki in their care. Centre leaders who contributed to the present study were committed to supporting, mentoring and teaching their staff to understand the importance of providing opportunities to engage in safe risk-taking in the outdoors and how to enact this in practice. The three key informants spoke of providing opportunities for staff to set up the outdoor environment independently and then using these moments to mentor staff in relation to safe risk-taking. This mentoring included engaging in pedagogical dialogue and using reflective questioning to enquire about the set-up of the environment, the pedagogical benefits and the consideration paid to health and safety measures. These opportunities presented openings for discussion around risk-taking, health and safety and the set-up of the environment in relation to the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 to support staff development (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2008). One of the key informants commented that "if you're having to have a discussion with a [kaiako] around say an aspect of play that they've set up that you know actually isn't safe then it's not just your opinion... the regulations state, it's not just me being pedantic or saying I don't want children to take risks" (Key informant 3).

Early Childhood centre leaders have a high level of accountability regarding keeping tamariki safe from harm. Early childhood education in Aotearoa is regulated by the Ministry of Education. The Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 set the mandated expectations of Early Childhood Service providers. Centre leaders need to adhere to these regulations. Alongside this, the higher level of expectation for centre leaders in keeping tamariki safe, has gained prominence since the Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) was introduced. The launch of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, which was required to be implemented from the 4th of April 2016, had implications for schools and early childhood settings (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2016a). The responsibilities of education settings and the subsequent implications of insufficient health and safety measures were initially confusing. The Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) outlines a need "to eliminate risks to health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable; and if it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate risks to health and safety, to minimise those risks so far as is reasonably practicable" (p. 32). The new law meant that individuals could be

held personally liable and could face prosecution of a fine of up to $600,000 if an injury occurs (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2016b). This research study highlighted that this higher level of expectation is felt by centre leaders. One of the key informants shared that "we all have such a sense of responsibility ... it might fall back on me if something terrible did happen" (Key informant 1).

One of the key informants also indicated that she feels this pressure and articulated the importance of ensuring that all health and safety documentation was completed and up to date in alignment with the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. She sees this as an important aspect of her leadership role and a key aspect of her commitment to tamariki and their whānau. This participant shared: "I think there is that obligation as a centre manager or particularly a centre owner, that you know, you keep up to date with all that documentation" (Key informant 3).

Key informants that were interviewed suggested that the pressure of this high level of accountability could possibly be alleviated by engaging in dialogue with whānau. Key informant one felt strongly that there were opportunities to engage with parents in dialogue around the concept of risk-taking and seize opportunities to educate whānau rather than be influenced by the parents' view. The following excerpt from our interview shows her thoughts on this and demonstrates how this would be enacted in her practice.

> ...[be]cause the society that we live in today is to wrap our children up in cotton wool and so we do see parents, they just hover over their children all the time and...when our parents are here...we try and role model to the parents; so, some children they'll be swinging on the swing like really high, or they'll be asking for a push and you'll say 'Aww do you push them that high?' or 'do you like them to climb that high?' (Key informant 1).

This opens the conversation about risk-taking and provides the opportunity to have a learning focused discussion with whānau. Along with engaging with whānau in conversation about risk-taking, the key informants of the study also saw value in engaging in pedagogical dialogue with staff. All three key informants saw this as an important aspect of their role in leading opportunities for risk-taking in the outdoors. This included the importance that they place on effective communication with staff around safe risk-taking in the outdoors. One of the key informants shared, "I think it's about having conversations with [Kaiako] and I think it's about lots of aspects of the curriculum that you make sure that you are having that dialogue with [Kaiako] (Key informant 3).

Educating staff

Findings from the research demonstrated the importance that early childhood leaders place on supporting and mentoring their staff to develop their understanding of, and provision for safe risk-taking in the outdoors. All three key informants valued the role of pedagogical leadership and effectively mentored staff using a range of approaches to empower kaiako to develop their understanding about risk-taking and how to provide opportunities for safe risk-taking in the outdoors.

One strategy that was utilised by all the centre leaders to foster kaiako learning around risk-taking, was to provide opportunities for staff to set up the outdoor environment for tamariki. Once the set up was complete the centre leader would engage in dialogue with the kaiako around the set-up of the environment

inquiring into the pedagogical decisions that they had made. This included reflective questioning to ascertain the kaiako understanding of what they have provided, how it promotes risk-taking and how they had ensured that tamariki would be kept safe from harm.
Key Informant two shared:

> ...I just have to make sure that the staff know what the regulations are... you know if I think something [that they have set up] is a little bit risky I might say how are we going to manage this? Maybe that might be a little bit too high? ... had you thought about what happens if? Because my... leadership style is not to tell them what to do it's to say, hey had you thought about this? (Key Informant 2).

Key informant three shared:

> ...It's about having conversations with teachers and I think it's about lots of aspects of the curriculum that you make sure that you are having that dialogue with teachers and I think we are probably lucky here that it just happens naturally that you've got a professional team of teachers that are quite like minded that you can have those discussions. I think if you were a leader in a centre where maybe the knowledge and the experience wasn't as great, then you would be having to have more conversations and asking more questions you know around tell me what's out in the playground today that's going to challenge our children or is going to allow them to take some safe kind of risks... and like talking to teachers around the policies that sit around that or you know the regulations. ...Some [teachers] might deem something as unsafe, but we can have those professional conversations and then come to [a solution] (Key Informant 3).

The use of "skilful questioning and the ability to genuinely listen are vitally important skills for mentors to master" (Raymond, Flack & Burrows, 2016, p. 30). Questioning was viewed as a useful tool to support further understanding around risk-taking.

The centre leaders that participated in the study found that opportunities like the one discussed previously also provided a good opportunity to refer to the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 to support staff development (MoE, 2008). Key informant three provided an example where she observed the set-up of the outdoor environment and noticed an aspect of play that was not safe and then used the regulations to support her stance through kōrero with the kaiako who had set up the environment. The leader felt that these instances were good learning opportunities where you could draw from mandatory early childhood requirements and use this to protect the tamariki and the kaiako.

Key informant one explained how they had provided handmade hammocks on the deck for tamariki to explore and use. These hammocks were made from material and were big enough to become a double hammock providing space for two tamariki. The key informant explained how some of the tamariki loved to spin in the hammocks and would spin, spin and spin until they were feeling sick, then they would take themselves off the hammock and when feeling

better they would return and engage in the experience again. This example demonstrates how they were empowered to manage their own risk. During this scenario one of the other kaiako was concerned about this experience and said to the centre leader "I don't know…do you think we should take it down or shall we tie it or …the children be timed" (Key informant 1). This was navigated by the centre leader through discussion and questioning about the learning that was occurring and how the risk was being self-managed by tamariki. The centre leader highlighted the age of the tamariki (four years old) and their ability to self-manage the risk. The key informant elaborated further during the interview that the risk was highlighted, the concern was noted, a discussion was had, and the risk was managed.

Throughout the interviews a strong thread that emerged was the importance of engaging in dialogue with kaiako. All three key informants found it important to have pedagogical conversations with kaiako focused around risk-taking in the outdoors. These conversations served as a vehicle to support and scaffold kaiako learning surrounding risk-taking. These conversations were useful to engage in dialogue if a kaiako was providing learning opportunities that presented as an unsafe risk or alternatively for supporting a kaiako who was being overprotective of tamariki. Engaging in professional dialogue with kaiako is affirmed by Stamopoulos and Barblett (2018) as a key aspect of leadership that supports professional development and leads to change.

It was identified through the interviews that no specific risk-taking in the outdoors professional development had been accessed. Internal professional development was offered to all kaiako when there was important information that needed to be shared. This included professional development around the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. As this Act affects all workers, kaiako; as well as centre leaders, are also required to have a sound understanding of their role (WorkSafe New Zealand, 2016a). The key informants interviewed were acutely aware of the mandatory requirements and associated accountability level placed on them with regards to risk-taking in the outdoors. All centre leaders interviewed demonstrated a positive disposition towards supporting staff to ensure that tamariki had opportunities to engage in acts of risky play.

Optimal outdoor environments

Optimal environments contribute to the provision of safe risk-taking in the outdoors. The interview questions provided opportunities for the centre leaders to share ideas around aspects that contribute to an optimal environment for safe risk-taking to occur. Some of the key aspects identified by the centre leaders that contributed to an optimal environment were, provision of space, different materials/textures, loose parts or movable resources and equipment; bikes, different surface levels and trees that support climbing. The value of the environment as key to providing opportunities for tamariki to take risks has been widely reported on (Greenfield, 2011; Sandseter, 2012; Tovey, 2007; Little, 2022; McChesney & Clarkin-Phillips, 2020; Little 2019). Results from the interviews with centre leaders suggest that an optimal learning environment is key in supporting kaiako and centre leaders to provide an environment that is supportive and empowers tamariki to engage in risky play. In the present study, having a range of outdoor equipment and resources was viewed as helpful by centre leaders to support tamariki to play at height and speed. This is in line with 2 of the 6 categories of risk outlined by Sandseter (2007); 1) Play with great

heights 2) Play with high speed. Outdoor environments that are conducive to supporting safe risk-taking are environments that are planned to include elements of risk and provide plentiful opportunities for children to seek out and engage in risk.

This finding links with key informants' comments on ensuring that a range of loose materials or moveable, adaptable materials should be available to be used within the outdoor environment. The use of moveable resources can support tamariki innate curiosity to engage with the outdoor environment. By providing various natural and found moveable resources, such as large wooden boxes, rocks, trees, mounds, ladders and safety mats, kaiako can provide more opportunities to enhance tamariki play and learning and engage in risky play (Little 2019). The leaders cautioned that alongside this, the outdoor environment and resources must be well-maintained and frequently checked and reviewed to ensure everything is fit-for-purpose and of suitable quality. A recent article by Olsen and Smith (2017) found that the "maintenance of toys, manipulative objects, and playground equipment is critical in order for children to have quality experiences during play outdoors" (p. 1062). Olsen and Smith's study looked at play equipment in 61 early childhood centres in United States and found that only 43% of the outdoor equipment was in good condition.

Key informant two discussed how they provide a range of loose parts that tamariki can access to set up opportunities to engage in risk-taking. She articulated that the setting provides "different equipment that they can do different things with, that they can set up for themselves and manage for themselves and take their own risks" (Key informant 2). She explained that the tamariki have been empowered to set up equipment themselves and that they "will call out - I need a mat cos I wanna jump off here or I wanna do tumbles or whatever I need a mat, so just lots of opportunities within their own developmental level to take risks" (Key informant 2). *Te Whāriki* outlines in the considerations for leadership organisation and practice, tamariki should be provided with appropriate resources to adapt their environment for their own purpose. These resources can include but are not limited to "ropes, nets, planks and boxes as well as natural elements, such as logs, sticks, rocks and mud" (MoE, 2017, p. 50).

The key informants referred to the routine daily health and safety checks and the monthly review of incident reports as being key to ensuring that the environment was safe for tamariki. These are mandated requirements as outlined in Health and Safety Standard 12 of the *Licensing Criteria for Early Childhood Education & Care Services 2008 and Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework*, "equipment, premises and facilities are checked on every day of operation for hazards to children. Accident/incident records are analysed to identify hazards and appropriate action is taken. Hazards to the safety of children are eliminated, isolated or minimised" (MoE, 2008, p. 22). The voice of one of the centre leaders accentuated the role of the mandatory requirements in ensuring that the outdoor environment was safe for tamariki. "You've got to have something that governs what you do... and I think at the end of the day the regulations are there to... protect children and teachers in what we do, or they wouldn't be there, and I think too, with the [regulations] that for me it just makes everything transparent" (Key informant 3). A study conducted by Maynard and Waters (2007) noted that kaiako worry about tamariki being hurt alongside the possibility of being held accountable and even facing legal action. Therefore,

following the *Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008* and other regulatory requirements limits the possibility of any personal liability.

In contrast to this one of the key informants shared that within their setting she will 'push the health and safety boundaries' to provide opportunities for tamariki to engage in risky play. She shared that she feels restricted by "the height of how far they [tamariki] can jump from, how far they can climb to… you know all that kind of stuff" (Key Informant 2). She provided an example of setting up some moveable equipment in the playground to encourage risk-taking and shared that according to the regulations each piece of equipment would need to have mats underneath it. In reference to this she shared the following

> We kind of push that a little bit so that you know the regs say it's gotta be [soft fall] around each piece of equipment but if they're joined it doesn't have to be so if we've got two things quite close together, I'd say, put a plank between them. They're joined. You know, put a plank and a couple of mats and you're right you're meeting the regs now. …Whereas other teams would say move that here and move this there and then you have all of the equipment in isolation whereas if you have this whole circuit where they can climb and jump and move and… more challenges and yea so it becomes the way you interpret the regulations (Key Informant 2).

This comment is in reference to the leader's interpretation of the *Playground equipment and surfacing NZS 5828:2015* standards and the requirements for use of moveable playground equipment that is clustered together. The requirements outline that "moveable playground equipment with a free height of fall over 600mm on which children may climb shall be used on an approved impact attenuating surface…" (Standards New Zealand, 2015, p. 264). The perspective of key informant 2 demonstrates that there are instances where she pushes the boundaries via interpretation of the regulations. Furthermore, that there is a tension with meeting the mandatory requirements of ECE services while still providing challenging opportunities for tamariki to engage in risk-taking in the outdoors.

Influence of media reporting on significant incidents in the outdoors

Media reports have become instantly accessible via social media and online platforms. If an accident occurs in an early childhood setting, it can be shared easily and is accessible to many (Hanrahan et al., 2019). The impact of the media surrounding tamariki play in the outdoors has been well documented in relation to influencing adults' practices because of fears for the safety of tamariki (Gill, 2007; Little, 2015). All three key informants agreed that recent significant incidents reported in the media had an impact within their setting. All three provided examples from their early childhood setting of the impact these incidences in the media had within their early childhood setting.

One key informant provided an example where they had provided a rope on a pulley system with a bucket and the tamariki were using the rope to pulley up equipment with the bucket. After reading and hearing about an incident within an early childhood setting where a rope had injured a child, the centre manager had a korero with a colleague around whether they felt comfortable enough leaving the rope there. They went with their 'gut feeling' which was to remove the

rope and the pulley system (Key informant 3). The key informant explained that this change to the outdoor environment and use of the rope and pulley system was in direct response to a report in the media of an incident that involved a slide and a rope that resulted in the death of a four-year-old tamaiti in a New Zealand Early Childhood setting (Davies, 2016). Key informant one also shared, that this same incident reported in the media also resulted in the removal of all ropes as loose parts from the ECE setting. Both key informants elaborated that this was in immediate response to the incident publicised in the media and they have subsequently reintroduced ropes back into the environment as a loose part to be used with tamariki under supervision as the ropes were a key piece of equipment that provided learning opportunities for tamariki. Key informant one elaborated stating that "if they do want to have that risk taking of you know going up the slide [with a rope] it's about managing it but not eliminating it (Key Informant 1).

Key informant two shared an example from a report in the media where a tree had fallen, landing on, and injuring tamariki and the impact that this had within their setting.

> Recently, when a tree fell down, the [Kindergarten] Association sent out this email saying, 'Can you please check all your trees there?' And we've had a cabbage tree that a big branch had come down in the holidays in a big storm, and a couple of years ago the guy said 'Oh it's got a bit of a crack in that cabbage tree. I'd keep my eye on that if I was you.' So, as soon as I heard that, I went out and I checked and I thought 'Oh, can I see a crack there or not,' so I got the Association to come over and have a look and they said it actually needs to go to the arborist, and so they took out our tree (Key informant 2).

Key informant 2 elaborated that when the Kindergarten Association had cut a tree down, initially they left the stump there. This was navigated by ensuring that equipment wasn't placed too close to the stump to mitigate the risk of head injuries caused by falling onto the tree stump. This appeared to have been managed well by the kaiako within the setting, however, the leader shared that someone from the head office came to the setting "and he was sort of looking [and] he said oh that's a bit risky isn't it…I'll get it taken out and within three days it was gone" (Key informant 2). The centre leader had not had any problem with the tree stump within the environment and had been efficiently managing the risk presented by this. She shared that "…we identified it as a risk and we were always careful that…it was regulations [sic] away from [equipment]" (Key informant 2).

The examples shared by the centre leaders demonstrate how reports in the New Zealand media directly impact on early childhood education settings and can influence risk-taking practices and policies and procedures within early childhood settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ECE PRACTICE

Early childhood leaders have a key role in supporting kaiako with practices that promote safe risk-taking opportunities for tamariki in the outdoor environment. There are a range of practices that could prove useful within the ECE setting, such as using team meetings to explore beliefs and practices in relation to safe risk-

taking and establishing shared beliefs that align with the philosophy of the early childhood setting and the early childhood curriculum ***Te Whāriki.*** Furthermore, it is important to enact the health and safety requirements as outlined in the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations 2008 and the licensing criteria to ensure that safety checks remove hazards that may result in serious injury or death, but in the process be mindful to leave challenging yet safe opportunities for tamariki to engage in risk-taking. This can include the use of loose parts within the outdoor environment which can have safety enhancements, for instance, using soft fall in the form of mats. It would also seem important to provide specifically designed internal or external professional development to support safe risk-taking in the early childhood outdoor environment and to increase understanding of the benefits of promoting safe risk-taking. Promoting and supporting the ongoing learning and development of kaiako is a key responsibility of educational leaders (MoE, 2017, p. 59).

There are also three reflective questions from ***Te Whāriki*** that could be worthwhile exploring as a team at a staff hui. These are, "how might kaiako provide opportunities for children to develop and extend their physical capabilities with confidence? How do kaiako empower all children to pursue challenges in ways that acknowledge their current physical and cognitive abilities and strengths? [and] in what ways can real tools (such as gardening tools, saws, microscopes) be used confidently for exploration that leads to meaningful learning and sense making?" (MoE, 2017, p. 50).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, early childhood leaders have the responsibility of managing the tension between providing sufficient opportunities for tamariki to engage in risk-taking while following regulations to successfully eliminate any hazards that could cause serious harm to tamariki. Through exploring the scenarios and voices of the key informants, examples have emerged of ways that ECE leaders can navigate these tensions by working with their teams to ensure that tamariki are kept safe from harm while still being provided with opportunities to engage in safe risk-taking in the outdoors.

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