



Risk as an Educational Resource: Risky Play Practices in Norwegian Preschools between Rules, Environment and a Culture of Trust

Il rischio come risorsa educativa: Pratiche di risky play nelle scuole dell'infanzia norvegesi tra regole, ambiente e cultura della fiducia

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ABSTRACT

The study, which is part of a larger research project on risky play in early childhood, involves four Norwegian early childhood education and care institutions and explores how this form of play is promoted and valued in that context. The qualitative approach is based on semi-structured interviews, supplemented by structured observations. The results show that teachers and headmasters routinely encourage risky play as it is embedded in the educational project and consistent with a cultural approach, shared by families, that values activities in natural environments as opportunities for the development of psychomotor skills. Natural environments function as pedagogical agents that invite exploration, while teachers act as active facilitators of play. Growing awareness of safety issues does not discourage or limit the activities offered but leads to a more thoughtful approach to the layout of spaces and to communication with parents who express doubts or fears. Overall, risky play emerges as an intentional practice that promotes resilience, self-esteem, and physical competence.

Lo studio, che rientra in un progetto di ricerca più ampio sul *risky play* nella prima infanzia, coinvolge quattro scuole dell'infanzia norvegesi ed esplora come questa forma di gioco sia promossa e valorizzata in quel contesto. L'approccio qualitativo è basato su interviste semi-strutturate, integrato da osservazioni strutturate. I risultati mostrano che insegnanti e dirigenti incoraggiano ordinariamente il *risky play* in quanto incardinato nel progetto educativo e coerente con un approccio culturale, condiviso dalle famiglie, che valorizza le attività in ambiente naturale come occasione per lo sviluppo delle competenze psicomotorie. Gli ambienti naturali funzionano come agenti pedagogici che invitano all'esplorazione, mentre gli educatori agiscono come facilitatori attivi del gioco. La crescente sensibilità verso gli aspetti legati alla sicurezza non scoraggia e non limita le attività proposte, ma induce a predisporre gli spazi in modo più ragionato e a curare la comunicazione con quei genitori che manifestano dubbi o paure. Nel complesso, il *risky play* emerge come una pratica intenzionale che favorisce resilienza, autostima e competenza corporea.

KEYWORDS

Risky play, Culture of trust, Outdoor education, Motor and socio-emotional development, Inclusion
Risky play, Cultura della fiducia, Outdoor education, Sviluppo motorio e socio-emotivo, Inclusione

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1. Introduction

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in three main levels. The first draws on social constructivism, as theorized by Berger and Luckmann (1966), which highlights how the same phenomenon may be perceived differently, as experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social interactions shape individuals' ways of understanding the world. The second level refers to Outdoor Education and Learning, and in particular to *Educazione all'aperto 0–6* (Schenetti, 2017, 2022, 2023), understood as a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the integrity of the human being, the world, and their reciprocal relationship. The third level is represented by Bronfenbrenner's (1986, 2010) ecological model of human development, which helps to conceptualize how individuals, environments, and educational contexts are interconnected and mutually influential. Within this integrated framework, risky play emerges as a central dimension of children's experiences in outdoor contexts.

A substantial body of research has highlighted the multiple benefits associated with risky play (Brussoni et al., 2012; Brussoni et al., 2015). In particular, Sandseter's (2007, 2009) work has conceptualized and categorized risky play as an informal educational space through which children develop fundamental growth-related skills (Gray, 2013; Schenetti & Li Pera, 2021). By engaging with physical and cognitive challenges, children learn to recognize potential dangers, manage uncertainty, and evaluate their own limits and abilities, thereby refining their risk awareness and decision-making skills (Apter, 2007; Brussoni et al., 2012).

Beyond its contribution to physical development, risky play has been associated with benefits for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Eager et al., 2025). In particular, overcoming personal fears and obstacles plays a significant role in strengthening self-esteem and resilience, which represent key resources for long-term psychological well-being and mental health. In line with these findings, the Canadian Paediatric Society has recently recognized the importance of risky play in its Position Statement (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024), recommending that pediatricians actively promote it within families. From a biopsychosocial perspective, risky play can be understood as an effective strategy for the prevention and management of conditions such as obesity, anxiety disorders, and behavioral problems (Dodd & Lester, 2021; Taylor & Kuo, 2011). Despite this evidence, children's opportunities to engage in risky play are shaped not only by its recognized developmental value, but also by broader social and pedagogical factors, including prevailing conceptions of childhood, interpretations of risk, and the organization of everyday educational practices within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings (Obee et al., 2021). In these contexts, such factors are enacted primarily through the decisions and pedagogical practices of teachers and headmasters.

Consistent with this perspective, despite the growing consensus on the developmental value of risky play (Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023), research suggests that children's opportunities to engage in risky play are influenced by adults' perceptions, beliefs, and practices, as well as by institutional rules, restrictions, and safety-related regulations governing children's activities (Sandseter & Sando, 2016). A recent qualitative systematic review has highlighted how decisions relating to active and risky play in Early Childhood Education and Care institutions (ECECs) emerge from the interaction of interconnected factors at the interpersonal, institutional, and political levels, with teachers and headmasters acting as gatekeepers of play opportunities (Jerebine et al., 2022). At the

same time, a significant part of observational research on risky play has focused primarily on children's behavior, contributing to the identification and classification of different forms of risky play through naturalistic observations and/or video recordings (Sandseter, 2007, 2009; Kleppe et al., 2017). On one hand, these studies have furnished researchers with an in-depth understanding of how children deal with risk and experience emotions of excitement and fear in play contexts, and on the other hand, the educational practices through which adults regulate, support, or limit these experiences have been investigated more frequently using questionnaires and interviews. Moreover, the extant literature on risky play in ECECs has predominantly addressed the stated perceptions of educators and headmasters, observable educational practices, and the regulatory and organizational frameworks of institutional contexts separately. However, integrating these dimensions within a unified empirical design, capable of elucidating the interplay between educational perspectives, practices, and contexts, remains rare. In this context, it seems appropriate to develop research approaches that explore how adults' beliefs translate into everyday educational practices and how these practices are influenced by the constraints and opportunities offered by institutional contexts. The present study constitutes an exploratory contribution to the understanding of the conditions that may favor or hinder risky play in ECECs.

2. Research objectives and questions

This study forms an important part of a broader research project focusing on risky play in ECEC. It provides valuable insights into the current state of fostering risky play in Norway. The main objective is to investigate the pedagogical practices through which headmasters and teachers manage, support, and regulate risky play among ECECs, as well as their perspectives on risky play. The research seeks to understand how school regulations, structural and organizational aspects, and broader institutional and cultural conditions may either promote or hinder actual opportunities for active and risky play in ECEC settings across four Norwegian ECECs. The study explores how institutional frameworks, practices, and relationships with parents shape the provision of opportunities for risky play.

In addition, visits to ECECs were conducted to explore teachers' concrete actions, forms of supervision, and pedagogical interventions during play situations, and how these relate to children's engagement in risky play.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What factors promote or hinder risky play in Norwegian ECECs?
- How do regulatory frameworks and structural aspects influence these pedagogical practices?
- What role do teachers play during children's risky play?

The first two research questions were addressed through semi-structured interviews with teachers and headteachers, while the third research question was explored through semi-structured interviews with teachers only, complemented by observations of teachers' practices during play.

While this study does not test predefined hypotheses, it is informed by prior research highlighting the role of institutional and regulatory factors in shaping opportunities for risky play, and the mediating role of teachers in balancing safety and challenge. These assumptions guided the analysis.

3. Methods

The present study adopts a qualitative approach that facilitates the collection of rich, detailed, and meaningful data (Pastori, 2017). The primary method of data collection consists of semi-structured interviews of teachers and headmasters (Patton, 2002), lasting 30-50 minutes, which are then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Concurrently, teachers' practices were observed using an observation grid derived from the extant literature (Baumgartner, 2004).

The study adopted methodological triangulation (Silverman, 2011), combining data collected through interviews with data derived from observations, to strengthen the credibility and interpretative depth of the results. Even though the two data sources explore different dimensions – on the one hand, the perceptions, beliefs, and narratives of headmasters and teachers, and on the other, the educational practices observed during risky play situations – they converge on the same analytical focus, namely the role of adults in children's risky play. In relation to this specific research question, data from interviews and observations were initially analyzed separately and subsequently integrated at the interpretative level. This process enabled a systematic comparison between teachers' accounts of their role during risky play and the practices observed in ECEC settings. Triangulation thus contributed to a more nuanced understanding of adults' roles in risky play situations, thereby strengthening the study's overall reliability. The first author conducted both the interviews and the observations. This may represent a limitation, as using a single researcher may introduce bias, although it ensures consistency in data collection.

3.1. Purposeful selection of participants

This study was conducted in four Norwegian ECECs, including headmasters and teachers. The ECECs were purposefully selected because they spent a large amount of time outdoors. Initially, two ECECs were selected to participate in the study, and subsequently, two additional ECECs considered particularly interesting were included. The research was conducted in collaboration with a Norwegian university and followed national ethical guidelines for educational research, adhering to the Norwegian National Research Ethics Guidelines for the Social Sciences and the Humanities (National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, 2021). Participants were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. No audio or video recordings were made.

The number of participants was determined progressively as the research progressed (Benozzo & Priola, 2022). In the two initially selected ECECs, interviews were conducted with two headteachers and sixteen teachers. Participants were selected based on their professional experience, expertise, and willingness to take part in the study. In the two additional ECECs, two interviews were conducted with key informants, one headmaster and one pedagogical leader.

The final sample included three headmasters and seventeen teachers, of whom five held pedagogical leadership responsibilities.

During the interviews, participants were asked whether they would be willing to be observed while children engaged in risky play activities. Sixteen of the seventeen teachers interviewed agreed to participate in the observational compo-

nent; nine of them also consented to being observed a second time. One teacher did not participate in the observations, as the ECEC institution was included in the study exclusively for the interview phase. Families were informed of the researcher's presence on the days of observation through communication provided by the pedagogical leaders.

Visits were scheduled during risky play sessions and excursions, activities regularly included in the ECECs' educational programs, to specifically observe teachers' roles in promoting risky play. At one of the participating ECECs, the researcher was invited to take part in activities not directly related to play, with the aim of fostering a more natural and spontaneous relationship with the teaching staff and the children.

The presence of a researcher within the observed context may influence participants' behavior. However, this influence can be mitigated through prolonged engagement and an ethnographic approach that promotes familiarity and mutual trust (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By engaging in the everyday life of the ECEC institutions, the researcher reduced participants' awareness of being observed, thereby limiting the observer effect and capturing more authentic behavior, including during risky play.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

3.2.1. Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview guide was developed through a systematic and literature-informed process grounded in an extensive review of international research on risky play and early childhood education. Key studies addressing the definitions, benefits, and challenges of risky play were reviewed to identify core dimensions shaping how risky play is understood, regulated, and enacted in educational settings (Brussoni et al., 2012; Brussoni et al., 2015). These dimensions informed the development of interview questions that enabled in-depth exploration while leaving space for participants' context-specific experiences and interpretations.

The interview guide was organized into three main thematic areas: Regulatory Framework, Structural Aspects, and Relationship with Parents, with an additional section specifically addressing teachers' professional roles. This structure reflects the multi-layered nature of risky play as a phenomenon influenced by individual practices, institutional conditions, and broader systemic and cultural factors (Stephenson, 2003; Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2008; Little, 2025). Furthermore, two role-specific questions were included to capture aspects of teachers' everyday pedagogical work that are not fully addressed through institutional or regulatory perspectives. The questions were asked in a flexible way, allowing further exploration (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2005) and encouraging respondents to share even seemingly irrelevant everyday experiences (Cardano & Ortalda, 2021).

The first area, Regulatory Framework, focused on how formal regulations and informal norms shape risky play practices in ECECs. Questions explored participants' understanding of relevant rules and guidelines, their perceptions of the flexibility or rigidity of these regulations, and how such frameworks enable or constrain children's engagement in risky play (e.g., "What rules govern risky play in your ECECs?"). The formulation of this section was informed by research on safety cultures, professional responsibility, and the balance between protection and autonomy in ECEC (Gill, 2007; Wyver et al., 2010).

The second area, Structural Aspects, addressed the physical and organizational characteristics of ECEC environments. Questions examined how indoor and outdoor spaces, architectural features, and material resources support or limit opportunities for risky play (e.g., “Are there any particular features of the ECECs’ design that encourage or discourage children from engaging in risky play?”). This section also explored organizational practices such as staff training, equipment maintenance, and supervision routines related to risk management. The design of this section was informed by studies highlighting the importance of environmental affordances for children’s exploration, autonomy, and motor development (Heft, 1988; Fjørtoft, 2004).

The third area, Relationship with Parents, focused on the social and communicative dimensions of risky play. Questions investigated parents’ attitudes toward active and risky play, how ECECs communicate the benefits of risky play, and how parental concerns are addressed (e.g., “Have parents ever expressed specific concerns about risky play and, if so, how have these been addressed?”). This section was informed by research emphasizing parents’ central role in shaping norms related to risk, safety, and play in ECEC contexts (Sandseter & Sando, 2016).

Finally, the section dedicated to the Teachers’ Role explored how educators, directly engaged in daily pedagogical practice, facilitate active and risky play, assess and manage risk, and balance safety considerations with children’s need for autonomy and exploration (e.g., “What is your role during children’s risky play?”).

This section was guided by pedagogical perspectives that consider teachers as mediators between institutional frameworks and children’s lived experiences of play (Sandseter & Sando, 2016; Storli & Sandseter, 2019).

Overall, the semi-structured format ensured consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to adapt questions to participants’ roles and experiences. This approach produced comparable yet rich qualitative data, supporting a nuanced understanding of how regulatory, structural, and relational factors intersect to shape risky play practices in two Norwegian ECECs (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.2.2. Observation grid

An observation grid (see Table 1) was developed to systematically document adults’ roles during children’s risky play in ECEC settings. The grid was designed to capture observable adult behavior, emotional expressions, and positioning in relation to different types of risky play, thereby ensuring methodological transparency and replicability.

The conceptual foundation of the grid drew on research identifying adults as key mediators of children’s engagement with risk through their actions, attitudes, and proximity during play (Sandseter, 2007; Sandseter & Sando, 2016; Storli & Sandseter, 2019). Studies addressing supervision styles, safety cultures, and environmental affordances further informed the selection of observation categories (Fjørtoft, 2004; Gill, 2007; Wyver et al., 2010).

The observation grid consisted of 16 items organized in relation to the six categories of risky play identified by Sandseter (2007, 2009). In the grid, the items were presented in the rows, while the different categories of risky play (Play with great heights, Play with high speed, Play with dangerous tools, Play near dangerous elements, Rough-and-tumble play, and Play where the children can “disappear”/get lost) were reported in the columns.

For each type of play, the grid allowed the recording of

both the frequency of occurrence and the adult’s role during the observed situation.

The items captured multiple aspects of adults’ involvement during risky play, including their actions, emotional expressions, and physical proximity to the child during play.

Observation categories were organized into three main analytical dimensions. The first dimension concerned adult intervention strategies, including direct participation in play, verbal or nonverbal encouragement, guidance or assistance, non-intervention allowing autonomous exploration, moderating or redirecting play, demonstration of activities prior to play, and restrictive interventions such as verbal blocking or prohibiting risky play.

The second dimension focused on supervision practices, capturing whether play occurred under supervision or without direct adult oversight, and whether adults engaged in reflective conversations with children after the play episode.

Finally, the third dimension addressed adults’ emotional expressions and physical positioning during play. Emotional expressions included calm or neutral demeanor, relaxed or smiling expressions, and visible signs of concern. Physical positioning was coded based on the adult’s proximity to the children (very close, within a few meters, or at a distance of more than five meters).

3.3. Data collection procedures

The data were collected between September and November 2024. All interviews were conducted in person at the participating ECEC institutions. Interviews lasted approximately 30–50 minutes. Interview responses were not audio-recorded but were written in detail in real time using a computer, and subsequently read back to participants for confirmation and validation. This approach was adopted to facilitate an open and reflective interview setting. As a result, the reported quotations should be understood as near-verbatim reconstructions rather than verbatim transcripts.

Upon participants’ request, the interview guide was shared in advance, and the questions were also provided in Norwegian to facilitate comprehension and support more nuanced responses.

In addition to interview data, observational data were collected to address the research question “What is the role of the adult during children’s risky play?”. Observations were conducted using a structured observation grid during free-play periods, following agreement with the adults involved.

In total, 25 observation sessions were carried out across the participating ECECs. Observations typically involved small groups of children. An observational episode was defined as a distinct occurrence in which children engage in or experience risky play, during which adult behavior is observed. Episodes were delimited based on the beginning and end of a risky play situation, or when a clear change in the activity, level of risk, or adult involvement was observed.

The observation grid was completed immediately after each observation session to ensure accuracy. Each descriptor was coded using a binary nominal system, assigning a value of 1 when the behaviour was observed and 0 when it was not observed. When multiple adult behaviours occurred within the same observation, all relevant descriptors were coded to capture changes in adults’ actions, positioning, or attitudes during children’s play. For mutually exclusive categories, such as adult proximity, only one code was assigned per episode, corresponding to the predominant positioning observed.

This approach enabled the systematic comparison of adult roles across different types of risky play and contexts. All observations were subsequently reviewed to ensure consistency and completeness. To enhance consistency, the observation grid was applied systematically, and the data were reviewed and cross-checked after data collection to ensure coherence in coding decisions.

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Analysis of interviews

The data analysis was conducted by treating headmasters and teachers as a single analytical group. This decision was guided by the interpretative and systemic orientation of the study, which aimed to explore shared meanings, practices, and organizational dynamics surrounding risky play rather than to compare professional roles. Although headmasters and teachers occupy different positions within the institutional hierarchy, they operate within the same organizational context and jointly contribute to the construction of a shared pedagogical culture related to risk, safety, and play.

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, based on recent methodological guidance (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2025).

This method was chosen because it enables identification of patterns across participants' accounts, capturing how risky play is perceived, regulated, and enacted in everyday educational practice. The analysis aimed to describe and interpret participants' perspectives while identifying both dominant themes and less frequent but analytically relevant meanings.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, an inductive analytic approach was adopted. An inductive orientation, therefore, signals a data-led analysis while remaining reflexively aware of the interpretative role of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Terry et al., 2017). In line with a reflexive thematic analysis approach, the researcher was considered an active and interpretative agent in the analytic process. Reflexivity accompanied the whole analytic process through sustained, iterative engagement with the data and ongoing reflections on how theoretical knowledge, research aims, and the researcher's position shaped coding practices and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

The reflexive thematic analysis involved familiarization with the data, followed by systematic and open coding across the dataset, the generation of initial themes from the coded data, iterative review and refinement of themes, the definition and naming of themes, and a final phase of interpretative synthesis and reporting (Ahmed et al., 2025). For example, initial codes were developed directly from participants' accounts and then iteratively grouped into broader themes without relying on predefined theoretical categories.

3.4.2. Analysis of observations

Observation data were analyzed using a descriptive quantitative approach based on the structured observation grid developed for this study. For each observation category, relative frequencies were calculated both across the total number of observations and within each type of risky play. This procedure enabled the description of the distribution of adult behavior, supervisory strategies, emotional expressions, and positioning in relation to different forms of risky play. The observational analysis provided a systematic overview of patterns in adult practices, which was later inte-

grated with the interview findings to support methodological triangulation and enhance the credibility of the results.

4. Results

4.1 Results from the interviews

A total of four overarching themes were identified from interviews conducted in the context of ECECs, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of risky play: 1) Negotiation between rules and freedom as a pedagogical space for risk, 2) The environment as a co-educator. 3) Adults as risk regulators, and 4) A culture of trust.

4.1.1. Theme: negotiation between rules and freedom as a pedagogical space for risk

In relation to the initial theme, entitled "Negotiation between rules and freedom as a pedagogical space for risk", numerous participants alluded to a combination of general standards, internal rules, and contingent professional assessments, which collectively constitute the HSE (Health, Safety, and Environment) model. The rules are not generally perceived as a limitation, but rather as an indispensable framework for conducting activities in a safe environment. In this regard, one teacher states:

"There aren't many fixed rules governing risky play in kindergarten. However, we do have some restrictions the children must follow, such as not being allowed to climb higher than 2.5 meters. [...] However, given that we are quite open to risky play in kindergarten, it only slightly limits the possibility of engaging in risky play. [...] I think the rules we have about risky play are important to ensure children's safety in kindergarten" (Teacher 9).

Participants reported a strong awareness that individual ECECs possess significant discretion in defining the boundaries of acceptable practice and how these boundaries are to be interpreted and adhered to. The regulations that are established at the level of individual ECECs, frequently developed collectively by educational personnel, are regarded as flexible and subject to review based on experience and the characteristics of the children. As one participant observes:

"We have developed internal rules to manage risky activities [...]. These rules ensure that all adults have clear guidelines when accompanying children in activities that may involve risks" (Teacher 8).

Some participants highlight that risky play is primarily regulated by adults' professional judgement:

"It is my judgment, and that of my colleagues, that governs risky play in the kindergarten" (Teacher 11).

"Teachers may also disagree on which 'rules' should apply to risky play. [...] We work daily based on these regulations, but we don't let them govern our day-to-day work to the extent that we view children's risky play negatively" (Teacher 10).

4.1.2. Theme: the environment as a co-educator

Regarding the second theme, “The environment as a co-educator”, teachers focused on both indoor and outdoor spaces, whether structured or natural. The latter, in particular, offer children opportunities for challenges suited to all ages and skill levels. One teacher, for example, makes the following observation:

“Outdoors or in nature, you can also find tall trees and large stones that you won’t find indoors. These invite climbing” (Teacher 6).

Indoor spaces are often described as more limited, although some facilities have gyms or rooms specifically dedicated to risky play. However, there is a clear intention to make use of even seemingly unchallenging indoor environments for movement-based activities:

“The kindergarten has many long, narrow corridors. We actively use these for movement games such as obstacle courses, running games, relay races” (Teacher 1).

Despite the acknowledged value of outdoor facilities specifically designed for play, teachers and headmasters sometimes explicitly express a preference for natural spaces that spontaneously offer children opportunities for risky play:

“We have some playground installations, but we try to keep those minimal. In fact, we’re planning to remove one of the current installations even though some children really like it. We want fewer man-made structures and more natural settings” (Headmaster 13).

The third theme, entitled “Adults as risk regulators”, focuses on the role teachers have during children’s risky play experiences. In many cases, adults report participating directly in play, adopting a facilitating and modeling role. To illustrate this point, one teacher explains:

“My role varies in different settings. Sometimes I facilitate and organize risky play, where I myself participate in the play. I might climb the tree with the children, guiding them as we climb together” (Teacher 9).

In other instances, adults elect to maintain a deliberate distance, observing without intervening to permit children to experiment independently. It is imperative to adjust one’s presence in accordance with the children’s skills and needs:

“I’m often in the center of the activity, so the children know what to do. Then I step back a little so I can observe. If a child needs a hand to hold, I’ll take on that role, for example, or just stand a little closer when they’re walking the plank” (Teacher 4).

4.1.3. Theme: a culture of trust

Finally, the theme of “A culture of trust” emerges, concerning relationships with families in relation to the management of risky play. In most cases, parents are described as supportive of risky play, particularly in contexts where outdoor education and physical activity are central to the institution’s identity, and as generally trusting of teachers’ professional competencies. From a management perspective, this trust is explicitly acknowledged:

“Parents have great confidence in us and trust that we make good judgments” (Headmaster 19).

Regarding concerns expressed by some parents, several participants emphasized that these were more commonly associated with families from different cultural backgrounds, where apprehension about children’s safety tends to prevail. As a headteacher and a teacher pointed out:

“I used to work in a student kindergarten myself, where we had around 50 different nationalities. There was a big difference in how much the parents enjoyed this type of play. Some parents, particularly those from Africa and southern Europe, didn’t understand why we had to be outside and were not very accepting if, for example, their children had fallen and hurt themselves on a walk” (Headmaster 15).

“Where I work now, there is a large proportion of foreign parents. Here, the concept of risky play is often more challenging” (Teacher 20).

To overcome resistance, the educational community adopts strategies based on dialogue with families, explaining educational choices and, when necessary, adapting activities or offering alternative games:

“If parents do not want their children to take part in particular activities, we will respect this and make arrangements for their children to play at other times” (Headmaster 19).

Any incidents are taken seriously, but without questioning the openness to risky play. One of the headmasters explained:

“We have a system here in [...] Commune that requires us to report incidents. They sent people to document everything, and we reviewed all our routines. So, we have a firm system” (Headmaster 13).

4.2. Results from the observations

The results in the observation grids that focus on the role of the teacher during children’s risky play show that the most common attitudes observed were, in descending order, calmness (68%), keeping a distance of more than five meters (49%), smiling (43%), and refraining from intervening in children’s play (39%). Significant occurrences were also recorded in adult participation in play (23%), encouragement to continue (17%), and intervention to moderate and guide play (19%).

<i>The role of adults during children's risky play</i>	<i>Play with great heights</i>	<i>Play with high speed</i>	<i>Play with dangerous tools</i>	<i>Play near dangerous elements</i>	<i>Rough-and-tumble play</i>	<i>Play where children can get lost</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of risky play episodes observed	18	8	4	12	4	23	69
Adult participates personally in children's risky play	7 (39%)	1 (12%)	1 (25%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (17%)	16 (23%)
Adult encourages children to continue through positive gestures and/or verbal expressions	7 (39%)	1 (12%)	0 (0%)	2 (17%)	0 (0%)	2 (9%)	12 (17%)
Adult guides and supports the child during risky play	5 (28%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (13%)	8 (12%)
Adult observes what the children are doing and does not intervene, allowing them to explore and experiment	7 (39%)	3 (37%)	1 (25%)	5 (42%)	1 (25%)	10 (43%)	27 (39%)
Adult intervenes to moderate and guide the modes of play	3 (17%)	2 (25%)	1 (25%)	2 (17%)	0 (0%)	5 (22%)	13 (19%)
Adult demonstrates how to play before allowing the children to play	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 %	2 (3%)
Adult stops the play verbally and/or through gestures when danger is perceived	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0%)
Adult prohibits risky play practices in advance	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	2 (9%)	2 (3%)
Children play without supervision	1 (6%)	2 (25%)	0 (0 %)	3 (25%)	0 (0 %)	3 (13%)	9 (13%)
Adult discusses the play with the children after they have finished playing	3 (17%)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	1 (8%)	1 (25%)	0 (0 %)	5 (7%)
Adult is calm and shows no particular expression	13 (72%)	6 (75%)	2 (50%)	9 (75%)	3 (75%)	14 (61%)	47 (68%)
Adult smiles and has a relaxed expression during play	8 (44%)	4 (50%)	4 (100%)	2 (17%)	4 (100%)	8 (35%)	30 (43%)
Adult expresses concern verbally and non-verbally	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 %
Adult is very close to the children during risky play	9 (50%)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	9 (13%)
The adult is at a distance of a few meters from the children during risky play	6 (33%)	1 (12%)	1 (25%)	2 (17%)	0 (0 %)	6 (26%)	16 (23%)
Adult is at a distance of more than five meters from the child/children during risky play	10 (56%)	4 (50%)	0 (0 %)	6 (50%)	0 (0 %)	13 (57%)	33 (49%)

Table 1: Observation grid with prevalence of observations shown in numbers and percentages

In 23% of cases, adults were observed standing a few meters away from the children playing. Particularly low were the occurrences of prohibiting risky play (3%), conducting demonstrations before play (3%), and discussing play with children after play (7%). There were no instances of play being stopped by gestures or words due to perceived danger by the adult, nor were there any instances of verbal or non-verbal concern on the part of the adult.

Overall, the data show widespread confidence among adults in children's risky play experiences. In detail, further considerations can be made for each category of risky play. The most frequent observations concerned play where children can disappear or get lost (23) and play with great heights (18). In play where children can disappear or get lost, the most frequently observed attitudes were adults maintaining a distance of more than 5 meters (57%), remaining calm (61%), and allowing children to experiment without intervening (43%). In play with great heights, three attitudes,

not necessarily mutually exclusive, were recorded with the same frequency (39%): adult participation in the activity, encouragement to continue, and allowing experimentation without intervention. The first two do not have such high values in the other categories of risky play, probably because venturing to great heights is more challenging for children, can involve fear, and therefore requires a more active presence from adults. However, in 72% of cases the adult remained calm, and in 44% of cases the adult smiled or had a relaxed expression.

In the category of playing near dangerous tools, in 50% of cases the adults kept a distance of more than five meters from the children. The general attitude was one of calm, and in 42% of cases the adults did not intervene, allowing the children to experiment freely. In play with high speed (8 observations), calmness and reserve were confirmed as the most common attitudes.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that risky play is experienced as an ordinary pedagogical dimension, sometimes negotiated within everyday practices. In line with the most recent theoretical contributions on risky play (Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023), teachers and headmasters recognize the educational and developmental value of risk; however, the contribution of this study lies in highlighting how this understanding is translated into situated professional decisions, rather than standardized applications of safety rules. A first relevant finding concerns the role of rules and regulations, which do not emerge as rigid constraints but as interpretative frameworks supporting pedagogical judgement. Consistent with the observations of Sandseter and Sando (2016), risk management appears to be based on a continuous assessment of situations, taking into account children's skills, the characteristics of the environment, and the relational context.

A second central element concerns the pedagogical function of the environment. In line with the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 2010), the results indicate that risk is co-produced in the interaction between children, adults, and physical contexts. The most frequently observed forms of risky play are closely linked to environmental characteristics, suggesting that the environment acts as a co-educator rather than simply as a backdrop to the action. This interpretation reinforces the idea, already present in the literature, that risk cannot be understood exclusively in terms of individual behavior, but must be analyzed as a systemic, situated, and relational phenomenon (Schenetti, 2017).

A further contribution concerns the role of adults in the daily management of risk. The comparison between the interview data and the observations allows us to compare what the teachers say to the practices actually observed in the play contexts. In line with previous studies (Sandseter & Sando, 2016; Kleppe, 2018), teachers do not describe themselves as external supervisors of risk, but rather as play partners capable of modulating their presence according to the situation; observations confirm this stance, showing how this modulation translates concretely into a calibrated physical and relational presence, alternating between participation, distance, and non-intervention. The integration of declarative and observational data allows us to understand how professional beliefs, educational practices, and institutional contexts work together to enable risky play, in line with other qualitative studies that have combined observations and interviews to analyze the role of educational practices and social factors in risky play (Obee et al., 2021).

It is within this context that the physical involvement of adults also takes place, observed above all in the most challenging situations, which do not appear to be oriented towards control, but rather towards building relational safety. From this perspective, safety emerges as a co-regulated process, rather than as a constraint imposed from outside.

Finally, the results suggest that risky play should also be understood as a shared cultural practice. Although the Norwegian context is favorable to the valorization of risk, families' trust cannot be taken for granted; it is built through daily communication practices and through the visibility of educators' professional competence. This aspect resonates with previous observations on the role of culture in risk management (Brussoni et al., 2015) but also highlights how risky play can serve as a space for negotiating broader educational values.

Overall, the findings suggest that risky play may not simply be "allowed" or "prohibited" but is continually made possible through a combination of professional judgements, environmental configurations, and relationships of trust. This

interpretation is consistent with the findings of a systematic qualitative review of the literature (Jerebine et al., 2022), which calls for moving beyond a dichotomous conception of the risk/safety relationship and interpreting risky play as a situated, culturally mediated, and institutionally regulated practice. From this perspective, risk emerges as an integral part of the ECEC experience, contributing to a more pedagogical and contextually grounded understanding of its role in educational services.

6. Conclusions

The main contribution of this study concerns how risk is interpreted and experienced in everyday educational practice. The results show that teachers and headmasters are not negatively influenced by regulatory constraints regarding safety. Risk is assessed on a case-by-case basis in relation to the characteristics of the space, the specific situation, and the skills of the children involved, and it is understood as a value rather than a factor opposed to safety.

The educational environments described in the interviews and partly observed are not simply the backdrop to the action, but actual pedagogical agents that make risky play possible. From an ecological perspective, the focus shifts from "whether" risk should be allowed to "how" it takes shape in everyday practices. Drawing on ideas emerging from the interviews, it would be interesting to explore the comparison between outdoor environments specifically designed for play and natural environments where play can develop in freer and more improvised ways, from the perspectives of both teachers and children.

Another important aspect concerns the level of trust in the relationship between ECEC services and families, as a condition that permits and supports the daily practice of risky play. The interviews highlight how this trust can no longer be taken for granted, and sometimes requires negotiation and redefinition. In particular, in ECEC services that welcome children from diverse cultural backgrounds, different approaches to risk, safety, and educational responsibilities may emerge, requiring mediation with families. It would be useful to explore how teachers and headmasters deal with these dynamics, especially in intercultural contexts, and how risky play practices are supported. This could lead to interpretative tools that are also useful in non-Norwegian contexts, where trust in educational services is less taken for granted and where there is greater resistance to risky play.

In conclusion, the research has some limitations. It was conducted in four Norwegian ECECs, and in two cases, data collection was limited to a single interview per institution, reducing the comparative depth of the analysis. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study does not allow for causal inferences or statistical generalizations. Finally, the results refer to a specific cultural and institutional context, which differs from those of other countries.

Overall, the study contributes to strengthening an understanding of risky play as a situated, relational, and culturally mediated educational practice, showing how risk is a dimension to be embraced professionally. The results suggest that the possibility of supporting risky play in childcare services depends on the presence of educational contexts capable of integrating professional competence and judgement, mutual trust, and attention to the peculiarities of children and situations. From this perspective, risky play can also serve as a lens through which to question how educational services deal with complexity, uncertainty, and educational co-responsibility in contemporary societies.

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