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Risky play in Icelandic preschools

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Ágrip

Ritgerðin fjallar um hvort börnum í íslenskum leikskólum gefast tækifæri til að leika „áhættusama“ útileiki. Fjallað erum um viðhorf, sjónarmið og vinnulag leikskólakennara tengt áhættuleik til dæmis hvort leikskólakennarar hvetja til eða stöðva börn í þesshátt leikjum. Það er von að verkið varpi ljósi á stöðu áhættuleiks í íslenskum leikskólum og auki vitund um mikilvægi hans.

Gerð er grein fyrir rannsóknum og skrifum innlendra og erlendra fræðimanna á sviðinu. Rannsóknaraðferð var eigindleg en opin einstaklingsviðtöl voru tekin við 12 leikskólakennara.

Niðurstöður sýna að almennt bjóða íslenskir leikskólar og útileiksvæði þeirra upp á tækifæri fyrir börnin að stunda áhættusama leiki þá sérstaklega klifur. Tækifæri er hinsvegar að mestu takmörkuð við að leiktæki sem bjóða upp á frekar litla áhættu, dæmi láir klifurveggir, afmörkuð klifurhæð og svo framvegis. Jafnframt kom í ljós að viðhorf leikskólakennara til áhættuleikja lita hvernig staðið er að málum í þá veru að hamla frekar en styðja við áhættuleik. Samkvæmt því sem hér kemur fram virðist vera ljóst að skilningur og/eða þekking á meðal leikskólakennara á áhættuleik barna er ábótavant. Það viðhorf virðist ríkja að slíkir leikir einkennist af slagsmálum og klifri. Mat kennara á hvað sé áhætta hefur áhrif á leik barnanna og hvað er leyft og hvað ekki. Margir leikskólakennarana telja þörf á breytingum á viðhorfi til áhættuleikja og útiumhverfis. Meira náttúrulegt umhverfi og öðruvísi leiktæki, auka meðvitund og þekkingu leikskólakennara, starfsfólks sem og öryggisfulltrúa skólanna um mikilvægi áhættuleikja eru á meðal þess sem þeir leggja til. Nokkrir leikskólakennarar lýstu jafnframt yfir áhyggjum vegna strangra reglna um leiksvæði og töldu þær hamla leik barn.

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research was to determine whether the outdoor play areas in Icelandic preschools provide children with opportunities for risky play. Further to this the attitudes, perspectives and approaches that preschool teachers have towards risky play were explored. The final goal was to find out whether preschool teachers in Iceland encourage or hinder children´s risky play activities. It is hoped that this research will provide more information on the situation of risky play in Icelandic preschools and raise awareness to the importance of such play.

Photographs were taken of six preschool play areas, three in an urban area and three in a rural area of North Iceland to assist during data analysis. Drawings of the photographs were included to assist the reader get a clearer picture of the play features. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, using open-ended questions, were chosen as the method to collect data from twelve preschool teachers.

The results of this research show that overall play areas in Icelandic preschools offer some opportunities for risky play, especially climbing. However, these opportunities are limited due to the equipment only providing minimum risk and the preschool teachers' perspectives and approaches to risky play. The research also found that the majority of preschool teachers in Iceland do not have a clear understanding of risky play, believing it is only climbing or rough and tumble play. Risky play in Icelandic preschools is, in many cases, controlled by the preschool teachers' perception of risk. Many preschool teachers believe that changes are needed to ensure risky play is available in preschools. These changes include: more natural features in play areas and raising awareness among preschool staff and health and safety officials. A few preschool teachers expressed concern about strict rules regarding play features and felt that they no long had control over children's play activities.

Foreword

This research paper constitutes a Master's thesis worth 30 ECTS credit points in Educational Studies from the Faculty of Education of the University of Akureyri. The thesis was written under the supervision of Kristín Dýrfjörð whom I would like to thank for her assistance and advice. I would also like to thank the preschool teachers that took part in this research. Finally my gratitude goes to my parents, my husband Jón Þór, and my daughters Elín Bára and Kaja Líf for their patience, support and encouragement over the past five years.

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1. Introduction

The subject I have chosen to investigate for my M.Ed. thesis is outdoor risky play in Icelandic preschools. According to The Icelandic Accident Prevention Centre for Children there has been little research done on the subject of children's risk taking in Iceland however the centre suggests that discussing risk is important in the prevention of accidents (Miðstöð slysavarna barna, n.d.). Increasingly, research shows that children are playing outdoors less frequently than they did in past decades (Play England, 2011; McCurdy, Winterbottom, Mehta & Roberts, 2010; Little & Wyver, 2008). Children today spend more time indoors engaging in sedentary activities, such as television viewing. Less outdoor play and an increase in sedentary activities has been found to have a significant effect on the BMI (body mass index) of children as young as five years old (Kimbro, Brooks-Gunn & McLanahan, 2011, pg. 673).

Concerns over increasing levels of childhood obesity have prompted discussions about the importance of physical activity through play. While it is accepted that outdoor play is beneficial for children's health. Outdoor play has prompted fears about child safety and increasing concerns about children engaging in risk taking activities (Alexander, Frohlich & Fusco, 2012, pgs. 158 – 159). Risky play is often thought of as a specific category of play but when looking at how children play it is clear that children take risks all the time when they are playing. Taking risks pushes boundaries and develops many aspects of children's abilities. Most play is risky in one way or another (Armitage, 2011, pg. 11).

Risky play is often difficult to define, according to Sandseter (2007a) it is a thrilling and exciting activity that involves a risk of physical injury. For the purpose of this paper, risky play activities will be defined using the following six categories: 1) play at heights, 2) play at speed, 3) climbing, 4) play near dangerous elements (water and fire), 5) rough and tumble play, and finally 6) using dangerous tools. These categories are based on the activities Sandseter (2007a, pg. 243) defined as risky in her research on Norwegian preschool children. For this research the element of climbing replaced Sandseter's element of play in open spaces.

The number of children attending preschools in Iceland is increasing every year, from 14,574 in 2000 to 19,713 in 2013 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2014a). These statistics show that children's play activities must extend beyond the home environment and parental responsibility. It is becoming increasingly important that preschool teachers consider the amount of time and opportunities available for outdoor play (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005, pg. 49). Furthermore, emphasis must be placed on the importance of outdoor play for overall development and not just seen as a time when children can use up their energy between learning activities (Garrick, 2009, pg. 13). Even though the benefits of risk taking during play are well documented (Stephenson, 2003; Coster & Gleeves, 2008; Jarvis, 2010; Tovey, 2010; Thomas & Harding, 2011), research has found that many preschool teachers are reluctant to allow children to engage in risky play activities because of safety concerns and increasing regulations (Sandseter, 2010; Little, 2010c; Tovey 2011).

1.1 Research questions and methodology overview

Firstly this qualitative study aims to determine whether preschool outdoor play areas provide opportunities for risky play and to what extent. This was done by looking at photographs of the play areas and the equipment available (both natural and manmade), as well as asking the preschool teachers their opinions. Secondly, through interviews, preschool teachers´ attitudes and approaches towards outdoor risky play activities will be examined. Finally, the third aim will be to assess whether the preschool teachers' attitudes and approaches encourage or hinder children's' risky play opportunities. The following three research questions are put forward with the objective of finding out the status of risky play within Icelandic preschools:

1. Do Icelandic preschool outdoor play areas provide children with opportunities for risky play activities?
2. What are preschool teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and approaches towards risky play in preschool outdoor play areas?

3. Do these perspectives, attitudes, and approaches encourage or hinder the preschool children's' risky play opportunities?

Six preschools took part in this research, three in a rural environment and three in an urban environment. Two preschool teachers from each preschool setting were interviewed about their understanding, perspectives, attitudes and approaches to risky play activities and safety. Visual data was collected through photographs of the outdoor play areas of all six preschools in order to assist in answering the first research question. Further to this, the photographs provide the researcher with a visual image to the interviewee´s responses.

1.2 Thesis overview

The chapters of this thesis include a literature review, the research methodology, research findings, a discussion relating the findings with research mentioned in the literature review, and final words.

The literature review in chapter 2 provides information from relevant literature and research regarding outdoor play, focusing on risky play. The chapter begins by taking a look at outdoor play from a historical perspective by exploring the ideas and theories of Locke, Rousseau, Frobel and the McMillan sisters to name a few. The chapter then discusses various definitions of risky play and explores why children take risks. The importance of risky play activities are then brought forward. Reasons why outdoor play is declining are discussed. Safety is an important aspect of children's play so this will be explored. The chapter will look at children's outdoor play areas in general as well as from an Icelandic context. Attitudes towards risky play will be highlighted, as well as how to make risky play accessible to all preschool children regardless of gender or ability. With references to research and scholars in the field of outdoor risky play the final section of chapter 2 will look towards the future of risky play in early educational settings.

Chapter 3 provides information on the methodology of the research. Reasons are provided for the choices made regarding data collection and sample sizes. The chapter also discusses data analysis, and finally the important ethical considerations of the research.

The fourth chapter will look at the findings of the research with focus on the themes that came to light during the data analysis.

Chapter five will discuss the findings and reflect on previous research mentioned in the literature review. The three research questions will be answered in a summary. The chapter will conclude with the limitations of the research and recommendations for future research.

Chapter six will conclude the research with final words.

1.3 A personal approach

Creswell (2012, pg. 18) stresses the importance of researchers reflecting on their own values and assumptions by including them in their research paper. Therefore I would like to give a brief description of my background and my years working in the early educational field. As a child growing up in an English city I was lucky to have a field with hills and trees close to my home. Much of my childhood was spent playing there, unsupervised, with friends. We rolled, ran, biked and sledged down the hill; we climbed trees and made tree houses with materials we found; we also occasionally made fires. Today, the field is still there but I have yet to see children playing on it. Now the children tend to play outside their homes or in their gardens. The field is over grown, used for dog walkers, and about to be turned into allotments for local residents. From 2000 I have worked in the field of education. I have worked in several preschools both in England and Iceland. Since 2006 I have been raising my own children in a rural environment. I have been careful to allow them the freedom to play outside and engage in risky activities, however I have found myself saying "be careful, do not climb so high".

The English educational settings I have worked in offered very few (if any) opportunities for risky play. All the play areas were small and flat. There were no trees, rocks or climbing frames for the children to play on and children rarely played outside if it was raining or very cold. The youngest children (under 2 years old) spent very little time outdoors. Outside, the children either rode bikes or played in small groups chasing each other. I know this is not the case with all English preschools but it was with the few I worked in. When I began working in Icelandic educational settings the first thing I noticed was the difference in the outdoor play areas. They were often rather large and had a variety of equipment for the children to play with, such as, trees, swings,

slides, rocks, different materials on the ground and hills or slopes. I became interested in risky play activities and often wondered how much freedom the children had in these play areas. It has been these experiences that have influenced my views of risky play and my interest in learning more about the attitudes preschool teachers have in Iceland towards such play.

Through conducting this research study I hope to raise awareness of the importance of risk taking activities in early childhood and to bring to light any challenges that preschool teachers might face in Icelandic preschool settings. I hope that preschool teachers will be recognised for the professionals they are and this will be reflected in the choices they are able to make regarding outdoor play. Furthermore, I would like to see changes in play areas with an increase in natural features such as trees, hills, slopes, and rocks. Safety should always be a priority but I believe that preschool play areas should reflect the real world by providing children with opportunities to climb, have the ability to play on surfaces that have not been flattened, learn about different elements, and allow children to explore and push boundaries.

2. Literature review

This chapter will focus on exploring outdoor play in early childhood education. It will begin by looking at outdoor play from a historical perspective, how ideas have changed and influenced educators and philosophers over time. The definition of the term risky play will be explored, as well as why children take risks. The importance of risky play for the mental, social and physical development of children will be also discussed. In recent years children have had fewer opportunities for risky play. This chapter seeks to explore why risky play opportunities have declined and what this means for children. Safety is an important aspect when it comes to risky play and children. This chapter will discuss safety measures, as well as why some researchers argue that too many rules and regulations can have a negative effect on children´s play activities. The rest of the chapter will focus on attitudes towards risky play, a look at how changes can be made for the future of risky play, and finally how to make risky play available for all children.

2.1 Historical perspectives on outdoor play in early childhood education

Ideas and theories about play have been part of philosophical discussions since the ancient Greeks. It was not, however, until the 17th and 18th century that play, and the importance of it, began to receive more attention. Both John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that play was a necessary part of childhood, contributing to health and wellbeing (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005, pgs. 6 – 9). Rousseau rejected the common notion that play had no value. He saw education as a way to develop children both mentally and physically by encouraging learning through natural activities. Rousseau promoted exercise and agility by giving children the opportunity to climb trees, run barefoot, jump and swing. He believed that children would grow up clumsy if they were not able to partake in such activities (Frost, 2010, pg. 23).

In his book *On Education* (Rousseau, 1762/1921) Rousseau takes his young student Emile to the countryside so he can learn by using his feet, hands and eyes. With regards to the dangers of play, Rousseau suggested a child "must get used to danger too, so as not to be flustered by it". It could be assumed he

means children who are exposed to risks and challenging situations are able to learn from them, thus cope with similar situations in the future. By exercising the body through playful activities, Rousseau believed a child was also exercising their mind and judgement.

Friedrich Froebel had a profound influence on outdoor play in early childhood education during the first half of the nineteenth century. He understood that children should be given opportunities to freely explore the outdoors. His curriculum was based on children's need to play (Wellhousen, 2002, pg. 7). To encourage children to grow and learn in harmony with nature, Froebel provided children with small gardens to tend. These gardens enabled children to observe plants and wildlife, as well as engage in exercise and movement. Froebel devised songs and movement games intended for outdoor play (Herrington, 2001).

Greatly influenced by Froebel´s ideology, Margaret McMillan and her sister Rachel McMillan had their own ideas about how children should play and learn. After visiting poor communities in London, the sisters realised that children benefited from outdoor environments, fresh air and sunshine. Believing that outdoor environments had healing effects, they founded a play-oriented, open-air preschool for children aged 18 months to seven years, which included elements, such as, bushes, rocks, climbing equipment, sandpits and vegetable areas. It was their belief that intellectual development could not thrive without also focusing on a child´s physical and emotional wellbeing (Garrick, 2011, pg. 16; Wellhousen, 2002, pg. 15). It is interesting to note that in 1932 the first Icelandic preschool Grænaborg, was built upon the ideas of the McMillan sisters (Jónasson, 2006, pg. 7; Sigurðardóttir, 1999, pgs. 91 – 105).

An ideal school according to John Dewey (1990, pg. 75) should have a garden surrounded by fields which lead on to the wider country. Dewey understood the value of the outdoors in children's education. He thought schools were too isolated from the real world. The real world was outside the school building and this was, according to him, where children should learn and play (Rivkin, 1998, pg. 200).

In 1943 the first planned adventure playground was set up in Copenhagen. An adventure playground is an area set aside where children can play freely, in their own way. They provide children with opportunities to be creative, engage in challenging and often risky activities and to have fun (Shier, 1984,

pgs. 3 – 4). After visiting this adventure playground in Copenhagen, Marjory Allen of Hurtwood was so inspired that she campaigned for Adventure Playgrounds to be set up in England and by the 1950´s the concept was becoming popular (Wilson, n.d.). Today, there are only a few of these playgrounds left. According to Hanna Rosin (2014) the reason for the decline in such playgrounds is because of changes in cultural expectations and parenting ideals.

In the late 1950´s a Swedish man named Gösta Frohm founded Skogsmulle, a concept that teaches children about nature, and preserving natural environments. It was due to his ideas that Sweden's first forest school was set up in Sweden in 1985. These nursery and elementary schools provide children aged from one to fourteen with the opportunity to climb, jump, explore and play in natural environments (Robertson, 2008, pgs. 3 – 5). Today, these forest schools are well documented for the positive experiences they provide children (Robertson, 2008; Sandseter, 2010; Sandseter, 2009a; Sandseter, 2012).

When considering Rousseau´s, Froebel´s, Dewey´s and McMillan´s concepts of play and play environments, it becomes apparent that outdoor activities have played a crucial role in the development of early childhood education. Each of these pioneers influenced how people thought about play, and opened the doors for others, such as Frohm and Allen, to extend on their ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, the early pioneers in childhood play appeared to accept that running, jumping and climbing were an inevitable part of children´s play and therefore be encouraged. In the next sub-chapter the definition of risky play will be explored, as well as a closer look at what McMillan meant when she said children should be able to play "bravely and adventurously" (McMillan, 1930, pg. 78).

What is risky play?

The word risk is often defined within a very narrow viewpoint, with only the negative image been portrayed (Little, 2010b, pg. 1). On the other hand researchers in the field of risky play often define it in a more positive manner. Sandseter (2007a) described risky play as a thrilling and exciting activity that involves a risk of physical injury, but also provides opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries and learning about injury risk. Stephenson (2003, pg. 36) found that elements associated with risk taking were attempting

something never done before, feeling out of control because of height or speed, and overcoming fears. Sandseter (2011b, pg. 257) adds to this by explaining that risky play is "a set of motivated behaviors that both provide the child with an exhilarating positive emotion and expose the child to the stimuli they previously have feared".

Risky play appears to be a rather recent term for describing activities that carry a risk of injury. Back in the 1930´s the term risky play was not used. Instead Margaret McMillan (1930, pg. 78) argued that children should play "bravely and adventurously". By this she meant children should have opportunities to climb trees and ladders, swing on ropes and slide down steep slopes. Today these activities, and others, such as balancing, hanging upside down and jumping from heights would be described as risky play (Tovey, 2010, pg. 79). As previously mentioned in the introduction, Sandseter (2007a, pg. 243) established six categories of risky play while observing children playing in a Norwegian preschool these are: 1) play at heights, 2) play at speed, 3) using dangerous tools, 4) play near dangerous elements, 5) rough and tumble play, and 6) play where children could get lost (playing in unknown areas).

There seems to be common themes evident in the definition of risky play. Both observing and interviewing children has found that risky play falls under the following categories: exciting, exhilarating, the desire to seek out experiences that could frighten or injure, feeling out of control and overcoming fear (Little, Wyver & Gibson, 2011, pg. 115).

Why children take risks

Research shows that children will deliberately seek out activities were they can attempt something new, feel out of control, climb great heights, run at high speeds and overcome fears (Stephenson, 2003; Sandseter, 2007a, pg. 248; Sandseter, 2009a, pg. 4). Sandseter (2009b, pg. 103) found that children enjoy mastering new skills and doing something they have not dared to do before. Children enjoy these thrilling and exciting activities, therefore it is natural they should be drawn to play that is challenging and pushes their boundaries (Little & Wyver, 2008; Sandseter, 2010, pg. 23).

Sandseter (2009b, pg. 89) found that when children engage in risky play they experience a range of emotions from exhilaration to "joyful fear" (Sandseter, 2009a, pg. 5). While Coster and Gleeve's (2008) found that the

positive feelings associated with risky play such as fun, enjoyment, excitement, thrill, pride, and achievement were reasons children often give for engaging in risky play. Risky play is not all about excitement; it is also a very important aspect of children´s development. Coster and Gleeves (2008, pgs. 14 – 15) found that when children engage in risky play they develop their physical capabilities, increase their pride and self-esteem, experience feelings of independence, and gain new perspectives.

2.2 The importance of risky play

For children to learn they have to try new and challenging activities (Pound, 2014, pg. 111). Thomas and Harding (2011 pg. 19) suggest that risky play enables them to do just that. The factors involved in risky play allow children to challenge themselves, set and test boundaries, build resilience, and assess new situations. Consequently, having a positive effect on children's' self-confidence and independence (Thomas & Harding, 2011 pg. 19; Knight, 2009, pgs. 1 & 6; Knight, 2011, pg. 35). Stephenson (2003) suggests it is the motivation to master a new challenge, and the excitement felt when it is finally mastered, that drives children to engage in risky play.

The movements associated with outdoor risky play, such as, swinging, climbing, rolling, hanging, and sliding, are not only fun for children but also essential for their motor skills, balance, coordination, and body awareness (Greenland, 2010, pgs. 189 – 190). Coster and Gleeves (2008, pg. 17) found that when children engage in physical activities they experience positive feelings within themselves. On the other hand, research has found that children who do not engage in such active play are more likely to suffer fitness and motor problems when they reach adolescence (Kantomaa et al., 2011). The California Department of Education (2009) takes this further by suggesting that the motor skills involved in outdoor play activities are related to children´s social development.

The outdoors is a "powerful learning environment" (White, 2011, pg.7) providing children with sensory and stimulating experiences, as well as opportunities for exploratory, imaginative and risky play (Tovey, 2010 pg. 82; Garrick 2011, pgs. 55 – 56). Robson and Rowe (2012, pg. 349) found that outdoor play was particularly effective in promoting creative thinking among children. The reason for this could be that outdoor environments provide

children with space and time to develop ideas with open-ended materials resulting in creative thinking (Moyles, 2014, pg. 219).

Rough and tumble play, a feature of risky play, usually takes place between friends and should not be seen as an aggressive form of play. It does, in fact, create positive emotional connections between children (Jarvis, 2010, pg. 61). Research carried out on rats found that during rough and tumble play, the areas of the brain that are activated are those that deal with social concepts and decision making. This suggests that rough and tumble play could improve social competence in later life (Pellis & Pellis, 2007, pg. 97). Furthermore, rough and tumble play allows for independent and shared physical experiences often taking place in sophisticated social worlds full of narrative and role play (Jarvis, 2010, pg. 72).

Risky play helps children to deal with success and failure, providing children with the motivation to try again and discover new ways of doing things (Tovey, 2010, pg. 82). This sense of achievement gained by having a go and taking risks is important for effective learning. Children who embrace risk taking are likely to be more confident and believe in their ability to achieve. Children who shy away from risks or those who are discouraged from taking risks are more likely to give up when things get difficult (Dweck, 2000, pg. 2).

2.3 Declining opportunities for outdoor risky play

Evidence shows that the amount of time children spend playing outdoors has dramatically reduced over the past few decades. Research carried out in the UK found that 32% of children have never climbed a tree, a quarter of children have never rolled down a hill, and one in ten have never ridden a bike (Play England, 2011). Computers, television and an increase in organised activities have contributed to children spending less time outdoors (McCurdy et al., 2010, pg. 103). According to research (Wellhousen 2002, pg. 13; Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet, 2012, pg. 3138) such dramatic changes can be explained through political, social and economic trends.

Parents are often too concerned about traffic, the threat of kidnapping, and other dangers to allow their children to engage in outdoor activities, such as riding bicycles, playing outdoor games or exploring outdoor areas (Little & Wyver, 2008, pg. 34; Brussoni et al., 2012, pg. 3137; Casey, 2007, pg. 5). A

survey carried out for the Make Time 2 Play campaign found that 63% of parents believe it is more dangerous for children to play outside now than it was when they were children. The primary concern among parents is traffic, followed by the danger of strangers (Erskine & Le Rougetel, 2013, pg. 1). At the same time, research shows that this is not the case and "parents' perceptions about danger can be disproportionate to actual dangers" and child abductions by strangers are very rare (Brussoni et al., 2012, pg. 3138). Karsten (2005, pg. 275) points out that as outdoor play opportunities have declined, adult supervision has increased. However, research carried out in the United States found that approximately 50% of preschool aged children do not have even one supervised outdoor play opportunity a day and are expected instead to play indoors (Tandon, Zhou & Christakis, 2012, pg. 709).

Furthermore, the amount of space and places where children can play is decreasing rapidly. An increase in rules and regulations means that children are often told they cannot play ball games near homes, they are banned from public areas and curfews are put in place. All of this seems to suggest that children´s outdoor play is a nuisance and something that should be controlled. Attitudes even suggest that a child playing alone outside is neglected (Casey, 2007, pg. 5). As a result of increased concern over child safety, risk taking has become increasingly regulated and controlled, and even removed all together (Tovey, 2010, pg. 81). Researchers (Little, Wyver et al., 2011 pg. 129) argue that if children do not have access to risky play opportunities they become bored and find dangerous ways of playing, such as by not using play equipment correctly, or playing in dangerous areas (Hart, 2002, pg. 145). It is assumed that by removing risks, children will be able to play in a safer environment. This approach however fails to acknowledge risk taking as a positive part of children´s play and learning (Tovey, 2011, pg. 86; Little, 2006, pg. 142).

Urbanisation and a lack of green spaces have had a negative impact on children´s opportunities for outdoor play. As cities expand, children´s play becomes increasingly more an indoor activity (Bringolf-Isler et al., 2010, pg. 254; Aarts et al., 2010, pg. 215; Hart, 2002, pg. 135). Today, many children are driven from one location to another, engage in organised activities and play inside their homes or back gardens under the supervision of parents (Frost Wortham & Reifel, 2005, pg. 160). Taking away children´s play spaces, filling up their free time with organised activities and supervising children at all times means that they are not able to draw upon their own skills and resources.

Without the opportunity to engage in risky and challenging play, children will not be able to respond to difficulties or problems they encounter, learn from difficult situations, or deal with disappointment (Casey, 2007, pg. 7).

These parental and societal influences have led to a decline in play areas offering children opportunities for challenge and excitement. Safety should be a concern but not at the expense of the children (Hart, 2002, pg. 144). According to Sandseter (2010, pg. 8) and Knight (2009, pg. 34) this safety obsessed society will result in children whom are less physically fit, have little control over motor skills, and unable to engage in risky play thus less able to manage risks later in life.

2.4 Risk taking and safety

Some levels of risk are important and even necessary in play (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005, pg. 332). Ofsted (2006, pg. 9) suggest that rather than removing all risk from outdoor areas children should have access to risky play in a "controlled and supportive" environment. Despite this, not all risk taking is positive. Children can take risks which are inappropriate, reckless or that put themselves or others in danger. Consequently, children need guidance from adults who can help them recognise serious risks and teach them about safety (Tovey, 2011 pg. 89).

According to McNaughton and Williams (2009, pgs. 216 - 219) "telling and instructing" children can help teach children about safety as well as promote new knowledge and skills. This approach is essential for safety purposes when children are engaged in risky play. "Telling and instructing" is one way of providing children with important safety information. McNaughton and Williams suggest that in some situations it is better that children learn from being told what to do, rather than discovering it for their selves. This is particularly relevant during risky activities, such as when children are using tools for the first time, or playing near dangerous elements.

Research, has however, found that children are more capable of knowing their limits than adults think. Kaarby (2004, pg. 124) found that children are able to judge a risky activity according to their own strength and skill. They will explore different ways of sliding or running down a slope depending on its steepness and will use their judgement when climbing trees, stopping before it becomes too dangerous. Even very young children will explore a sloping

surface by touching it with their hands or feet before deciding whether to slide down or not (Adolph, Eppler & Gibson, 1993, pg. 1168).

Clearly adults need to ensure children´s safety during outdoor play but in a positive and encouraging way. Adults should focus more on making an environment or activity as safe as necessary rather than as safe as possible. The Icelandic handbook on children´s welfare and safety in preschool (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2014, pg. 18) puts forth that all preschool staff must be responsible for the children and intervene if a child´s behaviour could lead to a serious accident. The handbook states that accidents can happen in preschools and that preschool staff should be trained in first aid.

As Tovey (2011, pgs. 89 – 90) points out, an environment which is as safe as possible, with all potential risks remove, is actually an unsafe environment as it denies children the necessary experiences to develop and practice the skills they need to be safe. The aim is to ensure risk of significant injury is minimal. Which means allowing children to experience risks, discover their limits and abilities, and trusting them to recognise them. Furthermore, Tovey (2011, pg. 93) points out that denying children the opportunity to engage in risk taking, could lead to them become reckless, lack creativity and confidence, as well as not develop the skills needed to be safe when risky situations arise.

Richardson (2013, pg. 4) advises adults not to be too anxious about accidents happening. She believes that adults can help children learn vital life skills if they have a positive attitude towards accidents and discuss them with the children. Her worry is that adults who witness an accident will ban the equipment or activity all together. Richardson´s suggestion is to find a way of reducing the likelihood of an accident to an "acceptable level" and weight the benefits of an activity against the risks.

2.5 The preschool play area

The preschool play area is an important feature of the educational setting, promoting physical, mental and social health in children. Broekhuizen, Scholten and De Vries (2014, pg. 27) found that for preschool children to be physically active they need sufficient time and space to play. However Frost, Wortham and Reife (2005, pg. 185) say that in many countries, more time and money is spent on equipment to develop children´s academic learning, rather

than on outdoor play areas, which have the potential to develop the whole of the child; academically, mentally and physically.

Norðdahl (2005) suggests that although designers have attempted to create play areas that promote the kind of physical activities beneficial to children. By which she means equipment such as slides, climbing frames, swings and see-saws. A play area with more natural features such as hills, trees, logs and rocks, would provide children with greater challenges and more varied movements. According to Norðdahl this is something that designers should keep in mind. Casey (2007, pg. 9) also agrees that designers should stop focussing on stereotypical features, and instead create play areas that support a wider range of activities, such as large group games, chasing games, and imaginative play.

There is further evidence to suggest that the features of a play area influence the type of play children engage in (Sandseter, 2011a, pg. 4; Sandseter, 2009c, pg. 439). Knight (2009, pgs. 1 & 6; 2011, pg. 35) claims that playing in a natural environment provides children with increased opportunities for riskier and challenging play experiences. However, Sandseter, (2009c, pg. 446) argues that although natural play areas do offer a higher level of risk, they do not provide more opportunities for risky play. In her study comparing the opportunities for risky play in both a traditional and natural play area, she found that children will search for risky play opportunities in any play environment. Sandseter (2009c, pg. 446) does however agree that a natural play area offers children "more intense, exhilarating, and thrilling play" experiences than a traditional play area.

Rather than play areas having an influence on risky play, Stephenson (2003) argues that risk taking opportunities depend on the attitudes and perspectives of adults. Likewise, Sandseter (2012, pg. 95) claims that no matter how many opportunities a play area has for risky play, there is little point in them if the children are not allowed to partake in such play. Play environments should provide children with challenges "within reasonably safe limits" (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005, pg. 160).

Adult supervision is a highly important aspect in the play area. Lack of supervision can contribute to accidents, however Little (2006, pg. 144) found that what constitutes as adequate supervision is often not fully understood. According to Morrongiello (2005, pg. 545) the role of supervision should firstly involve the strategies used to manage injury risk. Secondly, adults need

to be aware of any potential risks and make necessary modifications to the play environment. Little (2010b, pg. 9) suggests that adult/child ratios are vital to providing support for positive risk taking experiences. Nevertheless, her research revealed that in many educational settings the current adult/child ratio only necessitates low levels of risk taking, as there are insufficient numbers of staff to adequately supervise children during risky activities.

Little (2006, pg. 143) suggests that the type of equipment and activities preschools provide, the way in which the children use equipment, and the support they receive from adults, are important if children are to have a positive experience with minimum risk of injury. Minimum risk does imply that all play areas should be risk free. As research demonstrates, environments that are free from risk only restrict children from engaging in activities, that not only are they capable of, but that also increase their competence now and in the future (Little, Wyver et al., 2011, pg. 127).

Risky play, safety and the preschool – An Icelandic context

Icelandic preschool laws and regulations state that preschools should be evaluated regularly. External evaluation is carried out by the Ministry of Education which evaluates a number of preschools every year to make sure they are following the laws and regulations (Einarsdóttir, 2005, pg. 470). One such regulation regarding both Icelandic preschools and compulsory is that all outdoor play areas need to be surrounded either partly or completely with fencing, to protect children from potential risks in the surrounding area (Reglugerð um hollustuhætti nr. 941/2002). Further regulations about the safety standards of playground equipment and playgrounds (Reglugerð um öryggi leikvallatækja og leiksvæða og eftirlit með þeim nr. 942/2002) state that play areas and equipment should be designed and maintained in a safe and approved manner. Furthermore, the designs of play areas should ensure that any potential risk of accidents are minimised. All play equipment must adopt the European standard as well as be endorsed by the Icelandic standard.

The Icelandic curriculum for preschools (2011, pgs. 39 – 40) states that outdoor play areas should be safe, healthy and encouraging so that children enjoy the activities. The curriculum points out that the outdoor area as an important learning environment which should encourage children to play, move, express themselves and explore. It adds that the playground should be

as diverse as possible by including various vegetation, landscapes, grass, soil and materials that are accessible to the children. The Icelandic handbook on children's welfare and safety in preschool (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2014, pgs. 18 & 41) highlights that staff must be aware of potential risks both inside and outside the preschool setting. If an accident does occur then staff must carefully review what happened and consider how to prevent it happening again.

Interestingly, in legislative documents the outdoor environment is not discussed as much as the preschool buildings. Norðdahl and Jóhannesson (2015, pg. 7) describe this as the "silence" of the outdoor environment. Their research revealed that although outdoor play and education is emphasised in the curriculum it is not supported by laws and regulations. Likewise some preschools in their study described their outdoor area as having multiple play opportunities that meet the needs and ages of all children. However, it was revealed that how they achieve this was not discussed. Interestingly the researchers found a contradiction between allowing children to take risks and learning opportunities these risks provide. Interestingly it was revealed that Icelandic teachers have fewer worries about children taking risks than teachers in other countries. Norðdahl and Jóhannesson suggest, however that action should be taken to ensure that teachers are protected from possible lawsuits. They believe it is important to teach children how to handle dangerous situations rather than just avoid them altogether (pg. 13).

A recent letter written by Margrét María Sigurðardóttir, from the Children´s Representative Office, (January 26th 2015) sent to all Icelandic preschools, compulsory schools and parent associations, claimed that not all local authorities are following the regulation nr. 942/2002. According to Article 12, Annex III of the regulation, professional inspectors are to perform an annual examination of play areas and play equipment. In some cases, these inspections were not been completed as often as recommended. The Children´s Representatives believe it is important to raise awareness of safety in educational settings in order to prevent accidents involving children. They suggest that if an accident occurs, changes to the facilities must be made to prevent further accidents. The letter noted that although the school principle is responsible for the needs, overall development, welfare and education of children, parents should become more involved in and aware of safety procedures.

Research has shown that childhood obesity is an increasing issue among Icelandic children, even during the preschool years (Jóhannsson, Arngrímsson & Þórsdóttir, 2006). Kristín Norðdahl (2009) suggests that improving children's self-image and promoting a healthy lifestyle should begin during the preschool years. Preschool policies and play environments have the potential to improve children's health and wellbeing (Pate, Pfeiffer, Trost, Ziegler & Dowda, 2004, pg. 1261). One way preschools can do this is by providing children with natural environments where they can engage in a variety of physical activities (McCurdy, Winterbottom, Mehta & Roberts, 2010, pg. 108). Further to this, Icelandic research revealed that children regard the outdoor play area as one of the most important features of a preschool (Einarsdóttir, 2005). Recent research revealed that children value natural environments and challenging play equipment (Norðdahl & Einarsdóttir, 2014).

Although in many parts of Scandinavia the value of outdoor play in natural environments is understand it is still relatively new in Iceland and very little has been written about it (Kristín Norðdahl, 2010, pg. 2). When children have access to natural features learn how their behaviour affects the environment around them. As a result, this raises children's awareness about the importance of nature as well as enhancing life skills, health and wellbeing (Norðdahl, 2009).

Risky play in winter

As this research takes place in Iceland it seemed necessary to discuss how winter weather conditions can affect outdoor play. Iceland is situated in the North Atlantic close to the Arctic Circle and winter weather can change rapidly (Einarsson, 1984, pgs. 673 & 676). In Northern Iceland heavy snowfall is common. Snow can arrive in September and cover the ground until April or May. Thaws are common, which are often accompanied by rain, leading to icy, slippery surfaces (pgs. 678 & 686 – 687).

Winter weather can and does provide children with more opportunities for risky play activities. Sandseter´s research (2007b, pg. 251) revealed that a popular preschool activity during the winter is sledging on snow. She observed children sledging at high speeds down slopes, sledging head first, and sledging standing up (often with two children per sledge). Sandseter also observed

children playing near frozen or icy water (pg. 251). Rough and tumble play was also a popular activity during the winter, especially wrestling on the ground (pg. 252).

In some Scandinavian and Nordic countries it is common to see fire pits in preschools. According to Sandseter (2011a, pg. 24) fire pits enhance outdoor activities in a variety of ways during the dark and cold winter months. In the same study, Sandseter (pg. 16) points out that walking on uneven surfaces, for instance snow covered ground, provides children with the physical competence they need to handle such terrain. This means that when they experience walking or running on a variety of terrains in the future they will not take undue risks.

It is important that preschool teachers take extra precautions during winter months. Outdoor equipment should be assessed for slipperiness and extra attention needs to be made when children are climbing (Zamani, 2010, pg. 1). During low temperatures playground safety surfaces, such as those made of wood mulch or engineered wood fiber can freeze solid. They may therefore not provide children with the proper fall protection required to avoid a serious injury. Alternative safety surfaces that can withstand freezing temperatures include rubber matting (Pittam, 2012).

Not all countries are willing to give children equal opportunities to play outdoors during winter months. In Slovenia, children spend 23% of their preschool day outside during the summer, but only 13% during the winter (Kos & Jerman, 2013, pg. 189). On the other hand, Norwegian children spend 70% of the preschool day outside in summer, and 31% outside in winter (Moser & Martinsen, 2010, pg. 457). Research carried out in New Zealand (Ergler, Kearns & Witten, 2013, pg. 181) found that outdoor free play is much more constricted in the winter. On rainy winter days many outdoor activities, even in schools, are denied. Several parents interviewed for the research claimed that by keeping their children indoors during the winter they were protecting them from illness. Many parents also felt that allowing their children outside during the winter would be viewed as negative by other people (pg. 183).

Contrary to this, research has found that children are in fact not more likely to become ill if they play outside in the winter. When children are playing indoors viruses and bacteria are more likely to pass from child to child, especially when children are playing in unventilated and confined spaces. On the other hand, viruses and bacteria that carry illnesses are rapidly dispersed

outdoors. Furthermore, while children are playing outside the teachers can ventilate the indoor areas (Sennerstam & Moberg, 2004, pg. 353).

2.6 Attitudes to risky play opportunities in preschools

Tovey (2010, pg.79) argues that since risk-taking is so important to children's development it should be encouraged by preschool teachers. However, due to increasing regulations and concerns about children's safety, many preschool teachers believe it is difficult to find the right balance between allowing children to encounter risks in the playground and preventing serious injuries (Sandseter, 2010, pg. 8; Bell, Gill & Spiegal, 2008, pg. 11; Little, 2010c). Research carried out in Australia found that because of increased safety regulations, preschool teachers are not allowed to let children climb trees due to the risk of falling (Little, 2010c, pg. 13). The preschool teachers in this research had noticed a change over the last few years in what activities children can engage in when playing outside. They stated that policy makers had gone too far and there was now an overemphasis on safety. As a result preschool teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to provide worthwhile challenging experiences for the children (Little, 2010c, pg. 12).

Further studies have found other types of risky play have been prohibited due to the fear of potential injury. Sandseter (2009a, pg. 6) found that although the preschool teachers in her study allowed many types of risky play, rough and tumble play (fencing with sticks for example) was prohibited and teachers would stop this activity. Earlier research by Sandseter (2007a, pgs. 246 – 247) revealed similar results concerning rough and tumble play. She found that this type of play was more common in boys and although preschool teachers do not think rough and tumble play is very risky in general, they do try to prevent fighting with sticks. In the same study, Sandseter found that play near water was considered very risky due to the risk of drowning (pg. 246). Furthermore, Sandseter found that the preschool teachers in her research often felt that speed got out of control with children going too fast on bikes and sledges (pg. 248).

Similarly, Tovey (2011, pg. 86) found that while some teachers support and encourage risky play, many feel anxious and reluctant to allow children to take risks for fear of accidents. In order for preschool teachers to find the balance between risk taking and safety they must understand the reasons behind

children´s risk taking and the implications of such behaviour for children´s development and safety (Little, 2005, pg. 146).

Fenech and Sumsion (2007) found that many preschool teachers perceive regulations as constraining and of little benefit for children or teachers. The researchers argue that an increase in regulations threatens to produce teachers who are "docile" (pgs. 110 – 111). Interestingly, their research revealed that many preschool teachers hide behind regulations as a way of protecting themselves from perceived threats, such as litigation. Fenech and Sumsion (pg. 118) suggest that critical thinking is the key to ensuring preschool teachers do not become "docile". Teachers can directly influence regulations by challenging them, promoting alternative ways of thinking and collaborating with parents and others working in the educational field. This can influence how preschool teachers view regulation and help change the regulations they perceive to be constraining.

Restrictions on risky play are not only due to regulations but also each individual's perception of risk. Sandseter (2009a, pg. 6) revealed a number of strategies preschool teachers use when dealing with risky play: restricting/constraining, keeping a close eye, not present/distance, and contributing/initiating. Others found that some teachers constantly supervise children's activities and restrict activities they perceive as risky (Stan & Humberstone, 2011, pg. 213; New, Mardell & Robinson, 2005). Such restrictions are however often based on the adult's perception of what is dangerous or risky, rather than individual abilities (Sandseter, 2011a, pg. 5).

On the other hand, some researchers have found preschool teachers to have a more positive outlook on risky play. Preschool staff in Little's (2010b) study believed that risk taking was important for children to learn about consequences and overall development. A more recent study carried out in Iceland found that teachers believe outdoor environments are important for children (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2014, pg. 8). Although the research did not focus on risk taking, one preschool teacher did express that risks are important in order to teach children how to handle risks in the environment and build up their courage.

Both parents and early educational teachers in Little, Wyver and Gibson´s study (2011, pg. 127) expressed positive beliefs about the benefits of risky play. The children were supported and encouraged through praise and physical support and the adults only restricted activities that they perceived as

inappropriate risk taking. Even so, this study also noted that increasing regulations have had a negative effect on children´s risk taking opportunities. The researchers in this study point out that play environments are becoming "risk-free" zones.

Although the Icelandic curriculum for preschools (2011, pg. 43) clearly states that preschools should provide children with "challenging outdoor activities". The curriculum also promotes movement, suggesting that movement creates joy and had a positive effect on children´s wellbeing. According to the curriculum, play that involves movement helps children to improve their competence for taking on new challenges. Daily activities at preschool should encourage children´s health and wellbeing which in return will improve their self-image.

Unlike the situation in Australia, mentioned previously in Little´s research (2010c), in Norway there are no official rules or regulations about what preschool children are allowed to do or not do. Each situation is evaluated depending on the individual child. The teachers give the children the freedom to explore the play area as they wish and risky play is encouraged rather than prohibited (Sandseter, 2012, pg. 94).

Parental attitudes can also affect risky play opportunities in preschool settings. A study looking at parental attitudes to risky play, found that parents' beliefs about risk taking influenced their children´s risk taking behaviour during outdoor play (Little, 2010a). It is therefore important that preschool teachers raise awareness about risky play to parents. If the staff are confident about risky play within the setting it will help ease any parental anxiety. Communication between staff and parents is the key to promoting the benefits of risky activities. Parents should be made aware that their children are developing and learning in an environment that is exciting and challenging, but where unnecessary risks are managed (Richardson, 2013).

Effective risk management is the key to safety in a preschool setting. It is essential that staff consider the benefits as well as the risks when making judgements about play behaviours and activities. The challenge preschool teacher's face is to allow children to take risks when they play, without putting them in danger of serious harm (Ball et al, 2008, pgs. 12 & 19). Furthermore, preschool teachers that feel anxious about children engaging in risky play could benefit from learning more about risk management and the values of risky play. Overall it is up to the staff to use their own professional judgement

to find a balance between the children´s needs and desires and their safety (Richardson, 2013).

2.7 Making risky play accessible for all preschool children

The Icelandic preschool curriculum (2011, pg. 21), states that preschool activities should encourage health and wellbeing, in an environment that contributes to a healthy lifestyle and improves motor skills. Outdoor risky play contributes to all of these things and more. The main issues that arise from risky play in preschool are preventing injury and maintaining safety (Brussoni et al., 2012, pg. 3134). Parents want their children to be safe, and teachers are anxious about getting the blame for accidents (Tovey, 2011, pg. 86). However, as research previously mentioned shows, risky play provides children with experiences that benefit them not just at an early age but also later in life (Thomas & Harding, 2011 pg. 19; Knight, 2009, pgs. 1 & 6; Knight, 2011, pg. 35). It is therefore vital that preschools provide children with an outdoor area where they can engage in positive risky play and risk taking opportunities, challenges and excitement.

Within a preschool setting there is usually a mixed age of children using the same outdoor area. According to Richardson (2013) this means preschool teachers must think about the setup of the area and ensure that it supports all the children's different ages and abilities. This could mean creating an area for the youngest children to play freely without disruption from the older children. Likewise, the oldest children in the preschool need an area where they can explore, take risks and enjoy physical activities. Preschool teachers could also take into account Sandseter´s (2007a, pg. 243) six risky play categories mentioned previously. Sandseter (2007a, pgs. 249 – 251) observed that the most popular risk taking activities among four and five year old children included climbing, balancing and jumping off high objects, and sliding or swinging at great speed. Preschool teachers should have these categories in mind when planning outdoor areas, equipment and activities.

Although this research is not focusing on gender differences in risky play, it seems necessary to briefly touch on the subject. Research (Morrongiello, Zdzieborsky & Normand, 2010, pg. 328) on parental reactions to sons' verses daughters' risky play behaviour, found that when daughters engaged in risky

behaviour, parents focused on safety and education about risks, whereas when sons behaved in the same way the parents focused on discipline rather than safety. This shows that parents have a different reaction to risky behaviour and play depending on whether the child is a boy or girl. Furthermore, research suggests that girls are less likely to engage in vigorous outdoor play (Bringolf-Isler et al., 2010, pg. 254; Aarts et al., 2010). Further research (Tandon et al., 2012, pg. 709) found parents are 16% less likely to take preschool girls outside to play. The researchers suggest that parents tend to make more of an effort to take boys outside because of social norms, and because boys demand more outside playing times.

In another study (Little, 2010a, pg. 325) girls were found to be more wary of engaging in risky activities that might be beyond their skill level, whereas the boys felt they were able to attempt all the activities and that none of them presented a challenge. This suggests that girls feel less confident engaging in risky play, a reason for this could be due to the reactions of others. The research further suggested that teachers need to be aware of their own and others' perceptions about risky play and gender, taking care to promote risky play to both girls and boys by allowing both genders to have equal access to risky activities.

There is evidence to suggest that teachers praise and encourage children differently depending on their gender. Girls are more likely than boys to be praised for being neat, quiet, calm, and encouraged to engage in domestic play and quiet activities, such as puzzles or painting. On the other hand boys are likely to be praised for thinking independently, being active and encouraged to engage in messy play and rough and tumble games (Chapman, n.d.; Naughton & Williams, 2009). Teachers need to be aware that they encourage all children, regardless of gender, to become involved in risky play activities.

When discussing risky play activities for all children it is important to consider children with disabilities and their opportunities to risky play. In her article for Special Educational Needs (SEN) Anna Route (n.d.) states that outdoor play is essential for all children. It promotes the social and emotional development of children as well as providing them with opportunities for adventure and challenging experiences in a stimulating environment. This according to Route is particularly important for disabled children. She claims that children with multiple impairments benefit from exploring the various sights, smells, textures and sounds an outdoor environment offers. Furthermore

disabled children are often overprotected and have limited access to challenging or risky activities. Therefore adults should ensure that disabled children have opportunities for risky play activities alongside abled bodied children.

People working with children have often claimed that play opportunities do not consider the needs of disabled children. Attempts and guidelines have been made but these rarely involve improving disabled children´s access to playground equipment and do little to help people caring for disabled children. Not all equipment can be available or accessible to all children but by talking to parents and the children themselves, preschool teachers can gain a better understanding of what is needed to meet the needs of all children (John & Wheway, 2004, pgs. 6 & 20).

For some children risky play activities may not come naturally to them, for example children who are withdrawn or isolated, children who have speech delays, and children with sensory or physical impairments could need additional support or encouragement. Some ways in which a teacher can encourage and support all the children are: to modify the environment as much as possible to meet the needs of each child. Be aware that some children may need longer to feel confident engaging in an activity, such as balancing or climbing. Encouraging the children to help each other or creating a buddy system to encourage co-operation can benefit children. Simplify an activity, e.g. if a child is too anxious to balance on a high branch allow them to gain confidence by beginning on a low branch (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009, pg. 59).

2.8 Making changes for the future

If changes are to take place regarding risky play in early childhood then a change in attitude is needed. Perhaps preschool teachers and society as a whole should use the words of Tovey (2010, pg. 92) “that´s a good idea, let‘s try it” rather than “we can´t, we´re not allowed, it´s not safe”. Above all preschool teachers must realise the potential learning opportunities in risky play activities not just the potential dangers. As Little´s research (2010c, pgs. 10 & 20) shows teachers are often just following the regulations put in place by policy makers. Instead, she suggests that teachers should be able to use their knowledge about individual children and their abilities, to determine appropriate responses to

potential risky situations. If there are going to be any changes made then policy makers need to understand the benefits of outdoor risky play.

There is an extensive amount of literature available on Swedish and Norwegian preschools' approach to risky play. To name just a few, Knight (2009 & 2011), Robertson (2008), and Sandseter (2009a; 2009c; 2012), have all explored the positive aspects of these preschools. It seems then that parents and preschool teachers should take their influence from these settings. However, it is not enough that everyone has the same beliefs about risky play. Research comparing preschool teachers in Australia and Norway found that although the preschool teachers in both countries had the same beliefs, how they were translated into practice was different. In Norway the policies makers allow the teachers greater flexibility in managing risky play (Little, Sandseter & Wyver, 2012, pg. 313).

Therefore, if serious change is to happen then it must begin with changes in policies, regulations and by giving preschool teachers the ability to use their own judgment in order to minimise accidents. Furthermore, teachers must be able to give the level of supervision that enables them to support positive risk taking in a challenging but safe environment (Little, 2005, pg. 152). This could be the way forward in finding the balance between providing opportunities for risk taking and ensuring children´s safety. As Gill (2007, pg. 83) suggests then society as a whole needs to embrace in the knowledge that children have the ability to recover and learn from their experiences and mistakes.

Thankfully, change appears to be happening. Adults and researchers are beginning to recognise the importance of outdoor challenging play for overall development and wellbeing. These changes can be seen in the increase in forest schools and adventure playgrounds in the UK (O'Brien & Murray, 2006, pg. 7; Rosin, 2014). Teachers are becoming increasingly aware of children´s desires and needs for risky play activities, and are slowly acknowledging this by providing children with stimulating and challenging play environments (Little & Wyver, 2008, pg. 39). Hopefully, in the future all children will have access to outdoor play areas that provide an exciting, challenging and creative play experience.

3. Methodology

This chapter will focus on the research process of this study. First the research objectives and questions will be revisited. Then the research design and methods used during this research will be discussed. The participants who took part in the research will be presented; including a brief description of each preschool setting. Information on data analysis will be given. Finally the ethical considerations will be brought forward.

3.1 Research objectives and research questions

The purpose of this research was firstly to determine whether the outdoor play areas in Icelandic preschools provide children with opportunities for risky play activities. The second objective was to explore the attitudes, perspectives and approaches Icelandic preschool teachers have towards risky play activities. It is hoped this will provide more information on the situation of risky play in Icelandic preschools and find out whether preschool teachers in Iceland encourage or hinder children´s risky play activities. The three research questions explored are:

1. Do Icelandic preschool outdoor play areas provide children with opportunities for risky play activities?
2. What are preschool teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and approaches towards risky play in preschool outdoor play areas?
3. Do these perspectives, attitudes, and approaches encourage or hinder the preschool children's' risky play opportunities?

3.2 Research design

The focus of this research was to explore preschool outdoor play areas and preschool teachers' attitudes and opinions of risky play. Due to the nature of this research a qualitative approach was taken so as to gain insight into the nature of risky play from the preschool teachers' opinions (Creswell, 2012. pg.

17). Qualitative research uses words or images to gather data. The data is then grouped in to codes, categories or themes in order to gain understanding of the data (Creswell, 2012, pg. 19). For the purpose of this research both words and images will be used for collecting data. This qualitative research followed the five steps suggested by Creswell (2012, pg. 205) 1) identify participants to be studied, 2) gain access to these participants by obtaining permission, 3) consider what type of information will best answer the research questions, 4) decide how to collect and record the information, and finally 5) administer the data with attention to potential ethical issues.

3.3 Research methods

The aforementioned research questions explore the outdoor risk taking theme on three levels. Firstly, the focus is on the outdoor play area itself. Photographs were taken of the outdoor play areas belonging to the preschools participating in this research. The aim the photographs, was to provide visual images of the play equipment and features available to the children for purpose of data analysis. The photographs also provide a visual aid to the interviewees' responses. One advantage of using photographs is that images are easy to relate to because they provide visual evidence related to the theme (Creswell, 2012, pg. 224). Drawings of the photographs were included to assist the reader get a clear picture of various features in the play area.

The second focus is the attitudes of the preschool teachers. To enable the participants to bring forth their own attitudes and approaches, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, using open-ended questions (see

*Appendix **3***), were chosen as the method to collect data for this part of the research (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, pg. 134). This style of interviewing provides the interviewer with more freedom and flexibility to change the wording of questions or add questions that are relevant to the individual respondents' experience. Using open-ended questions allows the interviewer to probe deeper in to a certain area and clear up misunderstandings. The most important aspect for this research is that this style of interview permits the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003, pgs. 146 & 275; Creswell, 2012, pg. 218).

It should, however, be noted that this study relies on interviews only to gather information about the participants personal attitudes and therefore has

limitations (Cohen el al., 2003, pg. 3). Open-ended questions, although commonly used for educational research, can present issues. These types of questions will provide the researcher with many different responses, some that are very long and others short. It is the role of the researcher to analyse each response. To overcome the amount of data provided, the researcher should look for common themes (Creswell, 2012, pg. 220). Further disadvantages with interviews are that the researcher summarizes the participants' responses in the final report which may not give a full account. The respondent may answer question in a way that they think satisfies the interviewer but that are not their true opinion. The presence of the interviewer could affect the respondents' answers. Responses could be misunderstood. Furthermore, deciding which recording equipment to use may cause issues either before or during the interview process (Creswell, 2012, pg. 218).

It was decided that an audio-tape recorder would be used to record the interviews for this research. This was seen to be the least obtrusive method; taking notes during the interview could distract the respondent, a video recorder could make the respondent self-conscious, remembering the interview to write down afterwards could lead to the interviewer forgetting vital information and the reliability of the data could be compromised (Cohen el al., 2003, pg. 281). Interviews were expected to last approximately 30 minutes, and the overall range at the end of interviewing was 20-36 minutes. The interview process lasted from 10th February 2015 until 26th February 2015.

According to Cohen et al., (2003, pg. 121) it is important to minimise, as much as possible, the amount of bias during data collection. To ensure this, the interviewer must not express their own attitudes or opinions and ensure that they do not try to sway the participant to answer in a particular way. Furthermore, the interviewer must not misinterpret what the participant is saying.

After analysing the data collected for the first and second part of the research, the object will be to answer the third research question; whether the approaches and attitudes to risky play in Iceland encourage or hinder the preschool children's opportunities for risky play.

3.4 Sampling and participants

The size of the sample is often determined by the style of research. With qualitative research the sample size is generally small. Sample sizes are also determined by cost, time, resources and the number of researchers. It is not time or cost effect to interview the whole of the preschool teacher population and therefore a sample must be taken for the study (Cohen et al., 2003, pg. 93; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, pg. 26). Due to the time limit and resources available it was decided that a sample of preschools in North Iceland would take part in this study.

Probability sample, or to be more precise, simple random sampling was the main method of sampling used for this research. This method of sampling provides less risk of bias (Cohen et al., 2003, pg. 99; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, pg. 27). The sample for this study was chosen at random from all the urban and rural preschools in a Northern area of Iceland. It was hoped that this would give substantial representations of experiences and attitudes. It was decided that three rural preschools and three urban preschools should participate in the study if possible. From these six preschools, two preschool teachers from each preschool would be interviewed. An email was sent to six preschools in the urban area and four preschools in the rural areas (see *Appendix **2***). A reply was received from four urban preschools and three rural preschools. Three of the four urban preschools and all three of the rural preschools that responded to the email took part in the research.

The preschool teachers interviewed were chosen at random from those working with 4-6 year old children and they included ten female teachers and two male teachers. This provides a good representation of the ratio of female/male preschool teachers working in Iceland. In 2013 there were 3381 female preschool teachers compared to only 268 male preschool teachers working in Icelandic preschools (Hagstofa Íslands, 2014b). The 12 participants' teaching experience ranged from 4 years to 34 years. Two participants had no experience working in any other educational setting than the one where they currently worked but the others had worked in at least one other preschool in Iceland. One of the participants had worked in a Swedish preschool. Below is a brief description of each preschool setting.

Urban preschool 1

This preschool has six departments for children aged between 18 months and 6 years old. The preschool teachers interviewed at this setting had both worked in other preschool settings. One participant was male (Jón) the other female (Birta). At the time of interviewing Jon had 11 years' experience working in a preschool setting and Birta had 20 years' experience working in a preschool.

The play area is surrounded by a wall. Around the perimeter of the wall are bushes and a few trees. There is a small wooden fence separating the bushes and trees from the play area. This research was carried out during winter; as a result of this the ground was covered in snow. However, the play area surfaces include a flat concreted area, grass which covers most of the play area, a small gravelled area with a few small stones and rocks. There is a slope in one corner of the play area. Play equipment includes: a sand pit, a large round swing; three play houses; a climbing frame which has steps, a wobbly bridge, a bumpy slide and a sliding pole; there is another smaller slide; and a section made from wooden poles and planks. Within the play area are three trees.

Urban preschool 2

This preschool has approximately 90 children aged between 18 months and 6 years. The preschool teachers interviewed at this setting had both worked at other preschool settings. One participant was male (Karl) and the other female (Linda). At the time of the interview, Karl had 15 years' experience working in a preschool setting and Linda had 16 years' experience working in a preschool setting.

The outdoor play is surrounded by a metal fence and other than one small hill it is relatively flat. The surface is mainly concrete but there is also grass, wooden decking, gravel, and rubber safety mats under some of the play equipment. Around the perimeter of the play area are various trees, plants and bushes. The play equipment includes: two tyre swings; two regular swings; a slide; a large sand pit; an area made from tree branches; play houses; a loose rope; large tree branches; tyres buried partly in the ground; a climbing house; a climbing wall with balancing beam and horizontal bars for hanging; and a play boat.

Urban preschool 3

This preschool has approximately 80 children aged between 4 and 6 years. One of the preschool teachers interviewed at this setting had worked at other preschool settings but the other had not. Both participants were female (Lisa) and (Dóra). At the time of the interview, Lisa had 8 years' experience working in a preschool setting and Dóra had 7 years' experience working in a preschool setting.

The play area is surrounded by a wooden fence and around the parameter are bushes. The surfaces include grass, concrete, and rubber safety mats. The majority of the play equipment is in one section of the play area. The play equipment includes: a sand pit; various swings; a climbing wall; a small slide and tunnel; and a play house. There are steps and a slope that lead to another section. In this section are benches and football goals.

Rural preschool 1

This preschool has approximately 30 children aged between 12 months and 6 years. The preschool teachers interviewed at this setting had both worked at other preschool settings. Both participants were female (Elín) and (Sara). At the time of the interview, Elín had 20 years' experience working in a preschool setting and Sara had 14 years' experience working in a preschool setting.

The play area is surrounded by a wooden fence. The surfaces include a concrete area, a large hill that curves around the outdoor area, gravel and grass. Within the play area are a number of trees; one large rock; and some smaller rocks. The play equipment includes: loose tyres; a sand pit; a balancing log; a bumpy slide; a tyre swing and a regular swing; a play house; and football goals.

Rural preschool 2

At this preschool there are approximately 60 children aged between 18 months and 6 years. One of the preschool teachers interviewed at this setting had worked in other preschool settings but the other had not. Both participants were female (Rósa) and (Sandra). At the time of the interview, Rósa had 34 years' experience working in a preschool setting and Sandra had 4 years' experience working in a preschool setting.

The outdoor play area is surrounded by a metal fence. Surfaces include concrete, grass and rubber mats under some of the play equipment. There is a hill in the centre of the play area. On one side of this hill there is a slide and on the other are steps leading to wooden houses of various sizes. Other play equipment includes: slides; a sand pit; play houses; a see saw; and a climbing frame. There are a few bushes and trees at one end of the play area along the fence.

Rural preschool 3

This preschool has approximately 25 children aged between 18 months and 6 years. Both of the preschool teachers interviewed at this setting had worked in other preschool settings. Both participants were female (Hulda) and (Silla). At the time of the interview, Hilda had 9 years' experience working in a preschool setting and Silla had 7 years' experience working in a preschool setting.

The play area is surrounded by a metal fence and surfaces include grass and concrete. There are a few inclines around the play area but no hills or slopes. Play equipment includes: a climbing house; horizontal bars; a tower with a bridge and slide; swings; and a sand pit. Within the play area are also a few trees and a small rock.

3.5 Data analysis

There are six steps used when analysing qualitative data: 1) coding the data, 2) using the codes to develop a general picture, 3) looking for themes, 4) representing the findings with narratives and visual aids, 5) making an interpretation of the findings through personal reflection and the literature, and finally 6) validating the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2012, pg. 237).

When organising and explaining the data it is important to recognise patterns, themes and regularities in the data. As is typical with qualitative research, data analysis will begin at the same time as the data collection process begins. This will help the researcher avoid having to much data to analyse at the end of the data collection process. The researcher can select the important information and note down any patterns from the beginning of data collection (Cohen et al., 2003, pg. 147; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, pg. 136).

After each interview it is necessary to transcribe all the data. This is time consuming and adequate time is needed for it (Creswell, 2012, pg. 239). All the interviews were taken in Icelandic and then translated during transcription into English. As a non-native Icelandic speaker this stage took a long time to complete as it was important not to wrongly translate any words or statements. All words were transcribed, as was information such as when the interviewee, paused, laughed or was inaudible. This helps the researcher to capture all the details of the interview that may be useful when analysing the data (Creswell, 2012, pg. 239).

Coding, although time consuming, is an important part of data analysis and begins after data collection. It often includes examining the data, comparing it, then categorising the information. The data is then looked at in a meaningful way in order to find connections within the categories (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, pg. 144). Coding for this research began by printing out all the transcriptions. Each interview was examined and then answers were compared. Any emerging patterns, themes, regularities or unusual information was highlighted and then colour coded. These highlighted sections were then analysed more closely.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues can arise in every stage of research. During interviews there are three areas that need to be considered, these are, informed consent, confidentiality, and the consequences of the interviews (Cohen et al., 2003, pg. 49). Before beginning the interview the interviewer must ensure informed consent. Informed consent guarantees confidentiality, beneficence and non-maleficence as well as protects the participants "right to freedom and self-determination" (Cohen et al., 2003, pgs. 279 & 50). Informed consent involves four elements: competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension. If all of these elements are present then the researcher can be assured that the participants' rights have been considered. Informed consent protects and respects the rights of the participants, while at the same time places some responsibility on them should anything go wrong in the research. Consent also gives the participant the right to refuse to take part in the research, or to withdraw once the research has begun. A researcher must not assume that they have an automatic right to enter a preschool and begin their research. The

researcher must first seek permission at an early stage (Cohen et al., 2003, pgs. 51 – 53).

Anonymity ensures that any information given by the participants should in no way reveal their identity. However, this is not possible when conducting face to face interviews. In such a situation the researcher can promise confidentiality by using a pseudonym and ensuring that an individual's response is not traceable back to the participant (Cohen et al., 2003, pgs. 61 – 62; Creswell, 2012, pg. 232). In the case of this research, the preschools participating in the research will not be named, and the preschool teachers interviewed will be given a pseudonym.

To ensure that this research followed ethical standards a number of steps had to be taken. Firstly, information about the research was sent to the Icelandic Data Protection Authority. Secondly, permission to carry out the research had to be granted from the school authority (see *Appendix **1***). Once this was completed the collection of data could begin. As previously mentioned the interviews were conducted in Icelandic. The data was translated into English. Having good knowledge of the Icelandic language and being a native English speaker made this possible.

4. Findings

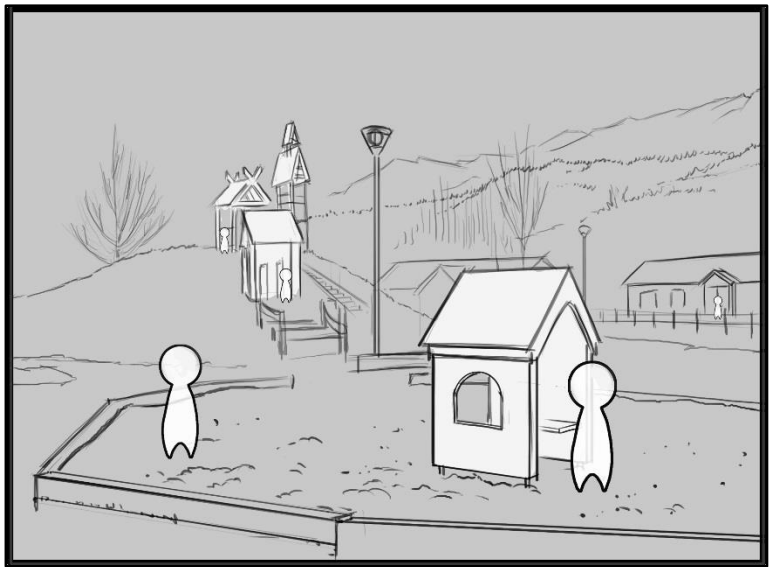
In this chapter the findings from the data collected will be presented. Six preschool settings (three situated in an urban area and three situated in rural areas) took part in this study. The findings regarding the key features for outdoor risky play in each preschool setting will be presented. These include both the natural and manmade features that provide risky play opportunities. The safety measures in place for each setting regarding outdoor play will be put forward. The changes participants would like to see in preschool play environments will also be presented.

The chapter then presents the findings from the twelve interviews taken with preschool teachers working with children aged between four and six years. The participants' understanding and definitions of the term risky play will be presented, along with whether they believe risky play to be an important aspect of play. Risky play and gender will be touched upon due to an overwhelming theme that emerged. The participants' attitudes towards the six categories of risky play (height, speed, climbing, dangerous elements, rough and tumble play, and use of dangerous tools) will be presented. The participants' views on challenges and attitudes regarding risky play in preschools will be brought forward. Finally, the chapter presents the participants views on how to overcome these challenges.

Findings will be supported with quotations from the participants. The preschools will be referred to as urban preschool 1, urban preschool 2, rural preschool 1, rural preschool 2 and so forth. The data collected revealed the following themes: similar key features in all preschool play areas, similar understanding and attitudes towards risky play, belief that changes needed to take place, and similar views on how these changes should be implemented.

4.1 Key features of outdoor play areas in Icelandic preschools

The key elements of the outdoor play areas at all the preschools participating in this research were very similar. All the preschools had relatively large outdoor play areas with very similar play equipment, including swings, slides and play houses.



Each play area was surrounded by a metal or wooden fence, or a wall. Each play area consisted of a flat concreted area which was generally used for bikes and “running games”, and a grassed area. There was some kind of slope or hill in every play area however the degree of steepness and height differed between each setting.

There were some natural features in all the preschools, although the children’s access to these varied from complete access, to barriers that prevented any access. All the preschools had at least one tree in the play area

for climbing. Four of the preschools had bushes and small plants around the play area but only two of these settings allowed the children to play within these areas. In urban preschool 2 the staff had cut and shaped the bushes so that the children could play and hide among them. There were also a number of tree stumps that the children could use for standing and sitting on. Rural preschool 2 had a very small area with bushes which the children had access to. Urban preschool 1 had various trees and bushes around the perimeter however a small wooden fence prevented the children from playing in this area. One participant explained this was to protect the trees and bushes:

> We also tell them [children] that they cannot climb all the trees in the garden. So we let them climb one and tell them that they should leave the others alone because they need to be left in peace. We tell them that you have a big space to play in so let the trees have their space.

Similarly, urban preschool 3 had a rope surrounding the bushes in the play area which was to protect the children because the bushes are "prickly" and the children are not allowed access to this area because then the teachers "cannot see the children". Two of the preschools had rocks in the play area. Rural preschool1 had the largest rocks, including a very large one that the children can climb. Rural preschool 3 had a small rock, it emerged that when they had asked permission from the school authorities for a larger rock it was denied on the grounds of safety.

All of the preschools allowed the children to climb trees. There were however differing opinions on how high the children could climb. Two of the preschools had marked the tree with tape indicating how high the children were allowed to climb:

> The mark in the tree is for the safety of the children. The height we mark is the height where we think that if they jump they will not hurt themselves.

It is worth pointing out that the other preschool with a mark in the tree informed the researcher during the interview that the local council had recently trimmed all the bushes in the play area including the climbing tree. As a result there were no trees left to climb in this setting. Rural preschool 2 had reservations about letting the children climb the trees due to their location: "there is a fence next to the tree and it could be dangerous if a child falls on to it". Both the

participants stated that the teachers do not "all have the same opinion when it comes to climbing the trees".

Most of the participants felt that their preschool's outdoor play area offered "some opportunities" for risky play, but this was often thought of as "medium risk". Only one preschool play area was thought to "not offer enough". The participants from this preschool setting both agreed there should be more natural features, such as rocks and trees, for the children to climb. They claimed that the manmade equipment was not very high and did not offer enough opportunities for risky play. All of the participants mentioned that their setting offered some degree of climbing possibilities but a few participants felt that there was not enough for the children to climb or that the climbing equipment was "too small".

On the basis of this research taking place in the winter, the participants were asked if risky play opportunities were different during the winter than the summer. All the participants agreed that risky play opportunities were different in the winter. Sledging was thought to be the main activity during the winter. This was also highlighted as the riskiest winter activity due to the high speeds at which the children can sledge. It was reported by the majority of participants that climbing is not a very popular activity during the winter. According to the participants this was because winter clothing made climbing difficult. Some of the participants pointed out that the winter provides a good opportunity for children to learn how to walk in deep snow and on ice.

The importance of the outdoor play area and children's opportunities for risky play was noted by one participant. This teacher suggested that teachers need to create challenging play areas for children where they can climb, jump, and learn to walk on a variety of surfaces because in the "real world the ground is not flat". However this participant and three others believed it was necessary to "set boundaries" and "limits" within the play area so the children have the opportunity to challenge themselves in "a safe way".

Rules and safety regarding outdoor play

It emerged during the interviews that the six preschool settings had very few formal rules or regulations regarding outdoor play. All the preschools provided the children with at least one, often two, outdoor play opportunities each day. The only time the children do not play outside was if the temperature fell below

-10°c. The rules that did emerge during the interviews were all considered unofficial or "common sense" rules. These rules had been discussed and agreed on during staff meetings. A number of the teachers stated that these rules are often brought up during meetings, especially when new teachers begin working at the setting.

A pattern emerged regarding the unofficial rules of outdoor play. All of the preschool settings had similar rules. One rule that all the preschools followed were that bikes, or toys with wheels, had to stay within the flat concreted areas. This was to ensure that the children did not get injured by a "bike rolling down a hill". There was one rule that applied to all the preschools except one. This was that the children can climb onto the roof of the play houses proving they can get up and down by themselves. The only setting that did not allow the children to climb on the play houses was urban preschool 3. When questioned about this, the participants were not sure of the reason.

Rules regarding the slides varied between the settings. Two of the settings allowed the children to slide anyway they wished. There were also different opinions regarding walking up the slide, with some settings allowing children to walk up the slide "if nobody else is waiting to come down". Interestingly there was a contradiction in one setting regarding rules on how the children can slide. One participant said "as far as I know there are no rules" and suggested that the children can slide backwards. The other participant from the same setting however, said "on the slide they have to be sitting. They are not allowed to stand or slide backwards".

Contradictions were also revealed regarding whether the rules were negotiable. Many of the teachers agreed that the "ability of the children" had to be taken into account. It appeared that the negotiability of rules is dependent on individual teachers. Nine of the participants stated that the teachers judge the rules in accordance with their own attitudes. Only three participants claimed the rules are not negotiable because it is "important all the staff work with the same rules".

It emerged that the safety measurements for each play area are the same. The first safety measurement that every participant recalled was the fence and gate surrounding the play area which ensured that the children "did not leave the preschool without an adult". The teachers themselves were also revealed to be the main factor in ensuring the children's safety. At each setting the children do not go outside unless there is a member of staff to supervise them.

Once outside, the teachers have a designated area where they supervise. This allows the teachers to observe the whole of the play area. Half of the participants mentioned that all the play equipment has to pass safety inspections.

Changes to preschool play areas needed to promote and support risky play

The participants were asked what changes were needed regarding the outdoor play areas in Icelandic preschools in order to promote and support risky play. Only two participants that felt outdoor play areas in Iceland already provided children with enough opportunities for risky play. The other ten participants wanted to see changes in the play features available to children.

Only one theme was found that reflected nearly all the participants' responses. This was the need to include more natural features in play areas. Natural features were thought to, provide a wide range of challenges, take into account the "different abilities of children", and develop children's thinking and motor skills. Below are a number of quotations that reflect the need for more natural features:

> They [children] learn to climb things but the equipment only provides so much development and then no more. Like on the climbing frame it has hand and feet grips so they know where to climb. But when you climb a tree you have to be aware of where you stand and if the branch will hold you.

> I would like to see more wild natural areas in play areas. Because even though there is a climbing frame to climb it is all so limited. The children do not have to evaluate things themselves on that kind of equipment. They do not have to think will the bridge on the play castle hold me but they have to do that when they are climbing a tree. They have to think will that branch break if I stand on it...The children have no challenges in these man made play areas. I want to see more wild areas with trees and mud.

> I would like to see more play environments that encourage risky play where they can climb and play on rocks and trees. They need more play opportunities that involve movements. Often play areas are designed in a way so the play is quiet and ordered. They should also be allowed to get a bit crazy.

> We need rocks...like when they are walking and stand on stones that move the children improve their balance. The children think these places are dangerous and that makes then exciting. They love them.

By "flattening play areas" and "removing all the risks" the participants believed that children were missing out. The participants said that the children's different abilities and ages needed to be taken into account. One participant claimed that at the moment preschool play areas are ideal for children "up to the age of three". However, in Iceland children attend preschool until they are five or six years old and at this age "they want more challenges".

In summary this research found that all preschools have similar play areas and play equipment. These provide some opportunities for risky play but are limited either because the equipment only offers minimum levels of risk or because of the rules imposed by the preschool teachers. Climbing was found to be the most popular risky activity during the summer. During the winter months sledging fast down slopes was the most popular risky play activity. Each setting was found to have similar rules. However, contradictions were found within preschool settings regarding whether rules are negotiable or not. The majority of participants wanted to see more natural features in play areas and suggested that play areas should cater for the different abilities of children.

4.2 Preschool teachers' understanding and definition of risky play

This section will begin by presenting the participants' understanding and definition of risky play revealed during the interview process. It is interesting that all twelve of the participants paused when asked to discuss their understandings and definitions of risky play. Although many of the participants felt these were "difficult questions" all the participants provided very similar responses. The section will also look at the participants' attitudes regarding the importance of outdoor risky play in preschools.

It emerged that all the twelve participants' understanding of risky play was an activity that could lead to "danger", "injury", or the risk of getting "hurt". Only two participants mentioned that there was "always a risk" during play even when an activity is not thought of as risky. Interestingly, all the participants only mentioned a few definitions of risky play which were either

"climbing trees or rocks" or "play fighting". Only two participants extended the definition by including "sliding fast down a steep slope". At the end of one interview the participant added:

> To start with I thought that risky play was just rough and tumble…you know like fighting games. I didn't think it was all those other things as well. It is interesting to think it is more.

Eleven out of the twelve preschool teachers interviewed believed that risky play was important for children. The one participant who did not think it was important stated that:

> I think that children of this age should not be playing anything that is risky. That is my opinion. They are little and some things could be too dangerous. They always try to go further and further and in the end it becomes dangerous and they cannot stop. They are not smart enough to stop something happening.

It is interesting to note that this participant talked about the safety of children more than any other participant. According to this participant the role of a preschool teacher is to "always think about the child´s safety first and foremost". When asked if there could be too much safety she replied:

> No. First and foremost safety is the most important thing. I do not think there can be too much safety in preschools. The parents would never forgive us if something happened.

The majority of the participants believed that risky play was "necessary" for "learning". Above all risky play was associated with learning about limits. The quotation below illustrates this point clearly:

> They [children] learn what their limits are, how high they can go, or how close they want others to come to them. They learn to set limits on themselves and others.

Further to this, risk taking during play was seen as a way for children to learn from their mistakes. A number of participants stressed that if a child hurts themselves, then next time they would be "more careful". Two participants even agreed that "getting hurt a bit" was part of the risk taking experience.

Surprisingly, only three of the participants responded that risky play was important for physical development and "self-belief":

> A lot that we call risky is something that can benefit them [children] physically or develop their self-belief. For example when they reach the top of the rock they are excited and say "yes I can do it".

> It helps them [children] develop and get stronger physically but also their self-trust develops. It is amazing to see how happy they are with themselves when they finally do something.

Risky play and gender

As mentioned previously in the literature review this research did not plan to focus on the issue of gender differences in risky play. However, a pattern emerged during the interviews and on the basis of this it seemed necessary to present them within this paper.

When discussing their understanding of risky play activities within preschools, it became clear that some participants' first thoughts were about boys. One participant said that her understanding of risky play was boys fighting and wrestling. Although the interviewer never approached the subject of gender and risky play, four of the participants talked about boys rather than girls. This was especially apparent when discussing rough and tumble play, when responses such as, "this is popular among the boys" and "boys have to be boys" came across in four of the interviews. Boys rather than girls were also thought of when it came to safety during risky play: "big strong boys want to climb high…we have to keep a close eye on them", "some boys are big and boisterous, and we have to be very observant".

It is interesting and important to point out that only one participant brought up the subject of risky play and girls. It also emerged that this participant had noticed a difference in how girls and boys are treated during risky play activities:

> It [risky play] gives them courage and it lets them push themselves. I think all these things are important to develop, especially for girls. Today people think that girls should just be sweet and well behaved and that they do not dare do [risky] things.

It is worth noting that only two participants mentioned girls in relation to rough and tumble play: “I always think of boys playing this way but of course girls do to.” “We have to try to teach this sort of play to girls but also teach them to be careful”.

To summarise this sub-chapter, it appears that many participants had an incomplete picture of what risky play involved. Although risky play was thought to be important for learning about limits and learning from mistakes; the negative aspects of risky activities often over shadowed the positive aspects. The majority of participants only considered climbing and rough and tumble play to be risky activities. These activities were often associated with boys, with some participants suggesting that boys need to be supervised more closely than girls during risky activities.

4.3 Preschool teachers’ attitudes towards the six categories of risky play

This section will present the participants’ attitudes towards the following six categories of risky play: play at heights, fast speeds, climbing, elements such as fire and water, rough and tumble play, and using dangerous tools. The findings for each category will be presented in turn.

Heights

It emerged that children enjoy hanging or swinging from a height, sitting together on the top of play equipment (such as play house roofs or climbing frames) and balancing on high objects.

The overall majority of the preschool teachers felt that playing at heights was an activity that had to be controlled by the teachers. The common theme was that children should only play at a height of a “certain limit”. This limit emerged as “not much higher than the height of the child” or “no more than 1.5 meters”. Only a few participants felt that providing the children “know how high they are” then height was “not a problem”. Safety measures are often put in place to ensure that children only play at a certain height, such as, putting a marker in the trees to indicate the height that the teachers considered a safe limit and only allowing a few children on the top of the climbing frame at one time:

> There has to be some limit regarding heights, for instance like here we decided that the children are not allowed to play higher than a certain height. Children need some kind of limit. They cannot just like…just be as high as they want and then fall down.

The majority of participants felt "concerned" because heights present "quite a lot of risk" to children. It was suggested that if children are at a height that exceeds the "limit" then the "danger becomes too much compared to what they get out of the experience". The potential risk of injury from falling from a great height was the main concern. Interestingly one participant suggested that this fear of falling that teachers have can in fact "cause a child to panic which is more likely to result in an injury". All of the teachers highlighted that supervision was important when children are playing at heights and that teachers should control the activity:

> If it is a large height then I am worried that if they do fall they could break a bone or something. I always tell them to be careful…If I see they are going too close to the edge on a height then I will move them away. You always have to watch them.

Speed

It emerged during the interviews that the main activities children engage in to achieve high speeds are running, biking, and sliding/sledging down slopes. An interesting theme was found regarding attitudes towards play at high speeds. The teachers expressed concern about children biking fast but had a much more relaxed approach to them sledging fast down slopes.

The teachers presented a wide range of attitudes towards children playing at high speeds from: "I have no problem with speed" to "speed is riskier than heights". Interestingly, the main concern expressed was not for the children playing at speed, rather for the other children playing in the area, especially younger children:

> I have an issue with speed because they can go really fast and hit into the other smaller children...Maybe not an issue but I am more aware of it.

This concern did not seem to apply to fast speeds when sledging or running as long as the children had control:

> Yes they are allowed to run as fast as they can. If they are running on concrete then we might tell them to be careful...When they are sledging as long as there is nothing in the way they can go as fast as they want.

> I have no problem with that [speed]. I think of it as...yes...they have to learn to stop. If they are sledging fast they have to have control and stop if they need to.

Furthermore, one participant suggested that children should be allowed to stand up on the sledges to make them slide faster: "it is not very fun to sit down and slide very slowly. I think it is ok if they stand up". It should however be pointed out that the majority of the participants did not allow the children to stand up while sledging as this was considered "too risky".

Unlike with heights the participants thought it was "hard to set a limit" on how fast a child could play:

> It is hard to set a limit there...children run as fast as they can. If they fall then they fall and they could hurt themselves. But you cannot say to a child only run this fast. They have to run at their own speed. It is hard to say how fast or slow a child can go, there is no real limit to set for that.

However one of the preschools had removed all the bikes as a way of controlling fast speeds:

> We removed all the bikes from the playground. The children were biking that fast that they could hurt each other.

> We have taken away all the bikes in the preschool because they were always going so fast on them and the little children were knocked down. At first I thought it was strange but now I kind of agree because of the fast speed. Yes…the older children were always trying to go faster and faster but there are other children here who got hurt...I think speed should be lowered.

In contrast to this other participants mentioned that the preschool's car park is often used for biking so that the "children can go as faster".

Climbing

It emerged that climbing was the main risky activity available to the children in every preschool setting. There was a very positive attitude towards climbing from all the participants. Climbing was thought to be "important" for children and all "play areas should offer some sort of climbing activity". However, attitudes varied regarding how high children should be allowed to climb, which reflects the findings regarding children playing at heights.

Two teachers expressed that they felt nervous when children climbed too high: "sometimes I tell them to come down because they are too high". As previously mentioned in two of the preschools, a marker had been placed in the trees to show the children how high they were allowed to climb and one other preschool was considering doing the same:

> The mark in the tree is for the safety of the children. That height we mark at is the height where we think that if they jump from that height they will not hurt themselves.
>
> It has been discussed whether we should let them climb it [the tree]. Some [teachers] said we should put a mark on the tree to show how high they can go.

The interviews also presented different attitudes towards children's abilities to judge a situation. Some of the teachers believed that most children know their own limits when climbing, whereas others said it was the role of the teacher to set the limits. The following quotes are a representation of these different attitudes:

> We have to make sure they only climb in a place they can handle. We have to teach them how far they can climb. Of course teach them to climb. Some do not want to climb while others really like it and we have to stop them if they go too far.
>
> I think most children know how high they can climb and they don´t go much higher.
>
> There are very few children that do not have in them a stop button. They know their limits. I have never known a child who has climbed all the way to the top of a tree that has not been able to get down again.

As previously mentioned one rule all the preschools followed was that if the children can climb without help then they are allowed to climb. The teachers expressed different opinions about how to assist children who are afraid to climb. The majority of the teachers said that they "encourage" the children to climb especially when they are "scared". It was also suggested that teaching children to climb from a young age is very important. However, one teacher believed that the children have to decide for themselves when they are ready to climb:

> If they do not dare then they don't do it [climb]. We don't not make a child climb a tree if they do not want to...we cannot make them. It is the child´s choice.

Overall, the attitude towards climbing, was positive with many participants expressing a need for more climbing equipment in play areas.

Dangerous elements

A very clear pattern emerged during the interviews regarding dangerous elements, such as water and fire. The use of fire in a preschool was something that "scared" all but a few of the teachers. Most participants said they had never used or considered using fire around preschool children because it was an element that had to be used "with a lot of caution". Most of the teachers paused when they were asked about their attitude to using fire. Below are typical the attitudes held by eight of the teachers towards using fire in preschools:

> I would say no with fire unless you can be totally sure yourself that the children will not go near the fire.
>
> We are never with fire or anything like that.
>
> Fire is not ok.
>
> We don't use fire, we just don't.

Only four of the teachers had a more open attitude towards the use of fire in preschools. Two of these teachers worked in a preschool setting where fire was used (note: not within the preschool grounds but the children aged four to six years had access to an open fire in an area just outside the preschool play

area). Their attitude towards using fire was that if the teachers can "handle the fire" and "react if a situation should arise" then there was no reason why preschools should not introduce fire to preschool children. Below is a quote that illustrates how the fire is used at the preschool and why:

> We light fires with the older children and I think it is important. We tell stories around the fire…we encourage them to feel how hot the fire it. It is important to talk to them about fire and explain that it can be dangerous.

The other two teachers that had a positive attitude towards the use of fire did not work at a preschool that used fire but it emerged that they "want a fire area outside". One of these teachers did not always think using fire around preschool children was a positive experience. This teacher had previously worked in a Swedish preschool, where she had her first experience of preschool children been near fire. It was this experience that changed her attitude:

> I worked in a preschool in Sweden where we cooked food outside in an open fire. At first I was shocked but after a while realised that it was ok. The teacher put a circle of flour around the fire and the children were not allowed to get closer than that. I have used a grill in Icelandic preschools but not that kind of fire like in Sweden.

Playing with water in preschools received a positive reaction from all twelve teachers. The most common response was that "water is great" and "it should be used as often as possible". One teacher was surprised that playing near water was considered risky because it only causes the children "to get wet". Later it emerged that at this settings "water is not used much…the children do play in the puddles though".

Some of the teachers mentioned that the children are taken to rivers and the coastline. It was only when the children play near these sources of water that the teachers expressed some concern:

> I think it is fine to do experiments with water in a glass or play with the water tray. But maybe not in an open area...When you go to the coast you need to prepare the children and have a limit about how far they can go. But children have a lot of fun playing in water and they get alot out of it.

> We are a little scared with water in the river.

> Water is great. When we go to the coast we sometimes walk near the cliffs and they could fall in the ocean so we tell them that it is deep and ice cold so they are careful.

Rough and tumble play

According to nearly all the teachers rough and tumble play is a "delicate issue". Most of the teachers either laughed or sighed when asked their attitude towards this type of play. There were a variety of different attitudes towards rough and tumble play and each setting had their own way of approaching it.

It emerged that although some of the teachers understood this form of play to be beneficial, it was a concern for most teachers:

> This is a delicate issue [laughs]. It is...especially among the boys, something that they do until they develop to a certain level. They learn from this play though, like to set limits. So as long as everything is good with them then I think it is alright. But you have to be ready to jump in if it turns bad or someone gets hurt.

> That is sometimes hard. I know sometimes they need to do these kind of games but for me I try to encourage them to do something else like running.

> They learn a lot during this play both physically and also to find solutions. We are not always telling them to stop because they could hurt someone. We would rather the children learn themselves when they have gone too far and what they can do to make it better. I think that is an important part of being a human. So I do not think adults should interfere.

It emerged that two of the participants worked in a preschool setting that had banned rough and tumble play:

> We stop rough and tumble play, especially if it involves fighting.

> I do not want them engaging in this. I am against that.

Other settings had appeared to ban this form of play but found that the children did it anyway. Therefore, they had created rules to control it:

> The boys do this a lot, play fighting I mean. My experience is that it is hopeless to stop it.

> I start by trying to stop it. I tell them that they are not allowed to do it. But they always carry on and find a new way to play like that. We tell them that if they get hurt then they cannot come to us and complain that someone hurt them…If they want to be in them sort of games then they have to take responsibility for themselves and learn that they could get hurt.

The interviews presented different attitudes towards rough and tumble games that involve objects. None of the preschool teachers allowed the children to pretend that spades were weapons. Similarly, most of the teachers did not allow the children to use sticks during rough and tumble play or had tried to find a way for the children to play with them safely:

> We do not let them play flight with sticks or anything it is dangerous for the eyes.

> We do not let them play with sticks. They find them a lot because we have so many bushes but we do not allow them to pretend they are swords or anything.

> If they have sticks I cut them down so they are not sharp and do not go in their eyes.

> Some teachers do not let them play with sticks but I would rather wait and see what comes out of it. I mean some of the games they play with sticks are great, like they pretend the stick is a magic wand. So I would rather stop and see how the game develops before I step in and stop it.

Dangerous tools

The majority of the preschool settings and teachers had allowed the children to use some type of dangerous tool. The attitude was positive towards children using a hammer and nails if they were closely supervised. There were mixed reactions regarding the use of knives, such as a whittle knife. Only three of the teachers said they had experience of using a whittle knife with children. A few of the teachers said they would never let the children use sharp knives because it was "too much of a responsibility". However, a few teachers claimed they would be willing to teach preschool children how to whittle in very small groups:

> I wouldn't be with a group of eight or ten children and let them use a sharp knife. If I was one on one with a child and could assist them then maybe I would let them use a knife like a whittle knife but no not otherwise.

> We have not used knives I have never thought about it. It is ok if I had the opportunity to take one or two children and let them have a go at whittling. Then it is ok. Then I can be with them and make sure they do not hurt each other...But we are never in that situation in a preschool…we are never with just one or two children.

It emerged that some of the teachers had used other tools with children, such as saws and drills although this was less common than the use of hammers:

> We use them [saws] when doing wood work but not an electric saw we do not have them.

> The children who are 5 years old can use the saws...We saw branches. We have small saws they use and we have hammers and nails.

In summary, the participants believed that play up to a certain level of height was acceptable, however the majority of teachers felt this activity had to be controlled. Play at fast speeds provided mixed attitudes. Some participants suggested that speed often got out of control and should be controlled, while others had a more relaxed attitude. All the participants had a positive attitude towards children climbing. However, some participants believed that it was the responsibility of the teacher to limit how high the children could climb. The majority of the participants expressed shock towards preschool children engaging in activities involving fire. On the other hand, a child playing near water was considered to be positive and something that should be encouraged. Rough and tumble play was a delicate area, with some participants understanding the benefits and others suggesting it should be controlled or banned all together. All the participants expressed a positive attitude towards children using some dangerous tools. Hammers and saws were often considered as appropriate providing a teacher was on hand to assist the children. For the majority of participants the use of knives was considered too risky for preschool children.

4.4 Challenges and attitudes regarding risky play in preschools

This sub-chapter will present the challenges preschool teachers face regarding risky play in preschool settings. Changes in attitudes over time, as well as different attitudes will be explored. The chapter will conclude by discussing ways in which preschool teachers believe they can overcome challenges.

Challenges of implementing risky play activities in Icelandic preschools

The participants presented three challenges that Icelandic preschool settings face regarding risky play. These are related to health and safety, attitudes, and finding the balance between risky play and safety.

Health and safety policies

The most common challenge presented by the majority of participants was related to health and safety policies set by the government and local authorities, whom restrict opportunities for risky play through, tightened regulations and directly influencing the play environment. One participant explained that much of what was acceptable when she began working in a preschool is no longer permitted today: "when I started working in a preschool we took the children swimming…that is not allowed anymore". It emerged that increasing influences from outside preschools are making teachers feel they can no longer make a contribution towards what play opportunities are available to children. One participant expressed her concern by saying:

> There are more and more influences from outside the preschool…yes like from the government. Teachers have no say anymore…it is getting too much. There are too many outside influences and regulations. We know the children and watch them play. We know what their abilities are…but we are told that is too dangerous…it is getting too much.

Nearly all the participants were of the opinion that preschool play areas did not provide children with enough opportunities for risky play. This was due mainly to health and safety policies which have "become increasingly strict in

recent years". Most, but not all, the participants stated that play equipment in preschools has to pass European safety regulations but that this equipment only provides very limited opportunities for risky play. This meant, according to a number of participants, that the children, especially the older ones, "master the challenge in a short time" leaving them "bored". Participants from three settings explained how safety regulations have directly influenced the play area in their preschool setting:

> We once wanted to put an old unused wooden boat in the play area but we were not allowed. The local council said no. Instead we had to get a play boat that had all the safety stickers and so on. We were not allowed the other boat because it was not registered as safe play equipment.

> There was a big rock that we wanted to put in the play area. But we were told from some safety office that it was not allowed because it did not fall under the European safety standards. We wanted to have it so the children could climb it but we were not allowed.

> We have a large rock here that the children love to climb. There has never been any serious accident with it but they [authorities] want us to remove it because it could be dangerous.

Attitudes

The second challenge expressed by many of the participants was the attitudes of other people towards children taking risks. Two participants included "getting over" their own "fears". However, the overall opinion was the struggle to change attitudes of other preschool teachers. A number of teachers suggested that what preschool teachers say about risky play does not always reflect how they respond when they see a child partaking in a risky activity:

> They [preschool teachers] say they are all for risky play but by the way they act they can´t be. Some are quick to stop children doing [risky] things.

> There was one time when I saw a child climbing high and I was supervising but another staff member came and took the child down. But it was my opinion that the children was not at the stage where we [the teachers] needed to step in. I would have let them try to do it themselves.

Very few participants felt the attitude of parents was a challenge. Overall it emerged that parents "trust" the teachers to "ensure the safety of their children". If parents were concerned the participants claimed it was "easier to change the attitude of parents than other teachers".

Finding the balance

The third challenge that emerged from the interviews was the difficulty in finding the balance between risky play and keeping the children safe. Only one participant believed that preschool teachers had "found a good balance between letting the children try things and their safety". While some participants believed that creating a challenging play environment and keeping the children safe, was possible. Others admitted that providing children with what they want in a play area was not easy: "it is difficult...we are sacred they get hurt but we also want them to experience risky things". A few participants said the balance between taking risks and ensuring safety would be easier to achieve if the teacher/child ratio was higher:

> If we had more teachers to supervise then maybe we could let them do more. It is hard when there are maybe eighty children playing outside and only four teachers supervising.
>
> If there is one teacher with four or five children then you can let them do more like with using tools or doing experiments. You cannot do those things when you are alone with lots of children it is not safe.

Different attitudes towards risky play

The interviews presented overwhelming evidence to suggest that preschool teachers feel torn between different attitudes towards risky play. The main difference and the one that was presented first by the majority of the participants were the different attitudes between staff within preschools. Interestingly all the preschool teachers who participated in the interviews said they allowed the children to engage in risky play but other teachers "were often quick to stop it". As previously mentioned only one teacher did not think preschool children should engage in risky activities and this teacher stating: "I don't feel torn between teachers' attitudes. I hope all teachers have the same attitude". Three of the participants suggested that educated preschool teachers

"are more likely to allow risky play" because those with a teaching degree "think about what the child can learn" while other staff members "think more about the risk". Below are three quotations reflecting the majority of responses:

> I think that many teachers do not let them [the children] push themselves enough. They are scared the child will get hurt.
>
> I feel torn yes, some teachers pack children in cotton wool.
>
> Yes [laughs] I let children do more…my attitude is sometimes different to other teachers.

There were mixed responses regarding the attitude of parents towards risky play. Four of the participants felt that parents had a more negative attitude towards risky play than teachers, suggesting that "parents are often scared or concerned about their child". However these participants also agreed that once the parents understood the benefits of a risky activity they "were less worried and understood that their child was in safe hands". On the other hand, many participants did not mention parents at all and two claimed that they had never felt torn between their own attitude and that of parents.

Further to this, nearly all of the participants felt that preschool teachers impose too many restrictions on children's risky play opportunities. Only one participant believed that there are "fewer restrictions today than there used to be". It emerged that preschool teachers are often "scared they will get the blame" if an accident should occur. Two participants highlighted this by claiming that the main issue was the attitude of society:

> I think the main problem is that we are becoming more American. We have to write everything down...like how and where they got hurt. Maybe there is a need for this but I think it is too much just for a small bump.

Changes in preschool teachers' attitudes

All of the participants, except three, felt that preschool teachers' attitudes towards risky play had changed in recent years. Five of participants responded that the changes in attitudes had resulted in a more positive outlook towards risky play. With many teachers suggesting that in the past preschool teachers "were packing children in cotton wool and not providing enough

opportunities" but today "teachers are more open to risky play". Nevertheless, four of the participants expressed the opposite view by stating preschool "teachers are more worried about risky play now" and that "they are scared to let children do things". No themes could be found regarding these different responses. The opinions regarding attitude change did not appear to correspond with either the age of the participant nor the years they had worked in a preschool setting.

Overcoming challenges

The majority of participants suggested that raising awareness about the value of risky play was the best way to overcome challenges regarding risky play opportunities in preschools. Raising awareness within all preschool settings was considered the first step towards more risk taking opportunities for children. Communication between staff was highlighted by a number of participants. Regular staff meetings to discuss issues or "differences of opinion" would allow teachers to "share ideas". Highlighting the benefits of risky play, both physical and mental, during meetings was considered by many to be an effective way of ensuring more teachers are "open to the idea" of children taking risks. However, other participants claimed that raising awareness between teachers was not enough:

> We discuss issues together. We say what we think and then come to a conclusion about how it should be done in the preschool. But we still do not agree.

These participants believed that the only way to ensure that children have opportunities for risky activities was to raise awareness among the "school authorities, governments and those who design play areas". It emerged that unless these authorities are aware of the importance of risk taking and willing to "accept that children need and want to take some risks" than the preschool teachers could not provide more opportunities. Three of the participants suggested that the topic of risky play within preschools was relatively new in Iceland. Therefore it was necessary to raise awareness about the importance of risky play to everyone involved in preschool education, from preschools teachers, and parents, to policy makers, and playground designers.

> I think maybe we need more discussions about this topic...this is something rather new here. I mean they [children] need these risky play opportunities. I have always thought that. To have this discussion about risky play is important, especially with those who make the safety rules.

A few of the participants suggested there are too many health and safety concerns. As a result children are missing out on important experiences. These participants claimed that there was too much focus on making play areas risk free and not enough challenges. A change in attitude, through raising awareness among designers of play areas, was thought to be an important step towards creating an "adventure play area" where the "possibilities are endless":

> I think the outside play areas in Iceland need to change. They are too unnatural. They need more big rocks they can jump off. We are so focused on manmade things and everything has to be completely safe. I think there needs to be more changes in attitudes among teachers but the main changes need to come from those who are building and designing play areas. Today teachers often have no input as to how the outside area should be. Now everything has to be evaluated.

The participants understood that the children's safety had to be taken seriously however a few felt that too much safety was "not good" either. One participant suggested that designers of play areas should take into account that children in Icelandic preschools range from 12 months to 6 years and this should be reflected in the play environment. By creating "a separate area for older children" where they can engage in "faster, more risky games", ensures the safety of the younger children while providing older children with play environments to suit them.

The final solution to overcoming challenges according to a number of participants was to increase the staff/child ratio. It was suggested that by increasing the number of staff there would be more adults to supervise "meaning the children could do more". The majority of participants also claimed that the children would have more opportunities to engage in risky activities if there were more staff, as then the children could be divided into smaller groups.

5. Discussion

This chapter will draw together the main findings which emerged in the previous chapter and discuss these in relation to the relevant literature in chapter two. Keeping in mind the research questions, the main findings of this research are explored: the key features of Icelandic preschool outdoor play areas, the challenges facing risky play in preschools, and finally the attitudes of preschool teachers towards risky play activities. The chapter includes a summary of the answers to all three research questions: Do Icelandic preschool outdoor play areas provide children with opportunities for risky play activities? What are preschool teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and approaches towards risky play in preschool outdoor play areas? Do these perspectives, attitudes, and approaches encourage or hinder the preschool children's' risky play opportunities? The chapter will conclude with the limitations and recommendations for future research on the subject of risky play in preschools.

The main findings of this research reveal that Icelandic preschool play areas provide children with some opportunities for risky play. However due to preschool teachers' incomplete understanding of risky play and a fear of litigation, risky play activities are often limited or controlled.

5.1 Opportunities for risky play in Icelandic preschool play areas

In this sub-chapter an overview of how preschool teachers perceive opportunities for risky play will be provided, along with the importance of risk taking and risky play opportunities available in play areas.

The importance of risky play

It is clear that the importance of outdoor play is understood in Iceland. Every preschool setting that participated in this research provided children with the opportunity to play outdoors twice a day in a variety of weather conditions. This reflects recent research carried out in Icelandic schools (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2014). Research shows that unfortunately not all children are given the opportunity to play outside as frequently as Icelandic children,

especially in wet or cold weather (Ergler, Kearns & Witten, 2013, pg. 181). All of the play areas viewed for this research provided children with plenty of space, which enabled children to engage in a wide range of activities, such as those mentioned by Casey (2007, pg. 9).

Regarding risky play, the majority of Icelandic preschool teachers understand that taking risks is important for children. The preschool teachers in this study believed risky play was important because it teaches children about limits, motivates them to do things differently, and improves their self-belief. These findings reflect previous research (Coster and Gleeve, 2008; Tovey, 2010; Thomas & Harding, 2011) and indicate that preschool teachers are open to the concept of risky play. All the participants were aware of potential risks in play environments which had led some to modify the environment to ensure that children could engage in risky play, without being in danger of serious injury. According to Little (2006, pg. 144) and Morrongiello (2005, pg. 545) these are important aspects if children are going to have positive risky play opportunities.

This research found similar results to Sandseter's (2007a) study in that climbing was the main risky activity available in all the preschool settings. However the majority of the participants felt that the play areas did not provide enough climbing opportunities. Furthermore, the challenge available through climbing was not thought to be sufficient enough for all the children. The most popular risky play activity during winter was play at high speeds, particularly by sliding and sledging on slopes. This reflects the findings of Sandseter's (2007b, pg. 251) research. As Sandseter (2011a, pg. 16) suggests, sloping terrain not only provide children with siding/sledging activities, it also improves children's ability to walk on uneven surfaces. The hills and slopes within Icelandic preschools provide children with a variety of challenging activities and as one participant pointed out they are important for children's development because in the "real world the ground is not flat".

Challenges concerning features in the play areas

Within the play areas preschool children have access to a variety of manmade equipment, such as swings, slides, play houses and climbing frames. According to Norðdalh (2005) this equipment shows that there has been some attempt to create a fun and challenging play environment. However by looking

at both the equipment available and the interviewee's responses the play areas are designed to provide only limited levels of risky play: "Because even though there is a climbing frame to climb it is all so limited". As one respondent pointed out "often play areas are designed in a way so the play is quiet and ordered". Further to this, the safety regulations on play equipment (Reglugerð um öryggi leikvallatækja og leiksvæða og eftirlit með þeim nr. 942/2002) mean that play equipment is similar in all play areas and preschools are unable to design their own play equipment.

All of the play areas offered some natural elements, including hills and slopes, trees and in some cases rocks. These natural features add to the children's risk taking experiences, however the variety and level of challenge they provide, varies between preschools. The majority of participants wanted to see more natural features in preschool play areas: "I want to see more wild areas with trees and mud". More natural features would provide more challenging and exciting forms of play (Norðdahl, 2005; Sandseter, 2009c). The present research found that some natural features, for instance rocks, are been removed or even prohibited from Icelandic preschools which the participants felt was unnecessary. Further to this, the access children have to the natural features was in some settings very minimal. As Sandseter (2009c) and Little, Wyver et al, (2011, pg. 129) pointed out, if children do not have natural features to play on they will find opportunities for risky play on traditional play equipment. This was evident in the present research, when participants claimed the older children are bored and enjoy climbing on to the roofs of play houses.

This research found that Icelandic preschool outdoor play areas offer children some opportunities for risky play. However these opportunities are limited to low risk activities and rarely take into account the ability of individual children, especially the older children. This means that children often "master the challenge in a short time" and the older children feel "bored" as a result. As Richardson (2013) suggests, some of the participants in this research wanted play areas to have a separate area for older children so they can engage in more risky activities. Furthermore, this research highlights that the designers of Icelandic preschool play areas are becoming more focussed on safety at the expense of risk taking experiences. This reflects the findings of previous research studies on children's play areas (Little, 2010c; Tovey, 2011). It is unclear if this increasing focus on safety is caused by a real need to

protect children from serious injury or because today's society demands that children be protected from any risk.

Challenges due to increasing safety measures

Risk taking in Icelandic preschools is controlled by adults' perceptions of risk rather than the children's abilities. This research reveals that there are only a few preschool teachers who have a clear understanding of what risky play is. Unfortunately these teachers feel that they cannot provide children with meaningful risk taking experiences due to the concerns of other staff and increasing health and safety regulations.

The main safety measure in place at all six settings was adult supervision. However, as was found in Little's (2010b) research, the low adult/child ratio was not thought to provide significant supervision for risk taking activities. One participant stated that: "If we had more teachers to supervise then maybe we could let them do more". This suggests that safety regulations are not the only thing holding preschools teachers back from creating challenging environments for children.

The challenges that Icelandic preschool teachers face regarding opportunities for risky play are related to: health and safety issues, which have led to teachers feeling they are no longer in control of children's play activities; attitudes, both their own fears and other peoples; and finally the ability to find the balance between providing children with risky opportunities while preventing serious injuries. Such findings were also revealed in research carried out by Fenech and Aumsion (2007). Who suggest that for teachers to overcome regulations critical thinking is necessary. Furthermore, the challenges revealed in this research reflect those of previous studies (Bell et al., 2008; Sandseter, 2010; Little, 2010c), suggesting that the issue of risk taking in preschools around the world is becoming more problematic.

To overcome these challenges, preschool teachers in Iceland believe play areas need to change to include more natural features, and that awareness needs to be raised among preschool staff members, parents and policy makers about the benefits of risky play on all areas of children's development. Other researchers have found that similar measures are required in many countries (Little, 2005; Little, 2010a; Richardson, 2013). As researchers (Little, 2010c; Little et al., 2012) suggest policy makers should take a step back and allow

preschools teachers to use their knowledge to determine appropriate risky play activities, as well as use their own judgement in order to minimise accidents.

5.2 Perceptions and attitudes towards risky play

In this section the perceptions and attitudes preschool teachers in Iceland have towards risky play will be discussed. This will include a closer look at their definitions of risky play; children's abilities to assess risky situations, attitudes towards rough and tumble play and dangerous elements.

The "dangers" of risky play

This research found that when Icelandic preschool teachers are asked their perspective on risky play they begin by thinking about the negative aspects, such as potential injury or play that involves some sort of danger. These findings correspond with research carried out by Little (2010b). Likewise, this research found that many preschool teachers only consider risky play to be either climbing or rough and tumble play: "I thought that risky play was just rough and tumble". None of Sandseter's (2007a) other risky play categories were mentioned nor were Tovey's (2010) suggestions of balancing and hanging upside down. This lack of understanding within Icelandic preschools as to what risky play involves could mean children are missing out on important risk taking activities. Risk seems to be associated with danger only, at least among the majority of preschool teachers. A likely reason for this could be that the concept of risky play is fairly new in Iceland, especially it seems, among preschool teachers (Miðstöð slysavarna barna, n.d.).

As both Stephenson (2003) and Sandseter (2012) found, this research also revealed that no matter how many opportunities play areas provide for risky play, the attitudes of individual staff determine how much the children are allowed to partake in such play. The different rules and opportunities available in each preschool setting reflect this. In a number of settings climbing trees was allowed but only to a level that the staff felt comfortable with. As Sandseter (2011a) found, such restrictions are often based on the preschool teachers' perceptions of what is dangerous and not on the individual child's ability. In other settings bikes had been removed because the staff felt the high speeds gained by the older children were too much of a risk. Sandseter (2007a)

also found that preschool teachers feel speed can get out of control. The various attitudes towards the use of slides provided further evidence that risky play opportunities are, to some extent, in the hands of preschool teachers.

It is interesting to note that different attitudes and perceptions were found among teachers working in the same preschool setting. Contradictions were also found within preschool settings regarding whether rules are negotiable or not. The variations in responses point out that the ways in which children can use equipment and the support they receive during risky play are important factors when considering children's opportunities and experiences of risky play (Little, 2006, pg. 143).

This research found that there have been changes in preschool teachers' attitudes towards risky play. However as the research revealed divided opinions, this research cannot state if the changes have resulted in an increase in risky play in preschools or not. One suggestion for this division in opinion could be that the preschools teachers with a positive attitude towards risky play are feeling increasingly controlled by strict regulations, whereas those that are more wary of risk taking feel safe knowing they are protected by regulations. As Fenech and Sumsion (2007) revealed many teachers hide behind regulations regarding health and safety.

Influences on risky play in preschools

Literature suggests that children know their own limits during play (Kaarby, 2004, pg. 124). This research found that opinions are divided on whether children know their own limits when taking risks. Some participants felt that children rarely go beyond their own limit while others believed adults have to teach children their limits. Perhaps it is not surprising that the teachers whom expressed a positive attitude towards risky play were the ones that believed children know their limits: "There are very few children that do not have in them a stop button. They know their limits". This suggests that a positive attitude towards risky play is essential if children are going to have opportunities for such play (Stephenson, 2003; Sandseter, 2012).

A number of factors that emerged during this research could suggest that although preschool teachers are more open to the idea of risky activities, overall health and safety issues have increased. This is evident in the increasing health and safety discussions and the challenges preschool teachers face

regarding risky play in preschools. Many preschool teachers feel there is now an overemphasis on safety which is been imposed on to preschools by policy makers: "There are too many outside influences and regulations". These findings reflect the literature and research of recent years (Sandseter, 2010, pg. 8; Bell, Gill & Spiegal, 2008, pg. 11; Little, 2010c) indicating that this is a growing issue in Iceland.

Furthermore, the letter written by Margrét María Sigurðardóttir (January 26th 2015) mentioned in the literature review, reflects the increasing concerns over child safety. The letter encourages parents to be more aware of safety in preschools, and thus potential dangers in the play area by questioning preschool staff about safety procedures and inspections. Although children´s safety is of the upmost importance and should not be ignored, this letter could make preschool teachers feel more anxious about risky play activities within their setting.

Both this research and previous studies (Tovey, 2011; Sandseter, 2011a) have found that preschool teachers are already anxious due to fear of accidents and litigation: "The parents would never forgive us if something happened". The findings of this research contradict the finds of recent Icelandic research (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2015) which found that Icelandic teachers are not as concerned about litigation as teachers in other countries. Perhaps the issue of litigation is not as established in Iceland as in other countries but this research shows that unless action is taken then the fear of litigation may become a worry for all Icelandic teachers.

Unlike previous research (Little, 2010a), this present research found that parental attitudes towards risky play do not significantly affect risk taking opportunities in Icelandic preschools. This could be because preschool teachers in Iceland have made parents aware of the benefits of activities through communication, which as Richardson (2013) points out, eases parental anxiety.

Attitudes towards rough and tumble play

Icelandic preschool teachers' attitudes towards rough and tumble play reflect those of many teachers (Sandseter, 2007a; Sandseter, 2009). This research revealed that many preschool teachers are uncomfortable with rough and tumble play and either ban it altogether or find ways to control it. Very few

preschool teachers were found to understand that this type of play is beneficial to children's development (Jarvis, 2010). This research also found that rough and tumble play was only associated with boys which reflects the literature on gender and risky play (Chapman, n.d.; Naughton & Williams, 2009).

Clearly preschool teachers in Iceland are worried about rough and tumble play, especially if it involves fighting with sticks. As with all risky play activities awareness needs to be raised about the benefits of rough and tumble play. If teachers understood why children engage in rough and tumble play, then they could teach the children about the risks involved and ensure they are playing in a safe manner, rather than banning it altogether.

The unknown is risky

Interestingly, this research found that some Icelandic preschool teachers do not consider children playing near water to be a risky activity. On the other hand, fire was considered to be too risky for preschool children and therefore rarely, if ever, used. This contradicts the findings of Sandseter (2007a), who found that the preschool teachers in her study often lit fires with children but considered water a high risk element. One explanation for this could be that because fire is rarely used in Icelandic preschools, the teachers themselves are anxious about letting children near fire. This is supported further, as the preschool teachers in this research who had used fire around children were found to have a more positive attitude. Water is very abundant in Iceland; both in rivers and the ocean, therefore preschool teachers could consider play near water as a more common event, thus teachers are generally more at ease with this activity.

5.3 Summary

This subchapter will summarise the answers the research questions relying on the data collected during the interview process.

The first question this research aimed to answer was: Do Icelandic preschool outdoor play areas provide children with opportunities for risky play activities? In short this research shows that Icelandic preschool outdoor play areas do offer children opportunities for risky play. The main risk taking activity available is climbing and playing at speed (sledging/sliding down

slopes). Such activities provide children with opportunities to develop motor skills, learn about limits, increase self-belief and encourage children to overcome challenges. Unfortunately, the risky activities available are limited and provide only minimal risk. The equipment is ideal for some children, especially the younger children (2-4 year olds). However, the play areas do not provide older and more capable children with the challenges they need and want.

The play areas are used by all the children in the preschool (the largest range found in this study was from 12 months to 6 years old) this is a disadvantage for the older children. As this study found, speed has to be controlled to protect the youngest children and the equipment has to be suitable for all abilities and age groups. To overcome this, a separate more challenging area for the older children would benefit all age groups. Firstly, the older children could have more risk taking opportunities designed with their abilities in mind. Secondly, the younger children would have the space to play and explore freely without the risk of injury from the older children.

The second research question was: What are preschool teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and approaches towards risky play in preschool outdoor play areas? Many preschool teachers appear to have a narrow definition of what risky play is and why it is important to children´s mental, social and physical development. Climbing and rough and tumble play were generally the only activities that the preschool teachers thought of when asked about risky play. Similarly, the negative aspects of risky activities were focused on, even by those who believe risky play was important for children. Although the preschool teachers had an incomplete picture of risky play the majority of them did have a positive attitude towards some risk taking activities. However, worries about litigation, the idea that children need to be protected because they do not know their own limits, and increasing regulations are holding teachers back from creating and providing truly beneficial risk taking experiences.

The third research question was: Do these perspectives, attitudes, and approaches encourage or hinder the preschool children's' risky play opportunities? Different attitudes, understanding, and approaches to risky play among preschool teacher's means that some children are missing out on important experiences. What one teacher allows the children to do, another teacher, even within the same setting, does not allow. This means that

children´s opportunities for risk taking are dependent on the attitude of the individual teacher. In some cases preschool teachers hinder the children, for example by putting limits on how high the children can climb, controlling how children use sliding equipment, and preventing children from engaging in rough and tumble games. On the other hand some preschool teachers (those who had a positive attitude and more understanding of risky play) were found to encourage children by proving them with more opportunities or by trying to adapt the play area for different abilities.

This study has revealed that many Icelandic preschool teachers have an unclear picture of risky play. They focus firstly on the potential dangers of risky play rather than its benefits. The rules and attitudes of the participants and preschool settings suggest that preschool teachers recognise the benefits of risky play, but either out of fear, or lack of knowledge on the subject they only provide children with low levels of risk. Awareness needs to be raised among all preschool staff as to what risky play is, how it benefits children, and how to provide children with appropriate challenges. As the majority of preschool teachers appear to have a positive attitude towards some aspects of risky play, raising more awareness could ensure preschool teachers are on the right track to finding the balance between allowing children to encounter risks while at the same time preventing serious injuries.

5.4 Limitations and recommendations for future research

Some bias has been recognised during research process. Risky play in preschools was, unintentionally, represented as a positive activity. This however could have had a positive outcome as it encouraged the participants to think beyond their own perspectives of risky play. Many of the participants appeared to reflect on their own attitudes regarding risky play during the interview process. It can be hoped that by participating in this research they now regard risky play and its benefits in a more positive manner and will change their practices accordingly. The accuracy of the data collected regarding teachers' attitudes relies on the information given by the participants during the interviews. What the participants say during the interviews may or may not reflect how they react to risky play in reality. As previously mentioned relying on interviews alone has limitations for the research (Cohen et al., 2003,

pg. 3). If there had been more time the researcher would have preferred to obtain data through interviews and observations of preschool teachers during outdoor play sessions.

This study only took into account outdoor risky play activities. The researcher recognises that risky activities also occur indoors in preschool settings. It would be interesting for future research to compare teachers' attitudes to outdoor risky activities with those they have of indoor risky activities. Future research would benefit from taking into account attitudes and approaches to risk taking during outings to the coastline, farming areas, woodlands and so forth, were the risk of getting lost can be added to the list of risky activities. Future research may find that teachers have a different approach to risk taking when outside the preschool setting.

6. Final words

This research interviewed twelve preschool teachers in six Icelandic preschools to determine whether the outdoor play areas provide risky play opportunities, and to gain insight into Icelandic preschool teachers' attitudes and approaches to risky play. Finally, this research aimed to discover if these attitudes and approaches encourage or hinder risky play opportunities in Icelandic preschools.

At the time of this study, and hopefully because of it, the majority of preschool teachers are becoming more open minded about risk taking and encouraging children to take risks. Unfortunately, their efforts can only go so far. It seems that unless preschool teachers are able to have more control over the features and equipment of play areas then they cannot provide children with more challenging experiences. This research highlights the fact that awareness needs to be raised both inside and outside preschool settings. The solution to finding the balance between risk and safety could perhaps be found if preschool teachers, designers of play equipment, and health and safety officials get together to discuss the important issue of risky play.

Risky play is an invaluable part of childhood. Research shows that not only does it increase children's physical and motor skills but also teaches them about their own limits, and how to deal with risks in the future. Children´s safety however is an ever increasing issue that some teachers are anxious about. The concern about children injuring themselves (or others) during risky play is preventing some children from having the opportunity to engage in such activities. Thus, it is important that preschool teachers and play area designers provide children with an environment where they can engage in risky play that is as safe as necessary rather than as safe as possible.

Risky play should be available for all children regardless of age, ability, or gender. Teachers should support and encourage children who are anxious, use positive language when accidents occur, and modify activities to suit a variety of abilities, as this ensures that all children can be involved in risky play to some extent. What one child considers risky might not seem so risky for another child, teachers must be aware of this and allow children to learn what they themselves are capable of and not feel pushed into doing something they are not sure about. The more children are free to engage in risky play the better they will be at managing risks, learning their limits, and keeping themselves

safe. The role of the teacher is to provide a challenging learning environment that will support all children as they become more motivated, curious, able, and adventurous.

As one preschool teacher said:

> I think in general in Iceland there needs to be more discussions about risky play. The people who make play equipment need to know it is what children need and want.

As this research was going to print the author received information regarding Rural preschool 1. After a recent inspection from an external safety officer the preschool were told to remove a number of rocks from the play area as they were deemed too dangerous, due to potential injury from falling. The preschool and parent association are currently trying to stop the rocks removal by laying a protective surface around the area.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Introduction letter about research

Ágæti viðtakandi

Ég undirrituð er í námi við kennaradeild Háskólans á Akureyrar og er að vinna að 30 eininga rannsóknarverkefni til Med gráðu. Þetta verkefni vinn ég undir leiðsögn Kristínar Dýrfjörð dósents við kennaradeild Háskólans á Akureyri. Hægt er að hafa samband við hana í síma 552 6365 og í tölvupóstfanginu dyr@unak.is. Rannsóknin felst í því að taka viðtöl við leikskólaskennara. Spurt verður um viðhorf þeirra til áhættusöm leik.

Rannsóknin hefur þegar verið tilkynnt til Persónuverndar. Með þessu bréfi óska ég eftir leyfi til þess að gera rannsóknina í skólaumdæminu og jafnframt leyfi til þess að hafa samband við skólastjórnendur í leikskólum og óska eftir heimild þeirra til þess að hafa samband við leiðbeinendur.

Ég væri þakklát ef þú sérð þér fært að svara þessari fyrirspurn sem fyrst. Hægt er að nálgast mig í síma 6933569 og í gegnum tölvupóstfangið ha100182@unak.is.

Virðingarfyllst og með fyrirfram þökk

Rachel Wilkinson

Appendix 2 Letter to preschools

Ágæti viðtakandi

Ég undirrituð er í námi við kennaradeild Háskólans á Akureyrar og er að vinna að 30 eininga rannsóknarverkefni til Med gráðu. Þetta verkefni vinn ég undir leiðsögn Kristínar Dýrfjörð dósents við kennaradeild Háskólans á Akureyri. Hægt er að hafa samband við hana í síma 552 6365 og í tölvupóstfanginu dyr@unak.is. Rannsóknin felst í því að taka viðtöl við leikskólaskennara. Spurt verður um viðhorf þeirra til áhættusöm leik.

Rannsóknin hefur þegar verið tilkynnt til Persónuverndar. Með þessu bréfi óska ég eftir að fá að heimsækja skólann ykkar og taka viðtöl við 2 kennara/starfsmenn

Ég væri þakklát ef þú sérð þér fært að svara þessari fyrirspurn sem fyrst. Hægt er að nálgast mig í síma 6933569 og í gegnum tölvupóstfangið ha100182@unak.is.

Virðingarfyllst og með fyrirfram þökk

Rachel Wilkinson

Appendix 3 Interview questions

How long have you been a preschool teacher?
How many years experience do you have working with children?
Have you worked in other preschools prior to this?

Are there any formal regulations or policies regarding outdoor play in this setting?
Are then any unofficial rules about outdoor play?
When were these made and by whom?
Are any of these rules negotiable?

What measures are in place to ensure the children's safety during outdoor play?

What is your understanding of outdoor risky play?
How do you define risky play?
Do you think risky play is important to children? Explain

Do you ever feel your personal attitudes towards risky play are different to other peoples?
Do all the staff have the same attitudes towards risky play?
If not how do you deal with opposing attitudes?

Do you think the outdoor play area at your preschool provides children with the opportunity to engage in risky play?

What changes are needed in order to promote and support risky play in outdoor play areas in Icelandic preschools?

Are risky play activities different in the winter than the summer? Explain?

What are your attitudes towards: heights, fast speeds, climbing, elements such as fire and water, rough and tumble play, tools such as hammers, saws, knives?

Do you think preschool teachers´ attitudes towards risky play have changed? How? Why?
Are more changes needed?

Do you think preschool teachers impose too many restrictions on children's outdoor risky play opportunities?

What attitudes do parents have towards risk taking in preschool?

What do you say to parents who are concerned about their child engaging in risky activities?

What challenges do teachers face regarding outdoor risky play in preschools? How do you deal with them?

What more could be done to ensure children have opportunities for risky play in preschools?

Is there anything you would like to add?