Educators' risk-taking in high quality early childhood education

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Abstract

There is little research to show how early childhood educators perceive risk-taking and whether, in the pursuit of high quality early childhood education, educators might take risks in their professional practice. We conducted a qualitative case study to explore early childhood educators' views on, and engagement with, risk-taking in professional practice. Through thematic analysis of interviews with 55 educators in three high quality early childhood education services, we show that, for the educators in the study, risk-taking was a valuable aspect of professional practice driven by three main motivations: professional growth and development; developing children as competent and empowered individuals; and advocacy and activism. We also show that educators' risk-taking was enacted under five broad themes: providing opportunities for children to take risks; trusting children; doing things that are new; expressing ideas and beliefs; and including curriculum content that may be considered controversial, complex and inappropriate for children. We conclude that for educators in the study, risk-taking was enacted as courageous, ethically and morally driven praxis in pursuit of high quality ECE for the benefit of both individuals and society.

Introduction

This paper explores early childhood educators' conceptualisations of their own risk-taking in high quality early childhood education (ECE). Previous research on risk-taking in ECE has predominantly focused on children's risk-taking (e.g. Sandseter, Kleppe, and Sando 2020, Sandseter 2007, Little 2010), although educators' risk-taking has been a focus of research in primary, secondary and tertiary settings (Figueira, Theodorakopoulos, and Caselli 2018, Howard et al. 2018, Twyford, Le Fevre, and Timperley 2017, Jones 2018, Le Fevre 2014, Doyle-Jones 2015, Lasky 2005, Iredale et al. 2013). The study reported here contributes to our understanding of early childhood educators' risk-taking by addressing the following research question: How is risk-taking conceptualised by educators in high quality ECE? Through a multisite case study, we explored educators' views on, and engagement with, their own risk-taking in professional practice (henceforth referred to as *educators' risk-taking*). By analysing data in relation to practices widely regarded as high quality, we show that educators in the study took risks to contribute toward high quality ECE, thus making a significant contribution to understanding the importance of educator risk-taking in ECE.

To place the study's findings in context, the paper begins with a conceptual discussion on risk-taking and summarises existing research on educators' risk-taking. This is followed by a discussion on the context of high quality ECE and two concepts linked to high quality education – praxis and the dual purposes of education – both of which will be used in the analysis. We then present the study's methods, data analysis approach, findings and discussion.

Orientation to risk-taking

The word *risk* has a range of connotations (see Burgess, Alemanno, and Zinn 2016). To differentiate risk that is out of one's control from deliberate engagement with risk, we use the term *risk-taking*. By risk-taking we mean engagement in an action or experience that is characterised by uncertainty and the possibility of positive or negative consequences (Aven and Renn 2009, Madge and Barker 2007, Zinn 2009, 2016). Zinn (2016) distinguishes between two kinds of risk-taking: *risk behaviour* and *voluntary risk-taking*. Risk behaviour is an action that is likely to lead to harmful effects. Risk behaviour is often impulsive and marked by failure to adequately assess possible negative consequences (Zinn 2015). Commonly researched risk behaviours include not wearing seatbelts and smoking. On the other hand, the concept of voluntary risk-taking focusses on risk-taking as a thoughtful, considered and valuable activity (Lyng 1990, Tulloch and Lupton 2003, Zinn 2016). Voluntary risk-taking is viewed as 'a form of social action' (Zinn 2015, 101), where individuals consciously make decisions to face challenges and conquer fears (Lupton and Tulloch 2002, Zinn 2015). Examples include moving to a new country, skydiving and challenging stereotypes (Lupton and Tulloch 2002). *Voluntary risk-taking* is the focus of this research and henceforth will be referred to simply as risk-taking.

Educators' risk-taking

In primary, secondary and tertiary education research, educators' risk-taking has been connected with experimentation, change, innovation, educator confidence and praxis (Figueira, Theodorakopoulos, and Caselli 2018, Howard et al. 2018, Twyford, Le Fevre, and Timperley 2017, Jones 2018, Le Fevre 2014, Doyle-Jones 2015, Lasky 2005, Iredale et al. 2013). Examples of educators' risk-taking identified in the literature include implementing new technology (Howard and Gigliotti 2016), managing relationships and power dynamics

with students (Raider-Roth et al. 2019, Le Fevre 2014, Clayton 2007, Shier 2001, Ashworth 2004), engaging in conversations about controversial (Pace 2019) or complex topics (Coles-Ritchie and Smith 2017) and standing up for one's beliefs (Lasky 2005, Baker-Doyle, Hunt, and Whitfield 2018).

In ECE research, educators' risk-taking has predominantly been discussed in studies focussed on children's risk-taking (Bundy et al. 2009, New, Mardell, and Robinson 2005). For example, Bundy et al.'s (2009) exploration of educators' perceptions of the benefits and consequences of increasing children's opportunities for risk-taking revealed that some educators viewed allowing children to take risks as a risk for themselves because of the possibility of negative responses from parents. Similarly, New, Mardell and Robinson's (2005) study, focussed on the notion of a *risk-rich* curriculum (where children and educators explore a range of unfamiliar, challenging and traditionally out of reach topics), found that educators viewed the following as risky: the uncertainty of following children's ideas and interests, and sharing control and decision making with children.

The Context of High Quality Early Childhood Education

The quality of ECE programs matters (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2017, Tayler 2016). In the global push for high quality ECE (United Nations 2015, OECD 2017), educators are encouraged to enact a range of practices including: providing opportunities for children to take risks (Department for Education and Skills 2015, Makovichuk et al. 2014, The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017, International Baccalaureate 2013, Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] 2017); constructing curriculum relevant to local contexts (ACECQA 2017, Smith and Campbell 2014); questioning taken-for-granted practices, beliefs and theoretical discourses (Moss 2017, Taguchi 2008, MacNaughton and Smith 2001, Fenech,

Sumsion, and Shepherd 2010); engaging in critical reflection (Barnes 2013, ACECQA 2017); and enacting wise and moral practice (Pascal and Bertram 2012, Goodfellow 2001). Yet there is little research to show how early childhood educators perceive their own risk-taking in high quality ECE and whether, in the pursuit of high quality ECE, educators might be required to take risks?

Praxis and the dual purposes of education

Praxis can be understood as educational action that is informed by history, traditions, theory and knowledge, and embedded with wise and moral reflection on both the action and consequences of the action (Kemmis and Smith 2008). Praxis is what educators do when, after careful deliberation, they act in the way they consider 'best' (Kemmis and Smith 2008, Kemmis et al. 2014). Praxis is employed by 'good' educators as they aim towards the dual purposes of education – the formation of individuals and the formation of societies (Kemmis et al. 2014, Kemmis and Smith 2008). According to Kemmis et al. (2014), to form individuals, education initiates people 'into forms of understanding, modes of action and ways of relating to one another and the world' (26), and to form societies, education fosters 'individual and collective self-expression, individual and collective self-development and individual and collective self-determination' (26). The dual purposes of education aim towards a socially just and sustainable society by helping humans to 'live well in a world worth living in' (Kemmis et al. 2014, 25).

Methods

This article draws on data from a qualitative multisite case study consisting of 55 educators from three high quality Australian ECE services that expressly value children's risk-taking. The rationale for selecting high quality services was to align data with the delivery of high

quality ECE. The rationale for selecting services that value children's risk-taking was to include educators in the study who were likely to be reflective about risk-taking. A list of services rated *exceeding* across every rateable area in the Australian Children's Education and Care Authority assessment and rating process (ACECQA, 2020) was used to select high quality services. Information on eligible services' websites was used to assess the value each service placed on children's risk-taking. The websites of selected services included positive references to risk-taking and evidence of providing opportunities for children's risk-taking. All educators at the three selected services were invited to participate in the study. The table below summarises the selected services and participating educators.

Table 1

Summary of selected services and participating educators[1]

	Service One	Service Two	Service Three
Service type	community-based long day care**Error! Bookmark not defined.**	community-based**Error! Bookmark not defined.** sessional kindergarten**Error! Bookmark not defined.**	private not-for-profit long day care
Location	major city suburb	rural town	regional town
Size	140 children 40 educators	54 children nine educators	100 children 33 educators
Participating educators	27	9	19
Certificate III qualified	4	5	6
Diploma qualified	18	2	10
Bachelor/Masters qualified	5	2	3
Website evidence of value placed on children's risk-taking	• Children's risk-taking discussed in parent handbook and newsletters • Educator participation in risky play professional development • Photos of children's risky play	• Children's risk-taking discussed in newsletter articles • Regular outings to bush and beach • Photos of children's risky play	• Children's risk-taking discussed in philosophy and newsletters • Educators had attended professional development on risky play • Photos of children's risky play

Following ethical approval by the Charles Sturt University ethics committee, written consent was received from participating educators. The data used in this paper were collected through interviews conducted by the lead author. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured and audio recorded. Interview questions included:

- Do you see a place for educator risk-taking in ECE?

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[1] All educators participating in the study were female.

- Do you take risks in your professional practice? If so, what risks do you take?

One concern for the conduct of the study was that educators might reveal examples of risk-taking that could be considered unethical or against regulations. At no point, however, did an educator reveal risk-taking that was of ethical concern or against regulations.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed and returned to participants for member reflections (Tracy 2010). Using thematic analysis, data were coded by the lead author related to two main areas of interest: 1) Educators' views on risk-taking and 2) Educators' reports of engagement with risk-taking. Data were inductively coded (Patton 2015). Once all data were coded, codes were reviewed, refined and sorted into potential themes. Themes were refined, named, defined and reviewed by co-authors to confirm the final set of themes. Data addressing 'Educators' views on risk-taking' were coded according to educators' definition of risk-taking, their views on the place of risk-taking in ECE, and their motivations for taking risks. Codes and final themes for data addressing 'Educators engagement with risk-taking' are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1

Themes and codes for 'Educators engagement with risk-taking'[2]
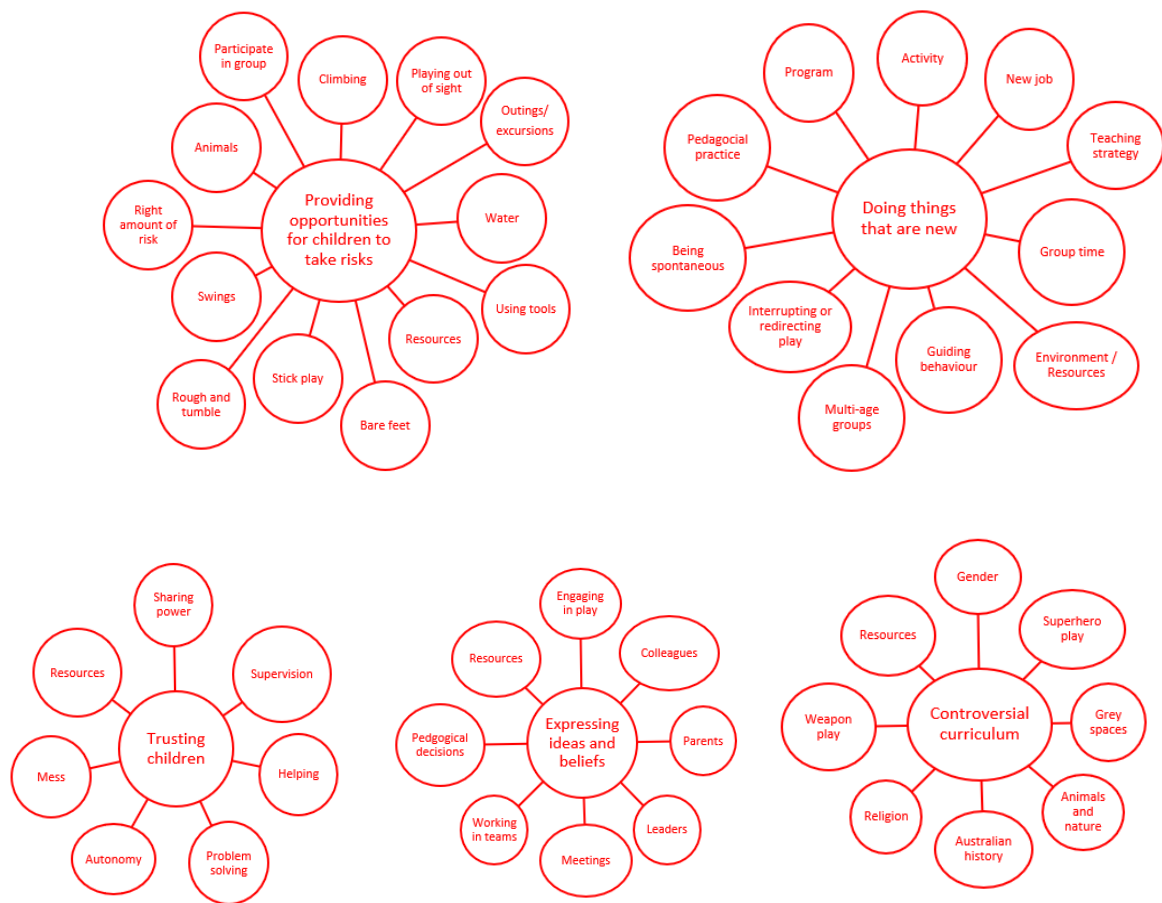
Findings

Findings are discussed under the two focus areas: 1) Educators' views on risk-taking and 2) Educators' engagement with risk-taking.

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[2] The positioning and size of the circles in the figure do not have any significance for the analysis.

Educators' views on risk-taking

Here we discuss educators' definitions of risk-taking and their views on the place of educators risk-taking in ECE, including their motivations for taking risks.

Definitions of risk-taking

Educators were asked to provide a general definition of risk-taking. As reported previously (Cooke, Wong, and Press 2020), the most common word educators used to define risk was 'challenge'. Risk-taking was regarded as the challenge to do something new or experimental. Many educators described risk-taking as pushing through fear and discomfort to do something out of ones' comfort zone. For example, Polly[3] said: 'I think it's anything that scares you a bit…any of those fears that are on that long list of fears that you can find'. This pushing of personal boundaries was viewed as a way of exploring possibilities and embracing opportunities.

The place of educators' risk-taking in ECE

The majority of participating educators said that they do and should take risks, as a valuable aspect of their professional practice. Educators' reasons for taking risks fit within three main motivations: professional growth and development; developing children as competent and empowered individuals; and advocacy and activism.

Professional growth and development were the most common reason educators gave for taking risks, as illustrated in the following quote from Jane:

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[3] All names are pseudonyms.

I think it grows you as a person…the culmination of all the little risks that I've taken have led me to now be doing stuff that I sit back a bit and go…"How did I get here?" So, I think part of my disposition to keep growing and learning and putting myself in spaces where I'm freaking out has given me that opportunity and I've learned that if I hadn't taken risks, I would have been a stagnant teacher where nothing ever grew. It means you question and reflect and you put yourself in spaces that you feel uncomfortable, whether it's emotionally or whatever…and you get really good at looking like you are calm on top and yet you know you're actually spinning around underneath. But I think it's that uncomfortableness that grows you.

Some educators said that if they did not take risks, they would not develop and their practices would be 'boring'. For example, Valerie said, '[If we don't take risks] we get stuck in a rut of what works well and we're not as open and as flexible to change, or to offer experiences that we're not necessarily good at'.

The next most common reason for educators' risk-taking was to support the development of children as competent and empowered individuals who can act independently and contribute to their community. Supporting the development of children's risk-taking disposition was viewed by educators as a key aspect of children's learning, as illustrated in this comment by Stephanie, '[Risk], it's part of life and learning…you persist at something and it may not work and it's ok. Learning by your mistakes…it boosts your confidence and gives a sense of achievement'. Educators said that modelling risk-taking was important in developing children's willingness to be brave. For example, Rachel said, 'I think…we should do it [take risks] too, so that we can show them [children] that it's ok to do those things'.

Some educators viewed risk-taking as an act that could benefit advocacy and activism. These educators said that sometimes they made risky choices as a way of influencing the way others think and act in the world, as illustrated in Prisha's comment, 'The

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risks could be of benefit not just to the organisation, but to the community. Those choices you make can change the political thought pattern of people, change the actions of people and we become more politically aware of what's going on around us'. In the next section we explore educators' engagement with risk-taking as they work toward developing themselves professionally, support children's competence and independence, and create socially just ECE.

Educators' engagement with risk-taking

This section focuses on the common types of experiences participating educators considered risky. Five dominant and overlapping themes were identified from educators' examples of risk-taking: providing opportunities for children to take risks; trusting children; doing things that are new; expressing ideas and beliefs; and including curriculum content that may be considered controversial, complex and inappropriate for children. Not all educators in the study viewed all described actions and experiences as risky and there was some evidence to suggest that the more an educator engaged in a risky practice, the less risky they perceived it to be.

Providing opportunities for children to take risks

In all three services, educators were encouraged by educational leaders to provide opportunities for children to take risks. Many educators said that this translated into a risk for themselves. Examples included children climbing high, using sharp knives or walking near a road. Educators' perceived that positive consequences could include that the child would enjoy the experience or learn something. Negative consequences were that the child may be hurt, or the educator may worry or have to 'deal' with judgement from parents, colleagues or regulatory authorities who perceived the risk as too great. The following quote from Shreya is

illustrative of an educators' concerns about a child's risk-taking: 'If a toddler wanted to climb the tree…as an adult I get scared he's going to fall, he's going to hurt himself and I'm going be filling all the paperwork in. But, for a child, I think they just want to go and explore'.

Some educators felt that deciding how much risk to allow children to take was an ethical dilemma, as illustrated in Polly's comment, 'It's hard because I'm always worrying about how they're [children] feeling…I don't want them to hurt themselves. I want to do the right thing by families, build that trust and relationship…But at the same time, children being allowed to fail helps them deal with failure. We take away some of the physical risks and make things 'safer', but at what point is that not helping them learn?'

Trusting children

In some circumstances, trusting children was regarded as risky. Educators said the benefit of trusting children is that children may feel a sense of power and autonomy. The negative consequence is that children may behave in irresponsible or inappropriate ways, such as hurting each other or not caring for resources. Educators said that the uncertainty of outcomes makes trusting children challenging, as illustrated in the following conversation between Sally and Jackie: Sally 'You want to be able to trust them to be able to navigate how far to push it'. Jackie 'It's hard because you have to weigh up the different risks…what's the most beneficial thing? Do we give [them] that trust and then something big could happen that puts other children at risk?' Common examples of trusting children included allowing very young children to use real crockery and glassware and children independently engaging in conflict resolution.

Doing things that are new

Educators shared a range of actions they deemed risky because they were new, including introducing a new game, program or pedagogical approach. New experiences were viewed as risky because success was uncertain. In one service, a bush kinder[4] program had been introduced when bush kinder was still a relatively unknown concept in Australia. The educators in this service saw the introduction of this new program as risky and courageous because if the program failed, they could receive negative feedback from families and the community. Some educators were prepared to take the risks such as this because they saw the new program as beneficial for children's learning and development. Other educators took risks because they were encouraged to do so by educational leaders as a way of developing their pedagogical practice. In one service, the introduction of children's participation in cutting fruit for snack time was viewed as risky because of the possibility children could cut themselves. The practice had been encouraged by leaders to develop children's competence and independence. In talking about the new practice, Maria said, 'It's a bit scary. It's the first time we've done this. It's important. We planned from last week to start doing this this week. I enjoy doing it, but if I'm not watching something might happen. I don't want the children to get hurt. If they get hurt [it] might be a negative experience for them and they might not want to try again'. Additional actions educators said were risky because they contained an element of newness included choosing a strategy to guide children's behaviour, deciding whether to engage in or redirect children's play and doing things spontaneously. Many educators said that engaging in children's play can scaffold children's learning, but it can also disrupt children's engagement in the play. Some educators spoke about the risks involved in being spontaneous and flexible, including things not working out and children becoming upset because they were unprepared for change.

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[4] Bush Kinder is the name used in some parts of Australia to describe a program where children and educators spend extended time in natural outdoor setting (alternatively known as 'Forest School').

Expressing ideas and beliefs

Sharing ideas and beliefs was commonly seen as having an element of risk due to the uncertainty about how others will respond - particularly if there are differing values or philosophies. Educators said that speaking up in a meeting, participating in research or advocating for what they believe is best, often requires them to have courage. It could be challenging to balance respect for others' opinions with their own beliefs. A common example of conflicting beliefs between educators and families involved parents requesting that their child does not do a particular activity, yet the activity is either desired by the child or seen as beneficial by the educator. Hanh said, 'That's a bit of challenge…when you are in the middle between the child and the family. If you stand up for the rights of the child, then you might lose support from the family. But if you sit on the family's side, then you might upset the child'. Some educators took the risk to share ideas and opinions because they viewed it as a learning experience, as illustrated in Lucy's comment, 'Challenging each other and being brave with each other, that's a bit risky. I think it's good though - it's how we grow and change'.

Including curriculum content that may be considered controversial, complex and inappropriate for children

Including particular curriculum content was viewed as risky by some educators as it contained both uncertainty and the possibility of negative responses from children, other educators and families. Some educators said that allowing children to engage in superhero or weapon play was risky. For example, one educator commented that 'Sometimes children take on the persona of "I'm gonna fight all the bad guys" and that's sort of their mindset for the day when they're wearing those costumes'. This kind of play required educators to balance

the benefits for individual children with the difficulties it could cause for others. Educators learning about and including Australian Indigenous perspectives in curriculum was viewed as complex and courageous by some educators. Positive outcomes included children developing respect for Australian Indigenous Peoples and negative outcomes included getting things wrong and upsetting people. In one service, an educator shared the story of white settlement in Australia with her four year old class and received backlash from some parents. She had carefully omitted information about the atrocities committed by European settlers because she did not want to upset the children, yet some children had 'filled in the gaps' and told their parents about it. Some parents expressed concerns at what they thought had been said, while others thanked the educator for her honesty. Similarly, talking about topics such as religion and gender was seen by some educators to be risky. They said that exposing children to a diverse range of topics and ideas was beneficial but were concerned about sharing information that may conflict with family beliefs or families may think was inappropriate. The following quote by Lucy illustrates how some educators felt about exposing children to 'risky' topics: 'I like taking children into risky places because…children are part of this world and…I think they bring something new to those conversations and this is the world they're living in and inheriting'.

Discussion

Our findings show that educators in the study regarded their own risk-taking as an important and valuable element of ECE. Although participating educators characterised the described actions and experiences as risky, they chose to engage in them because they saw them as beneficial for learning, development and a just society, thus contributing toward high quality ECE. Educators in the study took risks to: 1) enact practices widely regarded as high quality ECE 2) enact praxis; and 3) achieve the dual purposes of education, as discussed below.

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1) Enact practices widely regarded as high quality ECE

Educators in the study took risks to enact practices regarded as high quality ECE, including practices encouraged: by ECE leaders; in ECE literature and professional development courses (e.g. Elliott and Chancellor 2014, Claire Warden Educational Consultant 2020, Natural Learning Early Childhood Consultancy 2020); and in the Australian National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECAQ 2017). Practices encouraged by educational leaders included providing opportunities for children to take risks and doing something new. For example, Maria introduced the practice of cutting fruit with children because, although she perceived it as risky, she agreed with her educational leader that it was beneficial for children's independence and competence. The notion that educators experimenting with something new can be risky is consistent with research in primary, secondary and tertiary education (Figueira, Theodorakopoulos, and Caselli 2018, Howard et al. 2018, Lasky 2005, Doyle-Jones 2015). Similarly, services implemented practices that are encouraged in ECE literature and professional development courses. For example, all services in the study had implemented regular outings and nature pedagogy programs because these practices were encouraged in academic literature and by consultants leading professional development courses (e.g. Elliott and Chancellor 2014, Claire Warden Educational Consultant 2020, Natural Learning Early Childhood Consultancy 2020). Educators also took risks to enact practices encouraged in the NQF. The NQF explicitly encourages educators to provide opportunities for children to take risks (ACECQA, 2017). Many educators in the study found it risky for themselves when children took risks; yet they provided opportunities as they believed, in line with the NQF, that risk-taking is beneficial for children's learning and development. The view that children's risk-taking can be risky for educators was identified by Bundy et al. (2009), New, Mardell, and Robinson (2005) and Howard et al. (2018).

Howard et al. (2018) refer to this as a 'dual pedagogy' of risk-taking (860). The NQF also encourages educators to include a diverse range of perspectives, including the perspectives of Australian Indigenous Peoples (ACECQA, 2017). Many educators in the study took the risk to include diverse perspectives by expressing their ideas and beliefs to children, colleagues and families, and exploring ways to embed Indigenous perspectives in their program.

By engaging with practices that are encouraged as high quality ECE yet felt risky, educators in the study were working to transform their practices in the pursuit of high quality ECE. In addition to taking risks to enact high quality ECE practices, participating educators took risks to enact two concepts associated with high quality education – praxis and the dual purposes of education.

1) Enactment of praxis

Praxis can be seen in the way that educators in the study engaged in morally and ethically driven decisions about risk-taking. Across all themes of risk-taking, educators weighed up the uncertainty and possible positive and negative consequences of their actions. This weighing up of consequences was often a balancing act that involved an ethical dilemma in deciding what is 'best' (Kemmis et al. 2014). The notion of doing what is 'best' is a common theme in research on educators' views on risk-taking (Figueira, Theodorakopoulos, and Caselli 2018, Lasky 2005, Baker-Doyle, Hunt, and Whitfield 2018). In our study, as educators made decisions about what risks to take, for what purpose and whose benefit, they considered factors such as their knowledge of children and families, relationships and personal feelings (Kemmis et al. 2014). Educators balanced their beliefs about children's learning and development with their own fears and possible negative consequences. This ethical balancing act of deciding what is 'best' was evidenced in Polly's discussion on the multiple factors she took into consideration when providing opportunities for children to take risks, such as her

duty of care and her responsibility to support children's learning. Further evidence of moral and ethical decision making was Hanh's discussion on sandpit play. Hanh wanted to enact the rights of both the child and the family and was conflicted about how to do this. Both Hanh and Polly's reflective process of deciding what was 'best' demonstrates praxis. The connection between risk-taking and praxis was identified in Iredale et al.'s (2013) study focused on adult education. Similarly, Baker-Doyle, Hunt, and Whitfield (2018) describe educators' risk-taking as 'courageous acts' instigated by ethical dilemmas. Like Iredale et al. (2013), we propose that taking risks is an important element of praxis. Building on Baker-Doyle, Hunt, and Whitfield (2018), we propose that for the educators in the study, risk-taking is courageous, ethically and morally driven praxis in the pursuit of high quality ECE.

2) *The dual purposes of education*

The dual purposes of education – the formation of individuals and the formation of societies (Kemmis et al. 2014) – were evident in educators' motivation to take risks for their own professional growth and development; to develop children as competent and empowered individuals; and as acts of advocacy and activism.

Educators' view that risk-taking supports professional growth and development, and the development of children as competent and empowered individuals aligns with the purpose of education as the formation of individuals. As evidenced in the quote by Jane, educators viewed risk-taking as a key aspect of their professional growth and development. Although previous research has identified this motivation for educator risk-taking (Figueira, Theodorakopoulos, and Caselli 2018, Howard et al. 2018), a distinction between previous findings and those of the current study is that previous findings suggested professional growth and development was inwardly focused on the individual educator. In our study, the aim of educators' professional growth and development was closely linked to benefits for

children – what we call the 'double benefit' of educators' risk-taking. This double benefit of educators' risk-taking is evident throughout our five themes of educators' engagement with risk-taking. For instance, under the theme 'providing opportunities for children to take risks', Shreya's tree climbing quote demonstrates her willingness to develop her own confidence in allowing a child to take a risk for the benefit of the child's learning and development. Under the theme 'trusting children', Sally and Jackie's conversation about the challenges they faced in deciding how much to trust children demonstrated reflection on their own practices as well as a desire to develop children's sense of empowerment. Studies in other sectors of education have also identified issues of trust, power and control as being risky for educators (Clayton 2007, New, Mardell, and Robinson 2005, Le Fevre 2014, Raider-Roth et al. 2019, Baker-Doyle, Hunt, and Whitfield 2018).

Educators' risk-taking as contributing to the formation of societies is evident in educators' view that professional risk-taking supports the development of children as competent and empowered individuals and can be acts of advocacy and activism. Analysis of the data suggests that educators saw the development of children as competent and empowered individuals as beneficial for society. Educators enacted this view by making deliberate choices to expose children to potentially risky topics, such as religion and the history of white settlement in Australia. The inclusion of risky topics was driven by educators' desire to nurture children's thinking about social issues in the hope that children would engage in society as empathetic and respectful individuals. For many educators, including risky curriculum content was an act driven by a desire for social justice, as illustrated in Lucy's discussion about taking children into 'risky spaces' and Prisha's talk about influencing political reforms in society. The notion that early childhood educators advocate for social justice is not new (Wong 2013), and research has previously touched on the riskiness of including curriculum content that some people consider to be controversial,

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complex and inappropriate for children (Pace 2019, Coles-Ritchie and Smith 2017, New, Mardell, and Robinson 2005). Like some educators in our study, Figueira, Theodorakopoulos, and Caselli (2018) identify that choosing to engage in risky content can be powerful in influencing societal change. We now turn to a brief discussion on how the normalisation of risky practices can act as a powerful tool for improving the quality of ECE.

The normalisation of risky practices

Educators in the study took a range of risks in the pursuit of high quality ECE. As discussed in the findings, not all educators in the study viewed all examples as risky and there was some evidence to suggest that the more an educator engaged in a practice, the less risky it felt. For example, educators who were new to the practice of children cutting fruit with knives saw this as risky, yet those who had embedded this practice in their everyday pedagogy no longer viewed it as risky. This normalisation of risky practices suggests that the more support and encouragement educators receive to engage in high quality practices that they initially find risky, the more these practices might become normalised, thus increasing the quality of ECE. This normalisation of risky practices in the pursuit of high quality ECE is an area that warrants further attention.

Conclusion

This paper explores educators' views on, and engagement with, risk-taking in ECE professional practice. Focussing on educators in three high quality ECE services, we have identified three main motivations for educators' risk-taking: professional growth and development; developing children as competent and empowered individuals; and advocacy and activism. Participating educators' engagement with risk-taking fell under five broad themes: providing opportunities for children to take risks; trusting children; doing things that

are new; expressing ideas and beliefs; and including curriculum content that may be considered controversial, complex and inappropriate for children. Through analysis of these findings, we identified that participating educators' risk-taking aligns with the pursuit of high quality ECE. This was evidenced in the way that educators took risks to: 1) enact practices widely regarded as high quality ECE; 2) enact praxis; and 3) achieve the dual purposes of education. Additionally, we suggested that the high quality practices that some educators initially find risky may become normalised once embedded in everyday pedagogy, thus improving the quality of ECE. A limitation of the study is that because participation was voluntary, it is possible that only educators who had a positive view of risk-taking chose to participate. The study was also limited to female educators in a small number of Australian ECE services. Despite these limitations, the findings have implications beyond the study's context. Findings identify the importance of understanding and support for early childhood educators as they take the risk to question, adapt and transform practices for the good of individuals and society (Kemmis et al. 2014, Grieshaber and Ryan 2005, Moss 2014). Findings also suggest that exploration of the benefits and challenges of risk-taking in pre-service courses and ongoing professional development may be beneficial for educators. Further research exploring the best ways to support educators' risk-taking, the factors that enable and constrain educators' risk-taking and the possible normalisation of practices that educators find risky would be of benefit to the early childhood sector.

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