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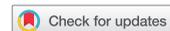
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Scotland Embarks on a National Outdoor Play Initiative: Educator Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Research Findings. The Scottish government is in the process of transforming their early childhood learning and care landscape by doubling the number of free hours of childcare for families and by requiring that all children in care spend a significant portion of each day outdoors. Thus, the government is promoting outdoor play programs. We surveyed 45 educators working in 16 outdoor programs and 16 nursery programs in Scotland as this transition was taking place. The survey focused on the benefits, barriers, risks, and challenges regarding implementation of this new social policy and educators' views on an ideal outdoor play program. Research Findings and Policy revealed that educators working in outdoor play programs were more confident in supporting outdoor play, reported more benefits, risks, and challenges for both children and educators, and highlighted more barriers to implementing the new policy. Educators in both programs held similar views about early learning and care programs reflecting Ministry play-based curriculum guidelines for children's learning, development, and the role of educators. Only outdoor play program educators raised issues regarding risk benefit analysis of outdoor play. Our findings highlight the importance of considering the views of educators regarding government policy decisions and its potential success of implementation.

In 2016, the Scottish government introduced a new policy to double the number of hours of free Early Learning and Care (ELC) services offered to parents from 620 to 1140 hours annually by 2020 (*A Blueprint for 2020*, 2017). Given national concerns about children's physical and mental health (e.g., obesity, screen time, educational and employment attainment gap), this new policy included an increased emphasis on early learning and outdoor play (see Perlman et al., *in press* for an analysis of this new policy). Specifically, the new policy on free ELC included an emphasis on expanding the number of outdoor play programs (OPPs) in both urban and rural settings. ELC services are designed to provide support for working parents while enhancing the early learning and development of young children as outlined in the mandated national educational guide for children ages 3–18 (*Curriculum for Excellence*, 2008). A related government document, the *Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Play* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, Scottish Government, 2010) articulates the national vision for outdoor learning in natural rural and urban environments and school grounds.

The Scottish emphasis on outdoor play was initiated as a grass roots movement by early adopters of OPPs located in natural environments (e.g., woodlands, fields, beaches, parks). More recently, the Scottish government adopted a new policy of expanding ELC services that includes licensing more OPPs. The top-down Scottish government approach indicates that it was influenced by the bottom-up grass root movement (Passy et al., 2019). Evidence demonstrates that attending OPPs is beneficial for

children's development (Brussoni et al., 2015; Fjørtoft, 2001; Lerstrup & van den Bosch, 2017; Wyver, 2019), although concerns regarding risky play are identified (Brussoni et al., 2012; Coe, 2017; Tovey, 2007). A limited, small-scale qualitative literature addresses educators' beliefs about the value of outdoor play for children's development (Leggett & Newman, 2017; Little et al., 2012; Maynard & Waters, 2007). Examining educators' perspectives is an important factor in promoting children's experiences in ELC programs (Little et al., 2011). In this paper we provide results from a survey administered to educators who work in early adopter OPP programs and matched traditional nursery¹ programs during the course of the transition to the new social policy on ELC. We focused on educators' perceptions of the benefits, risks, barriers, and the challenges to implementation of this policy change. In the next section, we outline the literature on the benefits and risks associated with OPPs and what we know about educators' beliefs around these issues.

Outdoor Play Programs: Benefits, Barriers, and Risks

There is a long tradition of OPPs in Scandinavia and Northern Europe starting in the 1950s and 1960s. Similar programs now operate across the globe, including Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Alden & Pyle, 2019; Änggård, 2010; Borge et al., 2003; Brown & Kaye, 2017; Lee et al., 2015; MacEachren, 2013; O'Brien & Murray, 2007). These programs typically have a social-constructivist, play-based approach (MacEachren, 2013) and provide ample opportunities for children to explore the natural environment (e.g., woodlands, forests, parks, beaches). Children spend a significant portion of the week outdoors (e.g., from 2 hours daily to three to five full days) year-round under the care of educators trained to work outdoors. Tovey (2007) argues the outdoor natural environment is qualitatively different than indoor settings given greater space for active engagement, exploration, affordances for learning, and freedom of choice in a sensory-rich environment so children can act in multiple ways as they build, transform, investigate, and observe over the four seasons of the year.

The first Scottish OPP was licensed in 2008 by the Care Inspectorate, the Scottish government agency responsible for licensing and assessing the quality of care services (*My World Outdoors*, 2016). Since then, a number of specialized OPPs have been licensed ($n = 31$ in 2020), providing the groundwork and justification for promoting new programs in the recent Scottish government policy (*My World Outdoors*, 2016). These programs reflected the *National Curriculum for Excellence 3–18* (2008) guidelines for quality programing and provided justification for the recent policy initiative (*A Blueprint for 2020*, 2017). The ELC landscape in Scotland includes different types of settings ranging from traditional, full-day, full-time, indoor early learning and care programs (nurseries) to OPPs to child-minders (i.e., individuals caring for a small number of children in their home). OPPs are required to follow the national curriculum guidelines and regulations in line with the traditional indoor early learning/child care programs.

As noted above, the Scottish expansion of OPPs was also based on empirical evidence indicating their positive benefits, particularly for physical health and motor skills such as increased activity level, reducing illness (Brussoni et al., 2015; Fjørtoft, 2001; Söderström et al., 2013), promoting coordination (Fjørtoft, 2001; Schäffer & Kistemann, 2012; Tandon et al., 2018), developing a stronger understanding and connection to the natural environment, enhancing opportunities for social interactions, developing a sense of agency, and promoting skills such as self-confidence (Alden & Pyle, 2019; Elliott & Chancellor, 2014; Melhuus, 2012). In sum, OPPs are viewed as contributing to a more positive quality of life for children (Malone & Waite, 2016).

Recently, Alden and Pyle (2019) reported that Canadian stakeholders from a variety of sectors identified critical features of OPPs; namely, the promotion of children's agency, the creation of play-rich environments, and adults who support and view children as competent learners, while also recognizing that play includes some risk. The issue of risk and safe practices associated with exploring the natural environment is a societal concern (Brussoni et al., 2012); it is often cited as a barrier to implementing OPPs and may have implications for the broader early learning field concerning the

play opportunities provided for children (Authors et al.). Outdoor play is frequently labeled as “risky play” due to opportunities to climb heights (e.g., rocks, trees), run and hide in dense environments (e.g., bushes), use tools (e.g., saws, hammers), and proximity to dangerous spots such as water (Coe, 2017). Educators manage these possible risks by developing rules so that children can engage safely with the environment and learn to assess the level of risk for themselves (Authors et al., ; Brussoni et al., 2015). Brussoni et al. (2015) describe a shift in thinking from risk assessment to risk/benefit analysis, specifically moving from determining the risk level and establishing overly protective safety measures to creating safety rules that avoid excessive harm but allow for some degree of risk. Children have an important role in risk/benefit analysis, for example, learning which tree branches are suitable for climbing and to what height they can safely climb (Sandseter & Sando, 2016).

Educators’ Beliefs Regarding the Benefits, Risks, Barriers, and Challenges of Outdoor Play

Early childhood educators play a significant role in the quality and type of learning experiences provided to children since their beliefs influence their practice and values (Little et al., 2011). The limited, mostly qualitative literature on educators’ attitudes and beliefs about the value of outdoor play often fails to account for auspice (e.g., not-for-profit, for profit) and type of program (traditional childcare, OPP, full vs. part day/week). Moreover, the location of programs (e.g., playground, natural environment) and definition of outdoor play are often not specified (e.g., Leggett & Newman, 2017; Wyver, 2019).

In general, some educators perceive the outdoors, especially parks or natural settings, as a potential learning environment, but they are more likely to use “maintained outdoor settings” such as playgrounds, for learning activities (Ernst & Tornabene, 2012; Herrington, 2008; Maynard & Waters, 2007). These findings suggest that all educators value the opportunities that children have for outdoor play, but for some educators this only means time for children to run around on a structured playground and not to explore the natural environment. Alternatively, Icelandic preschool and school teachers held strong and positive beliefs about the value of outdoor experiences in the natural environment, including facilitating play and learning, children’s health, “courage” to tackle risky challenges, and enhanced sustainability knowledge and behavior, but they had few concerns about risk (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2016). In contrast, Canadian, American, Australian, and Welsh preservice and early childhood educators working in traditional ELC programs held beliefs about the difficulty of accessing and using natural environments due to barriers, risks, and challenges, such as poor walking access, transportation issues, weather and proper clothing, safety, lack of time, litigation and risk factors, and lack of teacher knowledge (Ernst, 2014; Ernst & Tornabene, 2012; Leggett & Newman, 2017; Maynard & Waters, 2007). In conclusion, most of the literature has focused on early childhood educators working in traditional ELC or nursery programs and their beliefs about risky play, with less attention given to the value of outdoor play. A more rigorous approach that compares the beliefs and practices of educators working in OPPs versus more traditional nursery programs is warranted. Such an investigation may illuminate some of the challenges both groups of educators perceive that may hinder future success regarding the rolling out of the large-scale Scottish government policy initiative. Understanding educator’s concerns about barriers, risks, and challenges is especially timely now, with increased interest in outdoor play as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, OPPs may provide a viable, safer solution to the implementation of traditional indoor ELC programs since transmission rates are believed to be lower outdoors. Information about educators’ perceived benefits, barriers, risks, and challenges to implementing OPPs is going to be important as governments considering ramping up outdoor play arrangements for children around the globe.

The Present Study

We surveyed two groups of Scottish educators working in: (a) early adopter OPPs and, (b) traditional ELC (nursery) programs. The survey investigated educators' beliefs regarding outdoor play, benefits, barriers, challenges, risks, how they implement the curriculum in both types of programs, and their views of an ideal OPP. We also asked about their beliefs about the feasibility of the recent Scottish policy initiative of expanding free care from 620 to 1140 hours annually for families. This new policy also includes an emphasis on expanding the number of OPPs as one way to meet the need for more ELC spaces, thus we investigated the views of both groups of educators on this initiative. Gathering information from educators working in a system that is undergoing a major policy shift toward outdoor play allows us to capture the concerns and hopes of educators whose involvement in outdoor play is about to increase dramatically.

Method

Identification of Programs

The Care Inspectorate, the Scottish government body responsible for ELC licensing, identified 18 early adopters of OPPs in 2018. Two programs were excluded because they operated on a part-time basis only. The early adopter programs were located in rural and urban regions across Scotland and operated in a number of different settings, from parks to beaches and forests. Children attended these OPPs for between one to five full days a week. These OPPs were matched to nursery ELC programs identified via the Care Inspectorate website based on the demographic profile of families and programs (<http://www.careinspectorate.com/index.php/care-services>). Each OPP was entered into the search engine and all ELC centers within a 3-mile radius for urban locations and 5-mile radius for rural locations were considered. ELC programs were matched to the OPP based on the following criteria: (1) number of children, (2) children's ages, (3) distance, and (4) SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation). Each criterion was ranked for similarity with the corresponding OPP and ranks were summed to produce a total score. ELC nursery programs with the lowest total scores were rated as the best match to the OPP. In cases where nursery programs had equal scores, the one with a SIMD score closest to the OPP was retained as the matched control.

Survey

The authors developed an online, self-report survey to assess educators' attitudes toward outdoor play in ELC programs. The survey included 32 items based on previous literature, qualitative interviews with Scottish ELC stakeholders (Authors et al.), and consensus among the authors. Items consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions inquiring about educator views on OPPs and the role of educators in early years programs.

Closed-ended Questions

Educators were provided with 25 closed-ended questions that asked about their perspectives on: the benefits and challenges to outdoor play for both children and educators; the optimal amount of outdoor time for children; confidence in their ability to support outdoor play; barriers to implementing outdoor play programs; and challenges in implementing the new policy to expand ELC hours to 1140 across the country. Multiple-choice responses were provided allowing for the selection of one or more responses along with an "other" option where educators could add their own points. The one exception was the question (*How confident do you feel in your skills to support outdoor play?*), which was rated using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not confident at all*) to 10 (*highly confident*).

Open-ended Questions

Participants were asked seven open-ended questions about what their *ideal* ELC outdoor play program would look like. Questions inquired about the overall program as well as the role of educators, daily structure, location, number of children, and activities (e.g., *What do you think an optimal outdoor play program should look like in terms of the activities children/educators engage in?*).

Survey Collection Procedure

Educators were recruited from 32 ELC programs (16 OPPs, 16 nursery programs matched as described above) that were licensed in 2018. Program managers were contacted to recruit full-time educators and recruitment was conducted in three steps: (1) in November 2018, an e-mail was sent by the Scottish Care Inspectorate describing the study with a link to the online survey to distribute to educators; (2) between January and March 2019, follow-up e-mails and phone calls were conducted by a research assistant (RA); (3) in March 2019, postcards with a brief description of the study and the online survey link were mailed to each program. The study received ethical approval from the first two authors' universities.

Data Analysis Plan

Closed-ended survey responses across the two groups of educators were compared using a chi-square test of independence. The effect size was estimated using *Phi* (for binary variables) and Cramer's *v* (for multinomial variables) correlation coefficients. Due to the small sample size, we report differences in responses between the OPP and nursery educators when they were 10% or greater, even when results were not statistically significant. Responses to our open-ended question were analyzed using thematic analysis. Two coders independently identified the initial level of subthemes, met to determine agreement, and repeated the process until there was consensus on the major themes. Once this process was finalized, the auspice of the respondents was identified (i.e., OPP vs. nursery educators) to compare responses of the two groups.

Results

Forty-four educators completed the online survey: 25 from OPPs and 19 from traditional ELC nursery programs. Educators in both groups were comparable for gender, age, specializations, positions, and income (see Table 1). However, more OPP educators had a BA degree and reported working fewer full days and more morning or afternoon shifts compared to the nursery educators. The number of educators who responded to a specific question ranged from 43–45 across all questions. To account for differences in the number of respondents from the two types of programs, results are presented as percentages (divided by the number of respondents for each item) rather than frequencies.

Perspectives on Current Benefits, Barriers, Risks and Challenges to Outdoor Play

Optimal Time in Outdoor Play

The most frequently reported response for OPP educators, and second highest response for nursery educators, was that full-time (5 days per week) is the optimal amount of time children should spend outdoors (50.0% vs. 33.3%, respectively). The second most frequently reported response for OPP educators was 3–4 days a week, with a significantly higher percent of OPP educators, compared to nursery educators, reporting this as the optimal amount of time for outdoor play (29.2% vs. 0.0%). The majority (57.1%) of nursery educators reported that the amount of time outdoors deemed “best” is dependent on the child's preferences. Other nursery educators reported at least daily outdoor time as optimal for children. In contrast, 71.4% of OPP educators reported that children should be outside

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the nursery and outdoor educators (N = 45).

Demographic Characteristics	Nursery Educatorsn (%)	Outdoor Educatorsn (%)	Phi/Cramer's V	<i>p</i>
Gender				
Male	0 (0.00)	2 (8.00)	0.190	.207
Female	19 (100.00)	23 (92.00)		
Age				
Less than 30 years old	7 (36.80)	5 (20.00)	0.302	.212
30–39 years old	1 (5.30)	7 (28.00)		
40–49 years old	7 (36.80)	7 (28.00)		
50 years old and above	4 (21.10)	6 (24.00)		
Education				
Less than a BA degree	10 (52.60)	6 (24.00)	0.446	.013*
BA degree and above	3 (15.80)	15 (60.00)		
Other	6 (31.60)	4 (16.00)		
Specialization				
Early Years Education	10 (52.50)	10 (38.50)	−0.141	.345
Child Development	7 (36.80)	8 (30.80)	−0.064	.670
Early Years Special Education	0 (0.00)	1 (3.80)	0.129	.387
Childhood Practice	7 (36.80)	9 (34.60)	−0.023	.878
Elementary Education	2 (10.50)	1 (3.80)	−0.132	.375
Special Education	0 (0.00)	1 (3.80)	0.129	.387
Outdoor Play	5 (12.20)	14 (34.10)	−0.286	.067
Other	1 (5.30)	5 (19.20)	0.203	.173
Position				
Head or co-head educator	5 (26.30)	10 (40.00)	0.229	.678
Director/supervisor	1 (5.30)	2 (8.00)		
Educator	7 (36.80)	7 (28.00)		
Assistant educator	1 (5.30)	0 (0.00)		
Other	5 (26.30)	6 (24.00)		
Program Operation				
Less than 5 days a week	0 (0.00)	7 (26.90)	−0.362	.016*
5 days a week	18 (100.00)	19 (73.10)		
Hours of Operation				
Morning only	5 (26.30)	1 (3.80)	−0.326	.029*
Afternoon only	3 (15.80)	0 (0.00)	−3.13	.036*
Both morning and afternoon	8 (42.10)	5 (19.20)	−0.249	.094
Full day	13 (68.40)	23 (88.50)	0.247	.097
Yearly Income				
Below £20,000	13 (72.20)	19 (76.00)	−0.043	.779
Above £20,000	5 (27.80)	6 (24.00)		

**p* < 0.05

daily but often did not provide a specific amount of time. For example, responses include “several hours”, “at least some time” and they should follow the Scandinavian approach of full-time everyday outdoor play; only one educator said 6 hours a day. Less common responses from the OPP educators were not daily (14.3%) and dependent on the child (14.3%). Interestingly only nursery educators (28.6%) highlighted weather or seasons as an important barrier in determining how much outdoor time is best for children.

Confidence in Ability to Support Outdoor Play

Educators rated their confidence in their ability to support outdoor play as fairly high overall; scores ranged from five to ten (highest possible score) across all educators. A Mann-Whitney test indicated that the self-reported confidence level in supporting outdoor play was significantly higher for OPP (Mdn = 9.0) than nursery educators (Mdn = 7.5), $U = 89.5$, $p < .001$.

Benefits of Outdoor Play for Children and Educators

Significantly more OPP educators reported a wider range of benefits of outdoor play for children compared to nursery educators, with some OPP educators reporting more than five, $\Phi = .321$, $p = .033$, or six benefits, $\Phi = .388$, $p = .010$. In fact, OPP educators were more than 10% more likely to

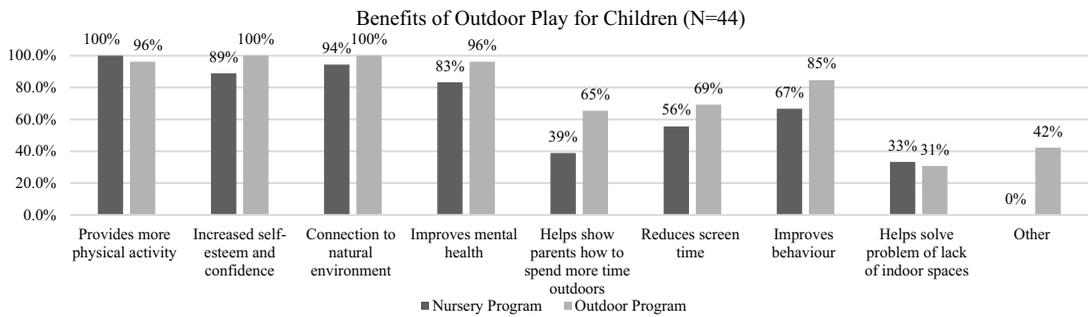


Figure 1. Perceptions of benefits of outdoor play for children from educators from nursery and outdoor programs.

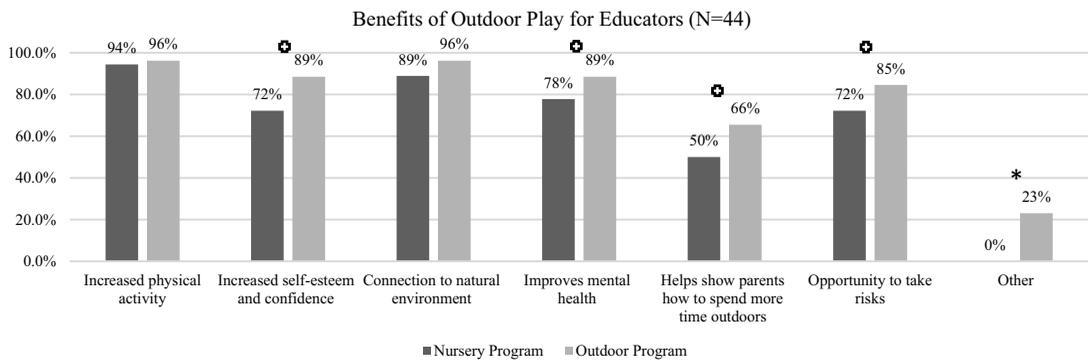


Figure 2. Educator reported perceived benefits of outdoor play for educators from nursery and outdoor programs.

* $p < 0.05$; > 10% difference

report five or more *benefits for children* (see [Figure 1](#)). The only significant difference between OPP and nursery educators was the endorsement of “other benefits for children” ($\Phi = .480, p = .001$), where OPP educators described additional benefits such as building resilience and reducing stress, the natural environment allows more freedom and promotes social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development, and children learn to assess risk. Interestingly, OPP educators were also more likely to endorse the “other” category regarding *benefits for educators*, $\Phi = .331, p = .028$ (see [Figure 2](#)). OPP educators reported these “other” benefits included opportunities for teaching and learning, resilience and wellbeing, and building relationships.

In sum, OPP educators reported more benefits to outdoor play for both children and educators compared to nursery educators. Specifically, OPP educators were more likely to list the following benefits for both children and educators: higher self-esteem, confidence, greater mental health, helping to show parents how to spend time outdoors, overall improvement in children’s behavior; decreased screen time; and finally providing educators with the opportunity to take risks.

Challenges, Risks, and Barriers to Outdoor Play for Children and Educators

OPP educators reported more challenges of outdoor play for children compared to nursery educators (differences of greater than 10%). Specifically, OPP educators were more likely to report exposure to bad weather and the difficulty of providing activities as challenges for children, whereas nursery educators were more likely to report that there were no challenges of outdoor play (see [Figure 3](#)). OPP educators were also significantly more likely to specify additional challenges for children, $\Phi = .302, p = .045$, including environmental risks, parental/staff issues, and children learning independence and decision making. Interestingly, when asked about the challenges of outdoor play for educators, nursery

Challenges of Outdoor Play for Children (N=44)

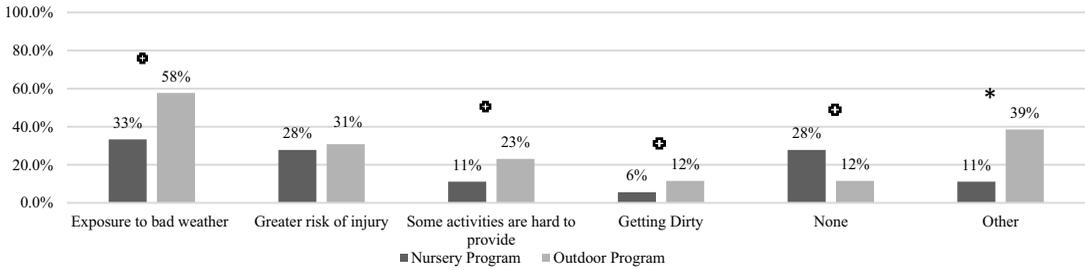


Figure 3. Educator reported perceived challenges of outdoor play for children from nursery and outdoor programs. * $p < 0.05$; > 10% difference

Challenges of Outdoor Play for Educators (N=44)

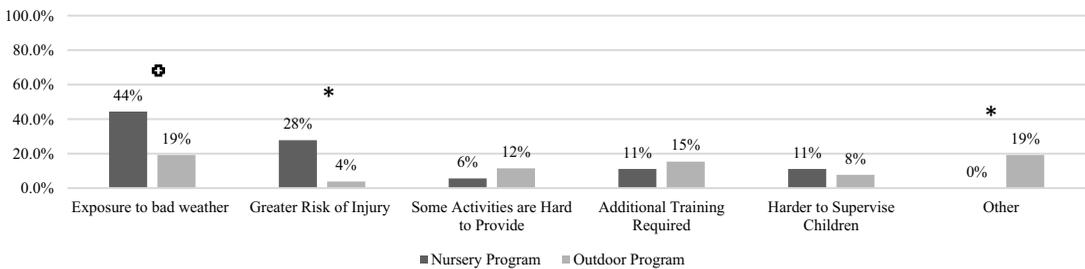


Figure 4. Educator reported perceived challenges of outdoor play for educators from nursery and outdoor programs. * $p < 0.05$; > 10% difference

educators were significantly more likely to report exposure to bad weather and greater risk of injury to children as challenges compared to OPP educators, $\Phi = -.343$, $p = .023$ (see Figure 4). However, OPP educators were significantly more likely to suggest other challenges, $\Phi = .298$, $p = .048$, such as the physical and mental demands of the work and the need to reframe challenges as opportunities.

In terms of the barriers to implementing outdoor play programs, OPP educators reported a wider range compared to nursery educators (difference of more than 10%), specifically noting licensing issues, getting parents on board, finding appropriate locations, and educators’ lack of expertise (see Figure 5). OPP educators were also significantly more likely than nursery educators to report that getting educators on board was a barrier, $\Phi = .533$, $p < .001$, but were significantly less likely to report children not wanting to be outdoors as a barrier, $\Phi = -.523$, $p = .001$.

Barriers to Implementing the New Scottish Policy on Expanding Hours of Free ELC

Although there were no significant differences between the two groups, OPP educators were more likely than nursery educators to report that the training and education of educators (53.8% vs. 26.7%) and the lack of clarity around the expectations (57.7% vs. 46.7%) were barriers. The responses of both groups of educators with regards to the availability of space and demand of hours as barriers were comparable (34.6% vs. 40.0%).

Educators’ Perspectives of an Ideal OPP

In the open-ended questions, OPP and nursery educators highlighted three main themes: a play-based philosophy and role of the educator; the role of the natural environment and related structural factors; and risky play.

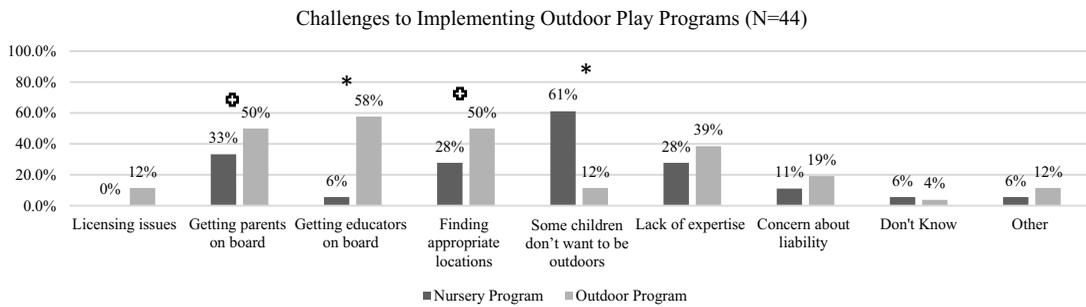


Figure 5. Perceived challenges to implementing outdoor play programs by educators from nursery and outdoor programs. * $p < 0.05$; > 10% difference

Play-based Philosophy and Role of the Educator in an Ideal OPP

Both groups of educators had a similar play-based philosophy. They described their ideal early years OPP as play-based, focused on children's development (e.g., physical, social-emotional, cognitive), following child-led interests and decisions, and providing frequent opportunities for free play in an outdoor, natural environment. For example, one OPP educator said:

Child-led play, follow-up of children's own curiosities and ideas, e.g., found a bird feather – where did it come from? Discuss possible back story of the bird, play a game related to the story that emerges. Get binoculars out and look for other birds. Draw birds (use sticks in mud or chalks on rock). Tree climbing, build a 'nest'.

Educators viewed their role in an ideal OPP as supporting children's learning, development, and play by providing resources and a stimulating environment, while viewing children as active learners. OPP educators highlighted the importance of building relationships with peers, educators, and parents more than nursery educators: *"The role of adults within the early years program is to encourage children to develop their skills in a way that is rights respecting and kind"*. Interestingly, more nursery educators emphasized the use of teaching strategies to promote children's learning and play such as observation, scaffolding, providing help, interacting when appropriate, and monitoring progress. These findings are echoed in the following two quotes:

An early years' educator's role is to provide a stimulating area for children to learn the best they can. With a free choice to lots of resources." (Nursery educator)

Learning in early years should be play based and as educators we should be alongside the children discovering along with them, prompting and questioning when appropriate, and when children are ready giving them the provocation to further build the connections that are already occurring in their play." (OPP educator)

The Role of the Natural Environment and Structural Factors in an Ideal OPP

Educators from both groups specified that an ideal OPP would take place in a natural environment such as woods, beaches, fields, or meadows, sometimes in conjunction with an indoor nursery facility. Many OPP educators emphasized the importance of a natural environment with a shelter: *"Outside in a natural environment in all weather conditions, but with access to a warm place for changing, storage and extreme conditions/end/start of session"* whereas nursery educators were more likely to refer to both indoor and outdoor play spaces (i.e., playgrounds) and sometimes advocated for a "free flow" between the two locations. In terms of the child/educator ratio in an optimal OPP, nursery educators responded in general terms (i.e., "tight ratios", "minimum legal"), whereas OPP educators mentioned specific ratios (i.e., range of 1:1 to 1:10 with most 1:4 or 1:5) as well as maximum group size (range = 15– 32 with most suggesting 18–20 children) and an educator/child ratio of 1:4 or 1:5.

Both groups of educators also emphasized the importance of including a degree of structure and clear routines in an ideal OPP: *"A rhythm to the day, with songs, circles, and stories at certain times, and*

spaces for free play in between”, although OPP educators were more concerned with routines (e.g., rest time) and curriculum activities (e.g., math, literacy) as one stated: “A wide variety of choice for not only curriculum based activities (reading, writing, maths, arts/drama etc.) but also to loose parts for physical and social development”. Simultaneously, many educators stated that an optimal program needs to provide multiple opportunities for child-led free play and activities based on children’s interests: “Children should be able to take part in what activities they choose or spend time in free play that is intrinsically driven”. OPP educators mentioned specific activities such as building dens, making fires, gardening, caring for animals, collecting natural items (e.g., leaves, rocks) and loose parts (wood pieces), mud kitchens, and other tools.

Risky Play

OPP educators, exclusively, highlighted the benefits of including risky play, in conjunction with appropriate risk management/risk assessment, within an ideal OPP to promote healthy child development: “Risky play is very important for children’s development, confidence and physical ability and to feel safe in the environment”. Specifically, OPP educators saw risk-benefit analysis or risk management as a tool for teaching safety and reducing injuries, as one stated: “Practitioners need to be aware of the level of risk so that it’s appropriate to a child’s age and stage of development and not dangerously high”. The advantage of promoting children’s ability to assess risk for themselves was highlighted by other OPP educators as one stated: “I support children’s opportunity to learn to self-risk assess, develop confidence, work from a risk:benefit model and see risk as an inherent and natural part of life – something to be managed and used for its opportunities – skills they will use throughout their lifetime”.

Discussion

The present study investigated the perceptions and beliefs of Scottish early childhood educators working in OPPs and nursery programs regarding outdoor play. The quantitative and qualitative survey data illuminated educators’ views of the philosophy and role of educators in OPPs, perceived benefits, risks, and challenges of outdoor play for children and educators, and barriers to creating OPPs and to implementing the new Scottish ELC policy. Overall, the educators in both groups expressed their professional views on the value of outdoor play in their current programs, in an ideal OPP, and the impending Scottish ELC policy.

Educators’ Perceptions of the Pedagogical Philosophy for OPPs and Nursery Programs

The importance of encouraging outdoor play was cited by all educators in line with the literature (Ernst & Tornabene, 2012; Herrington, 2008; Maynard & Waters, 2007). However, OPP educators advocated for more full days outdoors for children and were more specific about educator:child ratios perhaps due to their relevant experience working in an OPP. Nevertheless, both groups of educators espoused a similar philosophy of play-based, child-led activities based on the children’s interests and cited the government-mandated, *Curriculum of Excellence (3–18)*, as the foundation for both nursery programs and OPPs. These views were evident in descriptions of both current programs and ideal OPPs. Given that all Scottish ELC programs, regardless of type, are required to follow a play-based, child-led, and developmentally-focused model, it makes sense that all educators advocated a common view. Moreover, all educators saw their role as supporting children’s learning, development, and play by providing materials and viewed children as active learners. These views are in line with international educators who hold similar beliefs regarding program philosophy and children as active and agentic learners (e.g., Alden & Pyle, 2019; MacEachren, 2013; Tovey, 2007).

Educators' Perceptions of the Benefits and Value of Outdoor Play

All the Scottish educators held quite similar views regarding the benefits of outdoor play for both children and educators, although OPP educators listed significantly more benefits than nursery educators. All educators cited benefits for both children and educators ranging from enhancing self-esteem and mental health to building a stronger connection with the natural environment to helping parents learn how to spend more time outdoors with their children. OPP educators included additional benefits focused on improving children's behavior, reducing screen time, and opportunities for learning to take risks. These findings support and extend prior literature regarding benefits by comparing the two groups of educators regarding benefits for children (e.g., Ernst & Tornabene, 2012; Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2016). In addition, we extend the literature by examining benefits for educators, which previously have been neglected in the literature, yet given their primary role in OPPs, the findings may provide insight regarding the types of individuals attracted to working in such programs, as discussed below.

Educators' Perceptions of Challenges and Risks Associated with Outdoor Play

We also asked educators to indicate the challenges of providing outdoor play for children and for themselves. While both groups provided a similar list of possible challenges for children, OPP educators rated exposure to bad weather and some activities as more difficult to provide for children outdoors. Interestingly, nursery educators believed there were fewer challenges for children, perhaps due to their lack of first-hand experience working in an OPP. OPP educators also articulated additional challenges that the nursery educators did not report, such as environmental risks, parenting (e.g., getting parents on board) and staffing (e.g., recruitment/retention) issues, and helping children to become independent decision makers. Given the Scottish climate and weather, it is not surprising that this issue was raised by all educators. Interestingly, nursery educators reported weather and also the possibility of greater risk of injury as issues more for themselves than for children compared to OPP educators, perhaps suggesting their hesitations about working in OPPs.

Clearly, working as an OPP educator requires a special aptitude and individuals likely self-select to work in these types of environments based on individual characteristics and skills. For example, mental and physical resilience to work outdoors all year in all kinds of weather, specialized knowledge about the natural environment relevant to the specific location of the program, training in outdoor play and risk management, and enjoyment of the outdoors may all lead educators to choose to work in OPPs (Authors et al., Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2016). Although OPP educators likely are more knowledgeable about the natural environment, they also reported that it was a physically and mentally challenging job, but they saw the challenges as opportunities, thus revealing a set of positive attitudes. Similar to Icelandic educators, the strong beliefs of the Scottish OPP educators about the value of outdoor play may have given them the "courage" to tackle environmental and risky challenges (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2016). In contrast, the challenges raised by the nursery educators (e.g., risk) seem more in line with literature investigating the beliefs of educators in Canada, the United States, Wales, and Australia who focus on litigation and restrictive government policies, as noted earlier (Ernst, 2014; Ernst & Tornabene, 2012; Leggett & Newman, 2017; Maynard & Waters, 2007). This may suggest that a movement to overprotect children from any possible risk inhibits the professional judgment and training of educators, but warrants further study.

Educators' Perceptions of Risky Play

Play in the outdoor natural environment is sometimes labeled as "risky play" due to landscape features that could potentially create hazards such as trees, rocks, poisonous and prickly plants, and water (Brussoni et al., 2015, 2012). Clearly, the issue of risky play is central to OPPs and of concern to educators and parents internationally (Sandseter & Sando, 2016) and was also raised by Scottish

stakeholders (Authors et al.,). The Scottish Care Inspectorate recognizes this concern and thus, emphasizes the risk/benefit analysis approach; *My World Outdoors* (2016) states: “You need to balance the risks against the benefits and make children the main focus of the risk-benefit assessment process” (p. 5). Adopting the risk-benefit approach means educators work with children to create safety rules to avoid excessive harm but offer some degree of risk in their chosen activities (Sandseter & Sando, 2016). Understandably, OPP educators were more concerned with this issue than nursery educators as evident in both their daily work and in describing an ideal OPP; clearly, they viewed it as their responsibility given that they must deal with risk on a daily basis. Yet, the OPP educators viewed risky play as beneficial for the children’s development and as a way for children to learn to assess the environment, their own safety and comfort level, and to gain confidence in making thoughtful and independent decisions (e.g., which tree should they climb and how high).

Little et al. (2012) and Sandseter and Kleppe (2019) argued that there are cultural differences in how societies view risky play. For example, our Scottish findings are more in line with Scandinavian and German OPP educators than North American or Australian OPP educators. The latter report liability issues and more restrictive government regulations act to constrain the types of outdoor experiences offered to children, issues not raised by the former educators (Little et al., 2012; Sandseter & Sando, 2016; Wyver et al., 2010, 2012).

Educators’ Perceptions of Barriers to Implementing OPPs

The logistics of establishing an OPP requires a dedicated staff and much organizational work to find a natural location, gain permission to use it, obtain a license, recruit staff, enroll children, and a myriad of other responsibilities. Educators were articulate about what we termed, barriers, to this process. Of the six barriers in which there were qualitative differences between the two groups of educators, two issues stood out. OPP educators rated the issue of getting educators on board as a significant issue, whereas nursery educators raised the issue that some children prefer the indoors to the outdoors as more of a significant barrier. As noted above, attracting staff to work in OPPs requires specialized knowledge and skills and Scottish ELC training programs have traditionally not paid much attention to this topic, although given the new directions in social policy, this may be changing (Authors et al.,). Nursery educators’ perceptions that some children prefer the indoors to the outdoors may reflect the notion that the parents who enroll their children in OPPs have a different perspective on the value of the natural environment and outdoor programs than parents of children in nursery programs. The latter parents may be more comfortable with the idea of enrolling their child in an OPP, perhaps also reflecting the interests and inclinations of their child. Thus, this attitudinal difference may possibly explain why OPP educators saw children’s preferences as less of an issue than nursery educators. Nevertheless, OPP educators also rated the issue of having parental buy-in to the value of OPPs as a barrier, likely due to parents’ own lack of experience with the outdoors and their fears of possible risks (Authors et al.,). Our findings suggest a more detailed study of parental beliefs regarding the choice of ELC programs is warranted.

Educators’ Perceptions of the New Scottish Childcare Policy

Scotland has advanced an ambitious policy to increase the number of hours of free ELC annually from 620 to 1140 for families. Scottish government documents indicate societal concerns with the population’s social, mental, and physical health (e.g., obesity) were a driving force for the new ELC policy (*A Blueprint for 2020*, 2017; Mathias, 2018). The positive value of outdoor play in general and the establishment of more OPPs that children attend for extended and regular times each week are clearly advocated by Scottish government documents (e.g., *Curriculum for Excellence*, 2008; *Curriculum of Excellence Through Outdoor Play*, 2010). The educators in our study also expressed a similar view and spoke of the importance of outdoor play as one possible means to address larger societal issues (i.e., provides physical activity, improves mental health, reduces screen time).

Authors et al. interviewed various Scottish stakeholders (e.g., government officials, practitioners, advocates) regarding the new ELC policy and they articulated a number of issues that must be addressed in rolling out the policy, for example, the lack of sufficient space and infrastructure, the training of additional qualified educators, and funding issues. In the current study, the OPP respondents were more likely than nursery educators to highlight the lack of training for educators to work in the natural environment, which is in line with reports from other jurisdictions (e.g., Ernst, 2014; Ernst & Tornabene, 2012). As well, the OPP educators discussed the lack of clarity from the Care Inspectorate, and municipal, regional, and national authorities on their expectations regarding the expansion, quality of care, and financial issues. These issues will clearly need to be addressed if the new policy actually promotes the development of more OPPs, while simultaneously maintaining a quality experience for children and educators.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations including a small and potentially non-representative sample. Although we identified differences between the demographic characteristics of OPP and nursery educators, we were unable to control for any possible differences due to the small sample size. Specifically, educators who worked in OPP settings were more likely to have a BA degree and to have received specialized training in outdoor education compared to nursery educators, suggesting they likely self-selected the type of programs they chose to work in and may already have had different opinions/attitudes about OPPs. In addition, our findings are based on closed- and open-ended survey questions rather than observational data; future research should also include in-depth interviews. Nonetheless, our study generated some interesting findings.

Conclusions

Educators in both OPPs and nursery programs hold both similar and divergent views about the value of outdoor play. Interestingly, OPP educators raised more issues in discussing barriers to the implementation of the new social policy than nursery educators. This suggests that nursery educators may require additional supports regarding the transition to the delivery of their program outdoors for significant portions of the day. These additional supports may take the form of training programs in running OPPs, knowledge-based workshops on the risks and benefits of outdoor play and the natural environment, and increased opportunities for gaining confidence and experience working in outdoor settings. Our findings also have practical implications suggesting post-secondary early childhood education programs need to enhance their curriculum regarding required knowledge, experience, and training to work in OPPs. Moreover, a concerted effort to educate more parents about the value of OPPs for their children's development is warranted; Stakeholders in Authors (in press) reported that many parents had restricted childhood experiences with the outdoors, thus efforts to increase their comfort and use of natural environments are important. Considering the benefits, barriers, risks, and challenges to the implementation of OPPs is especially timely given that they may provide an advantageous option in terms of the delivery of ELC services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, the views of frontline educators during this period of change in the Scottish government policy on the expansion of ELC and its concerns with the mental and physical health of the Scottish population were informative. Authors (in press) discuss the evolution of the Scottish ELC policy as the intersection of a top-down approach that was influenced by a strong bottom-up movement by early adopters of OPPs (Passy et al., 2019); both sources of influence appear to be reflected in the views of the educators in our study. It is anticipated that our findings may have important implications for other jurisdictions considering the expansion of OPPs. In addition, these findings may impact the development of future, cross-cultural studies on educator on teacher beliefs regarding OPPs and the benefits of risky play, as well as the implementation of educator training programs focused on guiding outdoor play and risk management.

Note

1. The Scottish term for group day care center programs is nursery, which is the term we adopt in this paper.

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