'You can't totally avoid accidents. So how hard should you try?' Discourses of safety in early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand

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The question of 'how hard should you try?' to control accidents introduces a quixotic question which is grappled with daily by early childhood teachers. In the context of contemporary early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand, young children are expected to be kept 'safe' and yet also to take risks through active play. When considered historically, 'safety' becomes evident as a socially constructed concept that holds paradoxes and ethical dilemmas. Both 'play' and 'safety' are difficult to closely define and their meanings shift with context. Drawing on oral history interviews with historic leaders of the early childhood sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, this paper explores how, with the presence of very young children increasingly in institutional settings, ideas about 'safety' have shifted. This is evident in how those settings are regulated, and in what is understood as 'normal' activities for children, and for adults – parents and teachers. Three overlapping discourses of 'safety' are suggested which reflect the sociocultural context, the professional status of early childhood teachers, and existential concerns.

Introduction

I recently displayed a series of photographs of children's active play during a public open day. The photos were accompanied by the provocation: "What do you see happening here?" At the end of the day, I revisited the display. Only one photo had been remarked upon – 'Safety First' was written under a delightful photograph of three boys aged 4 years old, all smiling at the photographer whilst balancing on the low branches of a huge tree.

While nothing like a scientific survey, this vignette illustrates the prominence given to children's safety in early childhood settings. Yet despite its importance, safety – as a concept – is rarely considered in early childhood curriculum texts beyond acknowledging that a degree of risk is to be expected as part of children's physically active play (see for example, Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2018).

As a result, the tools to evaluate whether aspects of safety are reasonable or unreasonable are not easily available. Yet recent research suggests that safety is an area of considerable professional unease amongst early childhood teachers (Little, 2015a,b; Wyver, Tranter, Naughton, Little, Sandsetter, & Bundy, 2010). As one Australian researcher reflected, early childhood teachers are given contradictory messages: to both encourage children's

agency in problem solving – including situations involving risk – and also to restrict and discourage it (Little, 2015b).

This paper draws on PhD research undertaken in 2006-7 which involved oral history interviews with 23 historic leaders of New Zealand's early childhood community. While the focus of the interviews was on how ideas about 'play' (and 'play as learning') had changed in their lifetimes, these historic leaders all raised questions about the foregrounding of safety in the context of young children's active physical play. (See Table 1 for a thumbnail profile of each of the 12 leaders who are quoted in this paper.)

Table 1:   *The participants: Their status within early childhood education (e.c.e.), and their interview details*

	Status	Decades of involvement * (approx.)
Boyd, Lynda	Life member – NZK	1970s-2010s
Burns, Val	Historic leader	1970s-2000s
Chapman, Barbara	Life member – NZPF	1970s-2000s
Densem, Ailsa	Life member – CPA	1950-1990s
Gargiulo, Trish	Life member – NFKA	1970s-2000s
Hubbard, Pat	Life member – TTPOOA-NZCA	1970s-2000s
Katene, Kahuwaero (Kahu)	Life member – TTPOOA-NZCA	1980s-1990s
Logan, Wendy	Life member – NZK	1980s-2000s
Meade, Anne	Historic leader	1960s-2010s
Moorhouse, Noreen	Life member – TTPOOA-NZCA	1970s-1990s
Morris, Beverley	Life member – NZPF	1950s-2010s
Penrose, Pat	Historic leader	1970s-2000s

Key to acronyms:
- CPA: Canterbury Playcentre Association
- NFKA: Nelson Free Kindergarten Association
- NZK: New Zealand Kindergarten Inc.
- NZPF: New Zealand Playcentre Federation
- TTPOOA-NZCA: Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa New Zealand Childcare Association (Now 'Te Rito Maioha').

'Involvement' included one or more of the following:
- Working in an early childhood setting
- Working in e.c.e. professional development
- Researching and writing in e.c.e.
- Working as a consultant in e.c.e.
- Working in e.c.e. teacher education
- Working in the public sector in a position of responsibility for e.c.e.

(For more information about participants quoted in this paper, see Stover, 2011).

Methodology

When ethics approval was given for this PhD research (AUTEC 05/203), approval was also given for research participants to be named on the condition that participants also approved the transcripts of the interviews which were to be tape recorded and manually transcribed.

This process was followed, and in many cases, there were significant modifications to the transcripts to clarify points, improve grammar and in some cases, to omit material. The turnaround time for the return of transcripts was in some cases quite lengthy; one participant made a family project out of reading and amending the transcript and it took a year to finalise what was returned as an amended transcript. The transcripts, once approved, became the research data for the PhD which were then analysed for themes (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). (For more detail and other findings from this research, see Stover, 2011).

The research was qualitative in nature and was positioned broadly within feminist research methodology (see Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1990; Leavy, 2007). This methodology was reflected both in the way the research was conducted and in its focus on what was 'everyday' experience in the lives of the participants, who, with one exception, were all women. Furthermore, participants all self-identified as parents, and in various ways reflected how the experience of parenting led to their identifying new directions for themselves personally, in many cases towards greater community involvement, leadership, and advocacy for women and children. This has been an historic domain for feminist activity (Belenky, 1996; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Browne et al., 1978; Knox, 1995; Novitz, 1982; Singer, 1992).

Background: Educationalisation of early childhood in Aotearoa New Zealand

Those who participated in this research were active in early childhood services and organisations when the early childhood education (e.c.e.) sector was small, and with relatively few regulations – and relatively little money. These were the decades prior to the creation of the early childhood sector by regulation in 1989, and prior to the emergence of shared terminologies across the various providers. Amongst those interviewed, those who regarded themselves as teachers were usually employed in public kindergartens. Those working in childcare saw themselves as workers. Those in Playcentres saw themselves as parents – as learners alongside their young children.

To be emphasised here, while all the participants drew on experiences of working intentionally with children to encourage their growth, development, and learning, the diversity of services evident in the interviews was not fully focused on the education of young children. Shared understanding and shared language came later with what I have come to understand as the 'educationalisation of early childhood'.

I have argued elsewhere that the successful educationalisation of early childhood was the result of successful political lobbying in the late 1980s (Stover, 2011, 2013, 2016). However, it started at least a decade earlier through the combined efforts of academics, trade unionists, and feminists who shared a vision for quality childcare services as a social justice issue for women, especially working women. Many of those interviewed and whose perspectives are included in this paper were part of those political and tumultuous years. Some were still involved in the early 21st century when the professionalisation of the e.c. sector was guided from 2002 by a 10-year strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002). This opened the sector for considerable expansion, especially in commercial childcare, and for greater and more intensive participation by children – especially through provision of 20 hours per week of free e.c.e. for children aged 3 and 4 years old (Education Counts, 2017).

Collectively, the changes that the participants described can be understood as evidence of how early childhood has been 'educationalised' (Stover, 2011, 2016).

'Educationalisation' is a broad construct which is used by educational sociologists and educational historians interested in how social agendas become evident in the classroom and how that process is experienced and understood by those affected – especially teachers and children (Depaepe, 1998; Depaepe, Herman, Surmont, van Gorp, & Simon, 2008; Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008).

Educationalisation can be recognised in:

- the normalising of children as 'students';

- the creation of a 'science' of teaching/learning both in terms of a curriculum and in terms of the ways centres are established and managed; and

- the promotion of the education as a way to solve social problems.

I argue that all three aspects of educationalisation are evident in the recent history of early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The first two aspects have brought increasing numbers of New Zealand children into state-sanctioned and regulated spaces with the purpose of being educated in ways that are broadly within the 'science' of how best to 'teach' young children. Early childhood teachers have multiple accountabilities – not only for compliance with state-determined regulations, but also the ethical care of other people's children, and the safe return of those children to their parents. The third aspect of educationalisation can be seen in the promotion of e.c.e. as key to promoting broad goals, such as expanding the economy, enabling working parents to maintain employment and careers, as well as countering child poverty (see for example, ECE Taskforce, 2011; OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007).

Interestingly, amongst those researching educationalisation, 'discourse analysis' is not regarded as an appropriate research tool, with Depaepe (1998) advocating for scholars to look for understanding within the historic context. He called this "immanent theorising" and dismissed discourse analysis of historic material as "intrusive" (p. 22). However, while aligning this research within the broad construct of 'educationalisation', I am using the concept of 'discourses' to help explain the themes that came out of the historic research. My goal here is to position the historic material within a framework that can be considered by contemporary readers. I use the term 'discourse' to mean an interconnected set of ideas which is evident in shared language and is reinforced by political and social agendas. These in turn privilege outcomes – e.g., behaviours, policies – that reinforce those ideas. This definition of discourse is broadly in line with how it is used by Foucault (1979) and by early childhood researchers, including Smith (2014) and Gibson, Cumming, and Zollo (2016).

In analysing the research participants' working theories on risk and safety, I suggest that there are at least three discourses evident:

- a sociocultural discourse reflecting assumptions about what is desirable for children in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand;

- a professional discourse reflecting the expectations, requirements and accountabilities placed on early childhood settings, and especially on teachers; and finally

- an existential discourse that reflects widely held rational and irrational shared fears.

These will be discussed later in this paper.

Defining safety

Defining safety is one of the first problematic areas in researching and writing about safety. Sullivan (2009) proposed that current understandings of safety, especially in the context of education, is an all-encompassing state of "being protected against all harm including physical, spiritual emotional, political and psychological harm" (p. 49).

In the material world – such as in an early childhood outdoor area – risks can be listed. Sandseter (2007) identifies six broad areas of risk in such a setting. All of these require some degree of risk management both in terms of playground construction, and also in terms of teacher interventions:

- height (with the possibility of falling);
- speed (with the possibility of collision);
- dangerous elements (with the possibility of falling into water, or falling because of rocks);
- 'rough and tumble' (with possibility of injury to self or others);
- dangerous tools (with the possibility of injury to self or others); and finally
- seclusion (spaces beyond the surveillance of adults and the possibility of inappropriate or undesirable behaviours).

Each of these areas of risk has the possibility of accidents and injury, as well as opportunities for children to exercise agency in managing fear and danger. Little (2015b) suggests that the drive to take risks is innate, and Stephenson (2003) maintains that where no risk is offered, children will create their own risky situations. Further, Wyver et al. (2010) maintain that hypervigilance about safety can lead to 'surplus safety' in which safety is overemphasised. They argue that this results in children missing out on "important developmental experiences without access to play opportunities (physical development, as well as social, intellectual and emotional development). Children are now more likely to become overweight or obese, and to develop a range of health problems related to inactivity" (p. 263).

Because I see safety as both an objective (measurable) judgement as well as a subjective assessment (reflecting professional, personal, and emotional awareness), my working definition of 'safety' is as *a situation in which dangers are assessed as being sufficiently managed*.

This definition suggests that safety can be illusory. I argue that danger (in whatever form) is always present and can be sensed (rather than be fully understood) by an individual. Inherent in this view of safety is the assumption of a judgement: that something is 'safe' is a judgement in a particular context. Because early childhood teachers are required to make judgements about safety, they are positioned in the centre of safety conundrums.

This is well illustrated by a reflective question put to me by Pat Hubbard. Drawing on decades of experience in early childhood settings, she asked me:

> No matter how careful you are, you can't totally avoid accidents. So how hard should we try?

This paper is an attempt to answer that question.

Research findings

When asked to talk about 'play', and especially 'free play', the participants in the initial study all recognised play as one key aspect of what was understood to be what children should be doing in their early years, especially prior to starting school. 'Free play,' they agreed, was effectively the curriculum for early childhood services before the creation of an education-focused national system of regulation in 1989 and then the publication of a national curriculum in 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996). (For further information, see May, 2009; Stover, 2011.)

Something has changed

Unprompted, those interviewed also all talked about safety and about how ideas had changed about what was safe for children to do. Their reflections extended beyond early childhood settings; several spoke of the responsibilities given to young children in a previous generation which would no longer be understood as safe. They gave examples such as four-year olds caring for younger siblings, or going to a local shop to purchase household supplies (e.g., a bottle of milk).

Because she was the only surviving child in her family, Ailsa Densem explained that she was given little space to explore beyond her mother's gaze. However, most other participants in this study remembered prolonged episodes of under-supervised childhood activity with minimal parental or adult surveillance. This was often because of the size of a family (older siblings often cared for younger siblings; mothers were often very busy), and also because of the physical spaces where young children were allowed to roam.

Barbara Chapman recalled her childhood in semi-rural Canterbury:

> My mother let us take a lot of risks, really. She only drew the line when my brother lit a fire on top of the hayshed under some pine trees. That was just too much for her!

Others had similar stories:

> We had the most fantastic time, climbing trees, digging in the ground, wriggling on our tummies through long grass and all sorts of other things – and, as I say, we were left for hours, no one paying much attention to us except perhaps when we were chasing the chooks. (Anne Meade)

> We had a respect for danger…. We had our own bush, you know, and we had our own valleys, and our roads and things like that…. Oh, we had a ball, you know. And we played out there for hours until our mother called us in. (Kahuwaeru Katene)

In contrast, in their observations of families in contemporary New Zealand, participants saw families had become much smaller and there were far fewer opportunities for children to test their abilities physically and socially beyond the surveillance of adults:

> We used to let them muck about for ages before we'd go check on them. Now you go and check on kids – yeah, there's surveillance over them. They in turn … they're turning around to look and reference you an awful lot more. (Anne Meade)

> Children lead pretty regimented lives really…. I do think there is pressure on parents to have these children as far on as they can be before school because that is going to advantage them the most. And they do that through the various things they choose to have their children involved in. (Val Burns)

In the context of early childhood settings, several participants expressed concerns of "over-regimenting." They suggested this was the result of both institutional efficiencies and concerns for safety, the restrictions on children's physically active play being only one example. As another participant suggested, these can lead towards a "mechanistic" childhood arising from management decisions to group children in narrow age bands, within relatively small spaces and with limited access to the outdoors. For several participants, the existing standards for outside space were inadequate or "questionable" at best.

Similarly, while several spoke of the restrictions on children's access to "real tools" and "real experiences," especially outside the early childhood setting, Val Burns spoke of how lucky New Zealand children were to have outdoor space, and to live in a society with the Accident Compensation Commission providing a national compulsory no-fault accident insurance system.

Alongside the changes, participants also noted continuity. Reflection on early childhood services in the 1950s and 1960s also brought memories of how difficult it was to regularly make available all the expected 'areas of play' – particularly water and carpentry. Reasons? Usually it was the wet clothes and the mess involved in water play for families who did not yet have automatic washing machines, but also because of the perception that these activities needed extra supervision in order to be 'safe'. They could be seen as potentially dangerous, particularly in mixed age services with infants moving through the outside areas. Water troughs had to be high enough that infants could not easily tumble in, and carpentry tools (and nails) had to be kept away from infants.

Accidents

Although none of the research participants advocated for accidents as such, they did see accidents as an inevitable part of children's lives. They were not encouraging adults to be reckless with young children's well-being, and some appreciated how safe fall surfaces in playgrounds had replaced the earlier widespread use of concrete under outdoor play equipment. However, several spoke strongly about the power of an accident for children to viscerally understand fear and danger. These can be found, as Noreen Moorhouse listed, throughout the areas of play in an early childhood setting where children meet the possibility of having accidents:

> …from hammers to knives on dough tables, to saws, to climbing trees to swinging on other things or making a swing and finding it comes to bits – it's a vital part of learning.

Three participants independently offered a 'allow it now, or regret it later' working theory about children and risk taking, namely, that allowing young children to encounter dangers will give them not only a visceral experience of managing fear and risk, but also experience of dealing with the aftermath. When children are denied opportunities to meet and manage real risk, the result can be a craving for risk during adolescence when the outcomes could be much more dangerous. This, they each said, will have paybacks during adolescence when the drive to take risks is likely to increase and the dangers are higher stakes.

An example of this thinking came from Noreen Moorhouse:

> My own view is that the reason I – as an ordinary John Citizen these days, which is what I am – have to put up with silly idiots going and doing donuts on the road with fast cars when they are about 16, is because they haven't learned to master danger.

What do children learn through accidents? According to Pat Penrose, accidents teach:

> …how to take care of yourself; how to make sure that you're safe; what do you do when you're in pain and in an emergency; caring for others who might have had an accident or be in pain. Because sooner or later in your life, that's going to happen; and again it's a set of skills you can learn quite early.

There was a broad agreement amongst the participants that young children require physical activity which has inherent risks; however:

> If you take all the risks away, then it isn't challenging. And then they don't extend themselves physically, they don't learn to balance and to make judgement… (Pat Hubbard)

> If we inhibit our children from (ever having accidents) then we inhibit the skills they learn. Which makes them more accident prone. (Trish Gargiulo)

> They are never going to know what is too high if they haven't tried jumping off things of different heights. Just telling them is not going to convince them anyway. (Barbara Chapman)

The participants in this research project saw accidents as a key part of how children learn about risks, danger and how to look after themselves. Long term, Val Burns said, children who are allowed to take risks early in their lives are less likely to have accidents later on, "because they've always been in charge of their own safety."

Several pointed to a cautious mindset amongst early childhood teachers leading to the paradoxical situation that children are themselves less safe. As Trish Gargiulo observed:

> The less children are exposed to (physical active risk taking) situations, the more vulnerable they are going to be and therefore it becomes self-fulfilling. See?

Why are children encouraged to 'play it safe'? The participants came up with a range of reasons, including the institutional nature of early childhood settings, and the assumption of negligence on the part of the teacher if there's an accident. In addition, there was thought to be a connection between what parents had experienced in their own childhoods.

Several participants wondered if the size of the family affected how much risk-taking a parent can tolerate in their children. The larger the family, they suggested, the more tolerance of risk taking. As Beverley Morris explained, when there are only one or two children in a family, there could be more emotional investment in each one and that those parents have "all their eggs in one basket" so they supervise more, restrict more, and lay on more expectations of each child.

For some participants, the changes in attitudes to children's play reflected shifts in international movements towards higher efficiency and accountability within organisations, as well a desire to protect the child from a dangerous world. As Pat Hubbard suggested:

> We have been infected by the American obsession about safety and risk. The world is beginning to be seen as a totally dangerous place where awful things happen to people all the time.

Another suggestion was that parental attempts to limit children's activities can reflect the difficulties of being a reliable employee. A child's illness or accidents ripple beyond the child and his/her parents potentially affecting a parent's workplace. Another suggestion was that parental restrictions on their children may also reflect anxiety arising from violence in the media. Parental anxiety, and the basis for a litigious engagement over minor accidents, was also being fed by the requirement to document all accidents. As Lynda Boyd said, a minor accident can become a "big deal".

Discussion

The boundaries on safety measures are problematic. Managing risk inherently involves managing danger, so removing all dangers should eliminate risk. Yet too much safety – what is sometimes called 'surplus safety' (Wyver et al., 2010) – can also be seen as dangerous, for two main reasons. One is that "a climate of surplus safety negatively impacts on the rights of children and their growth, development and quality of life" (Wyver et al., 2010, p. 245). The other is that adults responsible for children may assume that an environment is 'totally safe' and therefore they may not be prepared for children who seek out ways to explore an environment in dangerous ways (see for example Stephenson, 2003).

This may reflect in part Ann Pairman's (2011/2012) argument that physical environments and their pedagogical importance have been positioned in a "blind spot within e.c.e. discourses" (p. 21). She proposes that the physical environment, instead of taking centre stage within e.c. pedagogies, is relegated to the regulations which set minimum standards. It is another question whether the regulations set a high enough physical environment for children; however, recent commentators maintain that they do not, with a veteran e.c. teacher observing that:

> Although some early learning environments met the regulations, they clearly did not meet children's needs…. I saw confident capable thinkers develop strategies to solve their problems. Biting, hitting, aggressive shouting, knocking over furniture; these children needed space, physically, mentally and emotionally and they created it. Children were hurting and being hurt. (Mitchell, 2018, p. 25)

Looking back, all of the research participants could see changes impacting on children, their families, and on early childhood teachers. They saw safety as growing in importance both in children's home contexts, and in what happened in early childhood settings. Somehow children's access to play, and especially physically risky opportunities to play, was seen as compromised.

Alongside this, several participants also proposed that children were seen as less robust, less capable, 'too precious', in the sense that they could be easily damaged, and that they were less resilient. This aligns with Smith's (2014) discursive positioning of safety:

> Within discourses of childhood safety, the adult is able to make rational and coherent decisions about the people, places and practices that a child can engage with and remain safe. For the child, she learns and takes up practices of safety unconsciously. These discourses of childhood safety draw on Western ideas of childhood that depict the singular image of the child as innocent, at 'risk' of being hurt by people and/or the environment and in need of protection from these risks. (p. 524)

Basic to this is the need to contain a child (e.g., within fenced environments) and to keep them under the watchful eye of a responsible adult. In Smith's (2014) work with Australian 3- and 4-year olds, this is how children understood 'safety'. This is illustrated by the child who recognises that it is unsafe for her to be outside in an early childhood centre without an adult present. Smith recognises this as 'self-surveillance' and queries how this self-limiting behaviour affects a child's capacity to explore environments and to assess risk for themselves.

Taking discussion of safety a step further, Tovey (2014) suggests there is danger in safety, and advocates for 'safe enough' environments:

> An environment that is as safe as possible, where all possible sources of risk or harm are removed, is actually an unsafe environment because it offers little value in terms of play and learning and denies children the necessary experience to develop and practice the skills to be safe…. Instead of promoting a 'safe' environment, we should focus on creating an environment that is 'safe enough' for children to act on, transform, seek out challenges, and take risks. (cited in Curtis & Carter, 2015, p. 277)

In analysing the research participants' reflections on safety-related themes, three different emphases became evident, all of which can be understood as distinct discourses, yet with the potential for overlap. Three discourses of safety that I propose are:

- a sociocultural discourse reflecting assumptions about what is desirable for children in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand;

- a professional discourse reflecting the expectations and requirements – but also challenges – placed on early childhood settings, and especially on teachers; and finally,

- an existential discourse that reflects rational and irrational shared fears.

These are discussed in some detail below.

A sociocultural discourse

Four major themes point towards a sociocultural discourse that influences 'safety' in Aotearoa New Zealand. The first is the New Zealand history of children and childhood which has multiple strands, but one prominent one in this research is the historic image of the 'wild child' – the child given freedom to explore, although equally likely also expected to take major responsibility; one perhaps compensating for the other. Prochner (2009) found evidence of this in colonial New Zealand – both a celebration of the health that such a childhood could bring, and also a fear that a colonial child – a British child on New Zealand soil – would 'go bush'.

The second theme relates to the artefacts of historical childhood which were referred to during the interviews. These included experiences of free play in early childhood settings, the opportunity for children to show and successfully act on their preferences, but also engaging in under-regulated space to explore. The participants recalled access to sand, water and trees. Dangerous tools – especially knives and carpentry tools – are also evidenced.

The third theme is a more general image of a 'Kiwi' as being a self-sufficient problem solver. Beverley Morris referred to this as "number 8 fencing wire mentality": that a New Zealander does not expect an easy life, but rather expects to creatively problem solve with available resources (Boshier, 2002). Assessing risk and challenge are inherent in this.

In addition, several participants suggested that as New Zealanders, children should have meaningful access to natural resources. For example, Anne Meade said:

> What we value as New Zealanders – the whole beach phenomenon and the great big sandpits and so on – is about the social stuff as well as the infinite possibilities for exploring the physical properties of those materials. I think that it's quite important for us in New Zealand – the beach culture and bush.

To some extent, this discourse also contains a 'nostalgia' discourse in which an older generation looks back to their own experiences and compares those experiences with what they see as currently happening for children. A nostalgia discourse is highly subjective, often emotional, and is evident in the popular media (see for example, Foote, 2015). It is also evident in the stories told by the participants in this research. I'll restrict myself to one example to illustrate this: Ailsa Densem, who worked for decades in both parenting education and as a successful advocate for adventure playgrounds, struggled to accept that both areas appeared to be rolled back by concerns for safety, and because, she thought, changes in how play was understood. Looking out into her neighbourhood, she also saw fewer children at play, and wondered why?

> I can remember … saying to mum and dad after dinner, 'Can I go out and play?' Play was something great. And we'd meet. It was semi-rural and there were empty sections which later had government houses on. And it had poplar saplings, and we had great fun in the sunset time of the day – hiding. And I can remember playing hide and seek and meeting with the other children; the social importance of play was realised then.

A fourth theme relates to the responsibilities laid on parents in choosing to bear and rear children – there is more judgement about parenting, several participants suggest. Noreen Moorhouse's experiences suggest that modern parents' anxiety may reflect an increased personal responsibility for parenting choices. Unlike earlier generations, the current generation of parents, she said, has had more choices regarding if and when they have babies. Often, they start families later and are well informed about what can go wrong. Knowing what could go wrong was not necessarily an advantage, she mused:

> I think the good Lord meant us to have our children younger because we are not so involved in what might happen to them; we don't have that awareness of what might happen – so (the children) get a more normal, free-flowing upbringing.

A professional discourse

While the creation of the early childhood sector in the late 1980s was seen as a victory for women and children (see Meade, 1990), it was also a victory of advocates for neoliberal approaches to education policy and provision (Codd, 2008; Jesson, 2001; Peters, 2018). With policy makers intent on expanding neoliberal models into the compulsory school sector, early childhood education was to be the first sector to operate within an active commercial marketplace requiring regulation, review, and quality assurance systems of self-auditing and self-surveillance (Jesson, 2001).

For the participants in this research, many had moved into the professionalising early childhood sector during the 1990s, but some did not, moving into retirement instead. Regardless of whether they continued to work or contribute to early childhood education as

it professionalised, the participants recognised professionalisation as bringing with it the "double-edged sword" of government intervention in pursuit of higher standards. In Australia this included the introduction of federal regulations which both facilitated and enhanced e.c.e. professional practice, while "concurrently restricting and damaging it" (Fenech, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2006, p. 52). Early childhood teachers in New Zealand have experienced something similar.

Amongst those interviewed, there was concern about the limited space for physically active play within the constraints of early childhood settings – especially for children in long day services. While the emphasis in this study was on the limitations affecting a child's capacity for assessing risk, there is a wider picture evident in recent research which points to the link between limiting active play and health issues, such as obesity (Little, 2015a,b; McLachlan, 2015).

Another strand within the professional discourse is the challenge of determining what is 'safe' in the context of shifting technologies. This perhaps is the most challenging aspect of claiming that an early childhood setting, for example, is 'safe'. Those research participants with sustained involvement over several decades (at least) in early childhood services were particularly concerned about the way in which technologies of accountability could lead to prioritising documentation above time spent with children. One suggested that documentation of accidents, a requirement for early childhood settings, can have the effect of alarming parents and effectively pathologising accidents, as something that should not happen and from which lessons must be learned. However, children's minor accidents are, in the minds of those interviewed, a normal and necessary part of children's experiences and an acceptable part of what would happen in e.c. services.

Recent changes to New Zealand health and safety laws require judgements about reasonableness and proportionality of risk, alongside accountabilities – potential liabilities for accidents (see for example Dunn, Crotty, Olney, & Campbell, 2016). While the Accident Compensation Commission continues to provide no fault accident insurance, the creation of lines of liability and the implicit threat of prosecution have led to more restrictions in playgrounds, despite assurances from a government minister that these are an "over reaction" (TV1, 2016). This is an area where more research of contemporary early childhood settings is warranted.

An existential discourse of uncertainty and fear

For the participants in this research, managing fear was key to understanding safety and risk. However, this is not something that can be fully managed or regulated.

In 1999, Judith Aitken, a former head of New Zealand's Education Review Office, proposed that safety had become a major "preoccupation" and had expanded beyond previous generations' confidence that being 'safe' could be understood as "being good" or "saying one's prayers" (p. 5). However, she recognised in her lifetime that that which had been understood to be 'safe' – the church, the nation, even one's home – could not be assumed to be safe. This was because "The cant of feminist and ethnic intolerance made private and public enemies of many who had previously been within the pale. But they were clearly symptomatic of the centuries of privatised pain, fear and impotence...." (Aitken, 1999, p. 5).

Similarly, Sullivan (2009) saw parallels between the rise of risk awareness/risk management alongside widespread societal insecurities, including the threat of nuclear war and pollution: "People felt the loss of security at a deep existential level. Given the likelihood of nuclear war could anyone ever be safe?" (p. 49).

In contemporary New Zealand society, the uncertainties of the Anthropocene are identified as having a similar impact on wellbeing and security to the fear that nuclear war had in an earlier generation (Orotaio/New Zealand Climate and Health Council, 2015). As Ritchie (2013) said, "Our reaction to this overwhelming onslaught might be to retreat into our supposedly safe domain as early childhood education practitioners and academics, (to) feel a sense of powerlessness" (p. 23). In the context of what to allow and what to limit, fears can reinforce themselves; fear of accidents can be reinforced by fear of what climate change can mean for these children.

Conclusion

Starting with micronarratives of historic leaders of the early childhood community and their cross-generational observations of, and reflections on, children, their families and teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, this oral history research has attempted to name and analyse three discourses of safety. While the data can be seen as ephemeral – memory can be faulty – the participants' working theories about play and safety resonate with contemporary research, particularly advocacy research which problematises safety when it is seen as unnecessarily restrictive of children's physical exploration and activity.

The question of 'how hard should you try?' to control accidents in e.c.e. remains unanswerable without there also being a context in which to consider the question. Professional early childhood managers have to navigate fears of parental complaint or even litigation for neglect, and in response, may limit opportunities and equipment that encourage children's risk-taking. Day by day in early childhood outdoor settings, professional teachers (who may or may not be trained) have to make sophisticated judgement calls about when to intervene in children's risky play. As such, recognition of the subjective nature of defining 'safety' and recognition that there are multiple discourses evident in that process can open up spaces for professional dialogue.

Assessing 'how much' risk is too much and 'how much' safety is too much brings multiple discourses and professional expertise into a complex conversation about how human beings and human bodies grow, and what responsibility rests with the proximal adults. Broadly speaking, this conversation draws together the diverse perspectives of those coming with expertise in child health and education, alongside designers of playgrounds and urban neighbourhoods, academic domains such as childhood studies, and those who attempt to create policy and regulation governing children's lives. That conversation is far beyond the scope of this research project, but in naming the three discourses, the hope is that those working with young children can start to recognise that what appears simple – 'Safety first' – is, in fact, highly complex.

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