Creating play opportunities on the school playground: Educator experiences of the Sydney

Playground Project

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Abstract

Introduction: Children with disabilities often experience unsupportive environments that restrict their play opportunities and inclusion on the school playground. This exclusion can perpetuate inequities for children with disabilities, with lifelong implications. The Sydney Playground Project uses a simple, innovative intervention consisting of placing recycled materials on the playground and engaging parents and educators in risk reframing sessions to create increased playground choice, control, independence, and inclusion for all children.

Methods: The purpose of this study was to learn from participants about the utility of the intervention for promoting choice and control among children with disability on the school playground. Data included evaluative interviews with 27 school staff (teaching assistants, teachers, therapists, school leadership) across five participating schools after completing of the intervention. Analysis was thematic and explored prominent ideas first within schools, and then between schools.

Results: Prior to the intervention, participating school staff focused on active supervision to support play and student needs. During the intervention, school staff experienced role shift and confusion as they allowed the children increased independence while using the recycled materials and learned to navigate how much independence to give the children. Children engaged in increased imaginative and social play, and school staff adopted higher expectations of children's capabilities.

Conclusion: Interventions such as the Sydney Playground Project that collaboratively shift adult perceptions to focus on the capabilities of children with disabilities and increase the supportiveness of the physical environment have great promise in increasing play choice and inclusion on the school playground.

Introduction

Outdoor play affords children opportunities to develop independence, self-determination, and physical skills (Stephenson, 2003), and foster a sense of well-being and belonging (Bundy et al., 2008; Lyons, Brennan, & Carroll, 2016). The inclusion of loose materials, opportunities for risk, and unstructured time can increase the inclusivity of play (Barbour, 1999; Bundy et al., 2008). The placement of recycled loose materials (e.g., tyres, crates, and barrels) on a playground space increases opportunities for physical activity, construction, and imaginative play, and decreases sedentary time (Engelen et al., 2013; Woolley & Lowe, 2013). Increased choice created by loose materials supports greater participation for children with delayed motor skills (Barbour, 1999). Risks in play are fun for children and afford them opportunities to develop self-confidence, and an understanding of their boundaries (Sandseter, Little, & Wyver, 2012). Despite these benefits, caregivers of children with disabilities can perceive that their children have insufficient skill or impulse control to take appropriate risks in play, and restrict risky play opportunities (Olsen, Kruse, Miller, & Brussoni, 2016). Consequently, while typically developing children may be constrained in the developmentally appropriate risks in which they are allowed to participate (Wyver et al., 2010), children with disabilities may be even further restricted (Bundy et al., 2015).

Outdoor play that is structured by children rather than adults affords opportunities for mastery (Missiuna & Pollock, 1991; Sandseter, 2012), self-initiation (Stagnitti, 2004), skill

development, confidence, and risk evaluation (Little, 2010). These opportunities are

infrequently available to children with disabilities (Missiuna & Pollock, 1991). Adults directing

playground activities can lead to peers engaging less with children with disabilities (Giangreco,

Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Tamm & Skär, 2000), and children with disabilities not

being afforded a break from structured forms of learning during the school day (Ramstetter,

Murray, & Garner, 2010).

The 9% of children with disabilities in Australia are five times more likely than non-

disabled peers to experience multiple and entrenched disadvantage in resources and participation

across areas of occupation, including play (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW),

2006; Emerson & Llewellyn, 2013). Despite Australia's ratification of the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN General Assembly, 2006) and the

development of policies and services related to disability, such as the National Disability

Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the gaps in participation and resources between young people with

disability and their typically developing peers continue to widen (Tracy & Mcdonald, 2015).

Negative beliefs and attitudes restrict opportunities for people with disabilities across community

occupations (Emerson & Llewellyn, 2013). Disability stigma and low expectations are prevalent

in the school environment (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). Children with disabilities are

often perceived as less capable than other children (Baker & Donelly, 2001; Emerson &

Llewellyn, 2013). Indeed, educator perceptions of children with disabilities is a key challenge to

inclusion in Australian schools (Anderson & Boyle, 2015). Awareness of the exclusionary

culture in mainstream schools is one of the main reasons many Australian parents opt for special

schools rather than mainstream settings (Mann, Cuskelly, & Moni, 2018).

The school playground can be a time during the day for children to build skills, and have increased choice, independence, and inclusion (Murray et al., 2013). However, a negative perception of the abilities of children with disabilities persists on the playground, restricting inclusion in play (Sterman, Naughton, Bundy, Froude, & Villeneuve, 2018). Meaningful interventions that aim to increase choice, control, and inclusion of children with disabilities on the playground must tackle widespread and ingrained attitudes toward all children with disability. This requires innovative strategies that change the attitudinal environment of the school, including focusing on the capabilities of children with disabilities, rather than their deficits.

Purpose

This paper reports on school staff experiences of the Sydney Playground Project (See Bundy et al., 2015 for protocol). The Sydney Playground Project intervention included two components. The first component was the introduction of recycled loose materials with no obvious play value on the school playground (e.g., tyres, milk crates, tubes, barrels). Items were selected that 1) encouraged cooperative, gross motor play; 2) had multiple uses; 3) could be used in challenging, creative, and uncertain ways; 4) provided interesting sensory experiences (e.g., from touch or movement); 5) allowed any hazards inherent to the materials to be easily be identified and managed by a child; and 6) were, or were made from, recycled materials.

The second aspect of the intervention were collaborative 'risk re-framing workshop sessions' conducted with educators and parents to enable them to support children with and without disabilities to have increased independence in manageable risk taking. As a key part of the intervention, school staff were instructed to 'step back' and see what the children did with the materials, rather than warning them about dangers or directing play. The purpose of this study

was to learn from participating school staff about the utility of the intervention for promoting choice and control among children with disability on the school playground.

Relevance for Occupational Therapy

School-based occupational therapy intervention in Australia, Canada, and the United States predominantly focus on fine and gross-motor skills, sensory integration, activities of daily living, and family and teacher training in a direct service model (Bayona, McDougall, Tucker, Nichols, & Mandich, 2006; Rodger, Brown, & Brown, 2005; Spencer, Turkett, Vaughan, & Koenig, 2006). Although collaboration has been recommended as a more holistic and effective delivery method for school-based occupational therapy services for a number of years (Bundy, 1995; Villeneuve, 2009), little change has occurred in service delivery in Australia. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with disabilities guarantees an inclusive school environment throughout the school day (UN General Assembly, 2006). However, schools must determine how they will support inclusion. To address this mandate, occupational therapists can serve as leaders in collaboratively enabling choice, control, and inclusion at school for people with disabilities (Russi, 2014). Collaborative practices that bring families and educators together to enhance environments for children with disabilities through capacity building have demonstrated positive outcomes for children (Missiuna et al., 2012; Villeneuve & Shulha, 2012), and can increase teacher self-efficacy at implementing inclusive practices (Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, & Malinen, 2012).

Collaborative interventions demonstrate potential to focus on children's school occupations, and their role as a student, rather than remediation of impairments (Villeneuve & Hutchinson, 2015). Occupational therapists can take a leading role in strengths-based

interventions to enable choice and participation across the school day (Eriksson, Welander, & Granlund, 2007).

Play as an occupation is seldom a focus of school-based occupational therapy (Rodger et al., 2005), and school-based playground interventions rarely focus on the occupation of play (Lang et al., 2011; Machalicek et al., 2009; Martin, Drasgow, & Halle, 2015). The playground is a unique and vital space where children can develop independence, exercise choice and control, and learn to manage risk through play (Murray et al., 2013). However, educators and therapists underutilise the opportunity to leverage the playground as a space for learning and development for children with disabilities (Sterman et al., 2018).

Innovation that brings therapists and educators together to create opportunities to develop children's choice, control, independence, and ultimately inclusion at school supports national and international priorities (May et al., 2018; United Nations, 2006). Occupational therapists' unique skills in modifying environments, understanding play, and school collaboration strategically place the profession in potential leadership roles for creating inclusive spaces on school playgrounds (Bundy et al., 2008; Missiuna et al., 2012).

Methods

Approach

We engaged in evaluative inquiry following the intervention period at each of the participating schools. We followed the core attributes of evaluation quality including: utility, feasibility, acceptability, propriety, and accuracy (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). Participating school staff included teaching assistants, teachers, therapists, and school leadership (Vice Principal, Principal, School Coordinators) (see Table 1).

Table 1: School profiles

School	Funding type	Student population	Students age (years)	Playground environment	Participant school staff roles	Number of students	Supervision (staff:student)
School 1	Independent educational system and private funding	Children with mild to moderate intellectual disability and/or autism	5-12	• Fixed playground equipment • Musical equipment • A large grassy hill	• 2 special education teachers • 1 teaching assistant	70	1:23
School 2	Private	Children with autism	5-12	• Fixed equipment • A sandpit • A trampoline	• 4 special education teachers • 1 occupational therapist	52	1:2
School 3	Partially funded by the state government	Children with autism	5-12	• Fixed equipment • Soft equipment	• 1 school coordinator (site lead) • 3 special education teachers • 1 teaching assistant • 1 occupational therapist • 1 speech and language pathologist	30	1:6
School 4	Government	Mainstream school, 3 classes for children with intellectual disabilities and/or autism	5-12	• Basketball/netball court • Large grassy fields • A canteen • Covered area with benches	• 1 principal • 1 deputy principal • 4 general education teachers* • 2 special	280	1:30

		on the playground			education teachers* • 1 teaching assistant		
School 5	Partially funded by the state government	Children with autism	5-17	• Fixed equipment • A pool during hot weather • Bikes/trikes • Soft equipment	• 1 school coordinator (site lead) • 1 special education teacher	35	1:3
*one special education teacher and one general education teacher were also assistant principals							

Ethics

University of Sydney Human Ethics Administration (protocol # 2014/155) and the State

Education Research Applications Process (SERAP) approved this study. To protect anonymity,

we used pseudonyms and removed school identifying details.

Schools

We included the five schools participating in the Sydney Playground Project. The schools

included four special schools for children with disabilities, and one publicly funded mainstream

school with three specialist support classes for children with developmental disabilities. The

schools were heterogeneous in: geographic location within a major metropolitan area in

Australia; types of playground; perspectives on recess; types of school funding; student

socioeconomic status; and parent education, and cultural and linguistic background (Table 1).

Roles differed between schools. For example, School 1 did not use teaching assistants within

their classrooms or on the playground, and School 4 was the only school with general education

students and teachers. With the introduction of the play materials, School 4 created a roster

system that specified that the loose materials were accessible for children with disabilities every

day, and on a rotating basis for other grade years. With this exception, none of the schools used

zoning, thus all children within the school could play at the same time, anywhere on the

playground, each day.

Participants

Schools and leadership consented to participate in the Sydney Playground Project. Following

completion of the study, we invited school staff who had participated in the intervention to be

interviewed about their experiences. School leadership knowledge of the school staff supported

identifying differing perspectives and experiences. When possible, we sought a diversity of participants through differing roles, length of time employed at the school, and experiences and opinions of the Sydney Playground Project.

Data collection

To decrease bias, the researchers conducting interviews and analyses of data were not directly involved in the intervention. Data primarily consisted of semi-structured individual interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Across the five schools, 27 school staff participated in interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional service. Interviews resulted in 315 pages of transcripts.

The first author conducted interviews within 1 month of the conclusion of the intervention with each of the participants. The interview guide focused on the Sydney Playground Project and 1) school staff perception of the utility of the play materials, 2) school staff learning from risk-reframing to guide development of future interventions, 3) perceived student changes (if any) 4) changes (if any) in school staff perceptions of the children's play, and 5) overall perceptions of risk on the playground. Team feedback regarding playground observations informed some questions asked within interviews. For example, knowledge that staff removed certain materials from the playground prompted follow-up questions about the challenges or risks inherent in those materials. Additionally, the research team's awareness of dynamics within the risk reframing session also informed interview questions. For example, in some schools, no parents participated in the risk reframing sessions. The first author asked participants within these schools about the challenges and the potential benefits associated with parent participation in the sessions specifically, and school workshops in general.

Data analysis

Consistent with our evaluative stance, the questions we asked of the data for initial data reduction were strengths focused. They were 1) "What did the participants gain from the intervention?" and 2) "How could the intervention be improved?". Data were managed using NVivo version 10.0 (QSR International, 2012). The first and second author first discussed coding within samples of several interviews for coding consistency. Next, we considered each school individually. The first author coded all data within half the schools, and the second author coded all the data in the other half of the schools. We compared coding for consistency, with no changes required.

Through peer debriefing we identified prominent ideas for each school, and then explored patterns across schools including similarities and differences. Visual displays of concepts present across schools supported data organisation and conceptualisation to create categories (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). These visual displays identified the interaction between categories of care and support for children, educators' duty of care, perception of the children's abilities, and the introduction of the play materials before, during, and after the intervention (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Finally, through constant interaction between the categories and data we created five themes: (1) accountability to others guides duty of care, (2) active supervision promotes play and pre-empts meltdowns, (3) novelty of the loose parts and direction to step back made supervision less certain, (4) they can, and (5) changed expectations.

We addressed trustworthiness throughout the research process by considering the four concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). We maintained credibility through triangulating data across participants and schools, using visual displays to explore theme connections, and peer debriefing with authors

who had prolonged site engagement. The reader can determine if there is transferability to their

own circumstances through our use of thick descriptions, and description of participating schools

as much as anonymity will allow. Finally, we maintained dependability through documenting the

research process and using an audit trail, and confirmability through documentation of why

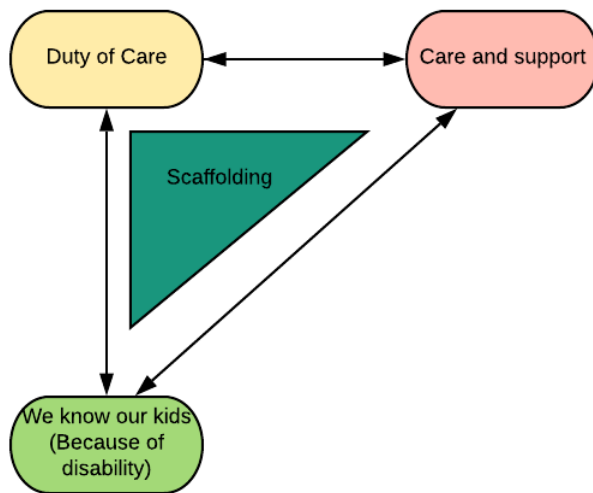theoretical, methodological, and analytical decisions were made.
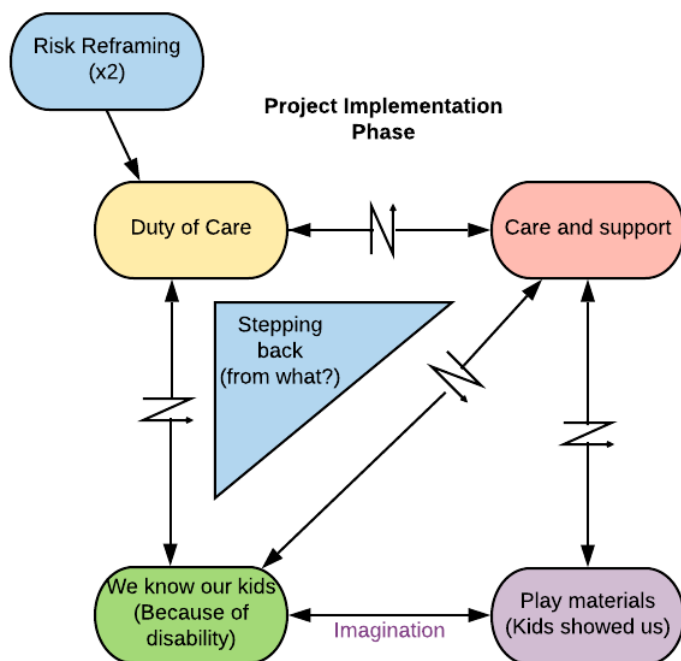

Figure 1: Control visual display

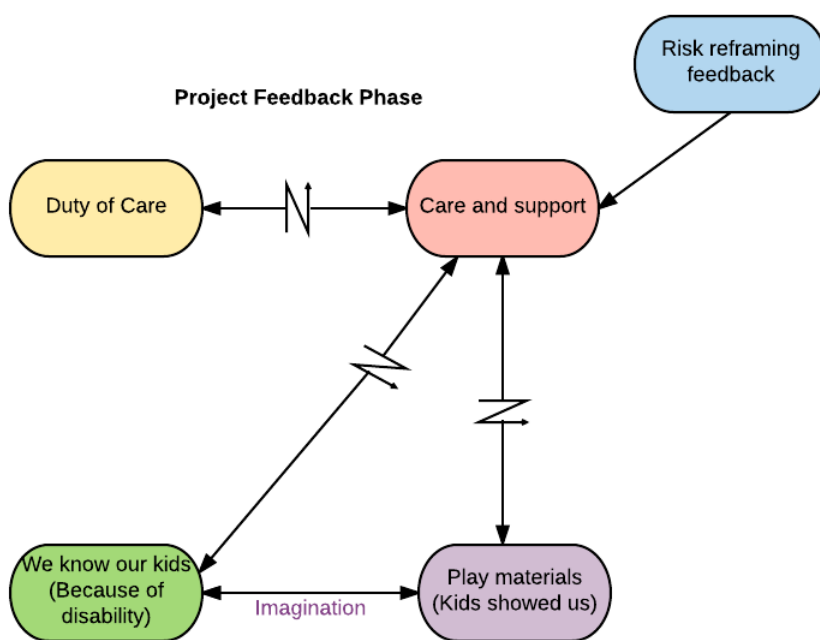Figure 2: Project implementation visual display

Figure 3: Project feedback visual display

Results

The themes are organised in a continuum across time, from concepts and actions that participants considered at the start of the intervention to shifts in thinking and actions with the introduction of the intervention.

Accountability to Others Guides Duty of Care

Participants' actions on the playground were limited by their accountability to the children, their parents, and other educators, and how their actions were perceived by others. Participants reported that "keeping students safe" guides all aspects of child supervision at school, but is especially prominent on the playground. "You always have duty of care that takes precedence over everything... I'm accountable to myself in one respect; I'm also accountable to parents. If something happened to a child that would be something I would have to live with" (Stephanie, Teacher, School 1). Teachers expressed professional accountability as paramount to their duty of care, even when they personally valued allowing children to take risks. For example,

> I know people have said, "What's the worst that could happen? He falls and he breaks his arm." But if he fell and broke his arm, we would be in trouble from parents; we would be in trouble from supervisors. So we would not let him do that. ….You do have the most fun when you're taking risks, but we still have duty of care. (Jill, Teacher, School 3)

Participants attributed the children's ability to judge risk on the playground to their disability, which, in turn, influenced teacher understanding about their duty of care and their supervision tactics for children they viewed as 'vulnerable.'

> There is already a reasonably high level of acceptance of risk-taking, but it is definitely balanced with a real understanding that our staff have a duty of care to the students, and they mustn't let them do something where they're going to get hurt. Particularly [these]

children who are more vulnerable may not understand the consequences of unsafe actions

that they undertake. It is a real mindset and it does limit risk-taking. (Sarah, School

Coordinator, School 5)

Active Supervision Promotes Play and Pre-empts Meltdowns

Because of their perceived accountability to others, participants described taking an active role in

playground supervision. Describing safety issues present on the playground and narrating options

was one way that participants sought to raise awareness and support student learning about risk.

For example, Katie, a teacher at School 2, recounted, I always try and explain why it is that I'm

asking them not to do it. Like, "Look you can see there's a really sharp piece of glass, so we

really probably shouldn't play over here. Let's play somewhere else." Similarly, Stephanie, a

teacher at School 1 narrated her actions when thinking about risk and play.

> Where we did have to step in, sometimes it wasn't taking away equipment; it was
>
> modelling how to use it in a more appropriate manner. There were times when it seemed
>
> more appropriate just to say, "Well, if we use it like this, everybody can be safe," and just
>
> showing them. Most of the time those children would go, "okay, we'll do that then."
>
> …There are times when some of our students can make those decisions about equipment,
>
> but there are a number of students out there that can't do that.

Participants engaged their knowledge about individual children to anticipate and manage

potential playground conflict. Often, participants described using supervisory tactics to support

children struggling to manage their emotions and prevent actions of other children that might

lead to 'meltdowns'. Emma, a teacher at School 2, stated that, "There are times that I'll step in

because I know it's going to cause a meltdown. Because I can see what's going to happen 20

minutes down the track." Educators used their knowledge of the child and their previous

meltdowns to inform actions.

> All our kids meltdown differently. Some of them, we can just give them a quiet corner
>
> and they're fine, other kids will hit every single kid. We have one child, who things
>
> can go wrong and he'll be fine. Then 5 or 10 minutes later he just loses it. So with him
>
> we are always walking on eggshells because if things happen we always [think], "Where
>
> does he need to be now? Does he need to be in soft swing on his own? Should we get the
>
> kids out?" (Margaret, Teacher, School 3)

Educators took an active role on the playground to support play; taking into consideration

the children's characteristics, including their deficits. Mike, a teacher at School 2, stated, "We're

their play partners because we find that they tend not to acknowledge each other. We will initiate

play and we'll invite multiple students into the play, having found that they rarely initiate

themselves." Similarly, Patrick, the school coordinator at School 3 discussed the educators' skill

facilitating and directing play, "We know all of the students really well, so we can engage them

in play that we know what they're most motivated by." Across schools, participants described

that students needed support from educators to engage in play, because the adults knew how

initiate and expand play, and the children did not. Elaine, a teaching assistant at School 1,

described, "I was trying to prompt children to get ideas. If they were sitting there just looking at

me, then I would just start silently doing something and that would draw kids to me and they

would just join in." Without adult intervention and scaffolding, participants reported that many

children would engage in repetitive activities.

> Most of our kids are very good at unstructured activities, [but] it's not play. It tends to be
>
> repetitive movements or speaking, or doing a routine over and over in the playground. If

there's not someone to make something interesting then that's what a lot of our guys will

do. (Katie, Teacher, School 2)

Novelty of the Loose Parts and Direction to Step Back Made Supervision Less Certain

With the introduction of the loose materials, participants experienced role confusion and

uncertainty of their own playground supervision, others' perception of their supervision, and the

aesthetic of their schools' playground. Many participants thought the recycled loose play

materials looked like 'junk', and did not expect the children to engage with them. Margaret, a

teacher at School 3, recounted, "In the beginning I thought 'Oh gosh this looks like a load of

crap.'" Participants often worried how others would perceive the appearance of the materials and

how it would reflect on them and their school. "We just thought that people are walking past our

school all the time. We don't want them to think it's a complete trash heap" (Mike, Teacher,

School 2).

Participants were concerned that the materials were riskier than typical play equipment,

or would be perceived by others as riskier. Patrick, the school coordinator at School 3,

hypothesized that, "Because [the fixed equipment] is an accepted object, people don't really think

about that as a risk," while the novelty of the loose materials made supervision less certain. The

fact that the materials were loose, unfamiliar, and without a defined function made them seem

riskier to participants. Nathan, the principal at School 4, described potential parental perceptions

of risk with the materials.

If we rang to say that a 6-year-old fell off the tyre stack, the first thing the parent would

say is, "What on earth were you doing with a tyre stack?" Where if it was, "They tripped

in the playground," there would be no question.

Participants were accustomed to anticipating children's needs, actively supervising their play, and managing playground risks. The introduction of loose materials was accompanied by instruction by the research team (at the start of the intervention phase) to step back and see what the children could do on their own with the loose materials.

Participants had difficulty consistently interpreting and understanding how to act on the message to 'step back' on the playground that they heard during risk reframing. They experienced role confusion and an uncertainty in knowing what they 'should' do on the playground. Claire, a Speech Language Pathologist at School 3 described, "[The teachers] were trying not to model or get in too much with the students if they were interacting with [the loose materials], because they weren't really sure what they could do, or what level of modelling they could provide." Participants felt torn between wanting to comply with study expectations, led by a university and researchers that they respected, and their current perceived role expectations, including their duty of care to the children. "There were a few mixed messages about what we were meant to do out there. I kind of stepped back a lot in the playground this year, probably too much" (Mike, Teacher, School 1). Ultimately many participants gained new understandings through the study, but it was coloured by this uncertainty of role and expectations.

The project sought to bring together educators and parents in cross-perspective risk-reframing sessions. When parents were present in the risk reframing sessions, educators experienced greater freedom to allow children independence on the playground. "It was so helpful when the parents said, 'Oh, we understand, kids hurt themselves all the time, it's not a huge concern of ours'" (Molly, OT, School 2). However, this was not always possible due to logistical reasons, school choice, or school's lack of understanding the value of cross-perspective sessions.

I think the most valuable [aspect] was just the conversations that we had about what

would parents say, and what's our experience of what parents say. Although we discussed

that a lot, I still don't think a lot of people got that message through. It would have been a

lot better if we'd had parents there. I think that was a key miss for us. (Patrick, School

Coordinator, School 3)

The mutual understanding of parents and educators in risk-reframing may have mitigated some

fears relating to accountability to parents.

They Can

Participants described that they initially had low expectations of the children's engagement with

the materials because (a) they viewed the materials as 'junk', (b) they were asked to step back

from their usual role in actively supervising and scaffolding (or supporting) play, and (c) they

underestimated the children's imagination. Marissa, a teacher at School 3, recounted, "When I

first saw the playground equipment, I thought, 'the kids are not gonna be interested because it

looks like every day random stuff.' But surprisingly the kids were interested." With the

introduction of the materials, the children, "had to go up there and do imaginative stuff, because

it was junk, right?" (Olivia, Assistant Principal, School 4). Across schools, participants described

their surprise of what these children could do with materials that had no obvious function. "I've

really seen through just random materials, [play] increase ten-fold because the kids have come

up with things I would never have thought of" (Janet, Teacher, School 1). Participants recognised

the utility of the loose materials in supporting the children's imaginative play. Bridget, the

principal at School 1, stated, "It's due to the materials being non-play materials. I just think the

children needed to come up with their own ideas."

The materials also supported peer play. Debra, a special education teacher at School 4 stated, "When I first came, there was no cooperative play, but now they're working together in role play games, using their imaginations, and building block towers together." The materials served as a focal point for children to support each other. Sally, the occupational therapist at School 3, stated, "I think what happened was that some of the children with further developed play skills were kind of dragging the other ones along, but they were really actually enjoying it." Similarly, Mary, an Assistant Principal at School 4, said,

> There's probably five or six key children in there that really struggle to form friendships. That equipment has been marvellous for them because it's given them the opportunity to have something different rather than sit by themselves on the buddy seat hoping that somebody comes over and asks them to play. They've been able to go take that equipment and then, someone says, "Oh, I want that piece, can we play together?"

Across all schools, participants reported that children used their imagination and took initiative with the materials. The imaginative play that children came up with varied. At School 1, Janet described, "I had kids in my class who had the sheet and, built tents with it. One of the girls in my class got a crate and was using the sheet as a volcano." At School 3, Marissa, recounted that she saw, "[a] little boy that was playing cowboys and Indians and hiding behind the crates."

> Towards the end of the project we got a chair, and some big milk crates that were lashed together, so they'd formed a big wall. We had a couple of the students make it into a spaceship and pretend to be blasting off. They were taking turns using the seat as the captain's chair in the rocket. That was some really good imaginative play that I haven't seen on the playground. (Patrick, School Coordinator, School 3)

Changed Expectations

Participants described their surprise at the children's ability to play and negotiate risk when the materials were introduced. "It was definitely interesting to see some of the kids who usually don't engage with our play equipment engaging with something" (Margaret, Teacher, School 3). Recognising the children's abilities gave participants more confidence to step back and allow the children to negotiate uncertain situations.

There were a lot of things that I seriously thought the kids would not be interested in but they were interested in. I think it made us push ourselves a little bit in letting go 'cause we're holding on and keeping them safe. It just made you step back and say, "Okay, they can do it. Just let them do it"…You saw that they do it on their own if you give them the opportunity and not step in and say, "Oh, let me help you," Giving them more independence from us. (Marissa, Teacher, School 3)

With the long noodles, they began using [them] as swords. I'd wait over there and have my heart palpitating going, "Oh my gosh." But until I actually took that step back I [didn't] realise "oh, that's how they play". As long as they're not physically hurting each other they're okay. It's definitely changed the way that I supervise those kids. (Christine, EAL teacher, School 4)

In combination with the instruction to step back, the loose materials were a catalyst for participants to learn from the children about their play capabilities. The research shows the potential for play-based interventions to support tangible shifts in the routine ways that adults supervise children with disabilities on the playground, which in turn, expands opportunities for children to learn and develop through play. Molly, an occupational therapist at School 2,

described that, "[we] saw a lot of really cool stuff happen that we didn't realise those kids would

or could do. So it was really good. And we sort of kept it that way since the [intervention]."

Similarly, Rachel, a teacher, at School 3 stated,

> The project was definitely a good eye opener. It was a good starting point. I think as a
>
> team we need to look at how we can improve [recess] for them and make it such that the
>
> kids initiate play a bit more.

Discussion

Participants constantly balanced their duty of care along with care and support for children with

disabilities on the school playground. This 'very real mindset' required them to adhere to their

roles and responsibilities while also allowing the children to learn through mistakes and problem

solve. Educators decided for children, managed emotional and physical risk, and supported

children's play because they worried about the skill of the individual children and their play

partners, risk, and their own professional accountabilities. Therapists should consider the

constraints and professional accountabilities that educators experience on the school playground

when making recommendations. Therapists seeking to implement risk-reframing sessions should

consider ways to navigate the challenges to cross-perspective sessions such as learning about and

being responsive to: school constraints, parent needs for participation, and ways for the school

community to value collaborative sessions about play.

Children with disabilities are often perceived as incapable of play without direct

intervention (Martin et al., 2015). Similar to previous studies on the school playground (Sterman

et al., 2018), at the start of the current study, a culture of low expectations existed where

educators thought children did not have the skills to manage their emotions or engage in

unsupported play, limiting play choice and control. When adults assess children as being unable

to play without support and thus direct their play more, peers may not view them as valuable

play partners, decreasing play choice or leading to unequal social relationships (Baker &

Donelly, 2001; Richardson, 2002).

      The introduction of the loose parts challenged educators' low expectations. The loose

parts acted as a catalyst to support new understandings of children's abilities and promote play.

Similar to previous research on loose materials (Barbour, 1999; Bundy et al., 2008), the

introduction of the loose materials increased children's choice on the playground. Children

engaged in imaginative, social, and independent play that surprised the educators and challenged

their beliefs about the children's current and potential play skills, ultimately increasing the

children's independence and control.

     Educators often value teaching discrete skills in the classroom and on the playground

(Martin et al., 2015). A shift to stepping back and using the loose materials to support play

challenged the educators' perception of their playground role. They defined their role through

supporting the children, and experienced role loss and adjustment with the instruction to step

back. Educators may have been more confident with allowing independence for children with

disabilities if they better understood the shifting expectations of their playground role. Despite

this uncertainty, children demonstrated previously unseen skills, and the ability to use materials

to develop skills. Additionally, peers scaffolded skills for developmentally younger children

when given the space and materials to engage in play.

Implications/Recommendations

Results from this study indicate that the loose materials, combined with adults stepping back and

letting the children engage on their own, supported children to demonstrate their abilities. The

greater play skills this facilitated led to a positive cycle in which educators allowed increasing

amounts of independence, control, and choice for the children as they demonstrated increasingly better play skills (Figure 4). This low-cost intervention may be a powerful way to shift adult and peer perceptions about children's abilities, reducing inequity, and creating more play opportunities for children with disabilities. Shifting from a deficit focus for children with disabilities to what they are able to do (Valencia, 2010) requires creating more opportunities for children to demonstrate their interests, skills, and value as play partners, such as through loose materials interventions. Occupational therapists are well-positioned to lead collaboration with other professionals across school occupations to increase choice, control, and independence of children with disabilities, supporting others to recognise, value, and support their capabilities.

Figure 4: Increasing play opportunities cycle

Key points for occupational therapy

- Occupational therapists should consider ways to address others' low expectations of children with disabilities on the playground through collaborative interventions.

- The environmental intervention of loose materials can support children with disabilities to play at school.

- Supporting participation through loose parts can also shift adult perceptions of children's capabilities and perceptions of risk.

Declaration of Authorship

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