How and why did outdoor play become a central focus of Scottish Early Learning and Care policy?

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Photos by Nina Howe
Outline of today’s talk

• Background
• Research questions
• Methods
• Preliminary results
• Some conclusions
Outdoor Play Programs: Background

• Importance and value of the outdoor, natural environment
  • Context for children’s active learning and development (e.g., Rousseau, Frobel, Dewey)

• Scandinavian tradition (1950’s & 60’s): forest kindergartens
  • Outdoors: affordances for development
  • Social-constructivist and pedagogical principles
  • Research: benefits for physical, social, motor, cognitive development
Outdoor Play Programs: Background

- Children’s spaces vs spaces for children (Rasmussen, 2004)
  - Informal spaces to connect to environment, learning and exploration
- Concerns with children’s physical and mental health
  - Increased interest in outdoor programs
- Risk management
  - Climb heights, tools, dangerous elements (water, fire)
  - Educators establish rules
Research Questions

1. How and why did outdoor play in the form of Outdoor Nurseries become a focus of Scottish Policy for Early Learning and Care (ELC) programs?

2. How has practice informed policy and vice versa leading to the adoption of outdoor play as a central feature of ELC services in Scotland?
   - Especially regarding recent significant increases in publicly funded care in Scotland (1140 initiative for 2020)
Methods

Study involves

• Literature and document review

• Interviews with 25 key stakeholders involved in ECEC policy in Scotland including:
  • 9 from the Scottish government: national, municipal/local authorities and national departments (Care Inspectorate, Education, Forestry)
  • 12 educators and program supervisors
  • 4 key “influencers” from foundations, training institutions, etc.

• Site visits to 7 outdoor play programs in rural/urban Scotland

• Survey of educators in early adopters of outdoor play and matched comparison sites (currently under way)
Methods

Interview data

- Transcribed by one research assistant. A second RA double checked
- Preliminary coding system of transcripts developed
  - Based on the literature/document review and attending the interviews
- RA’s applied the coding system to transcripts
  - Provided feedback to refine/add to the coding system
  - Iterative process was followed until no new codes emerged
- Two RA’s coded each transcript
  - Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached
Methods

Themes that emerged from the transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heterogeneity of Programs</td>
<td>The diversity of kinds of outdoor play programs (e.g., full-time outside, half-day outside, a few days a week, dedicated vs. shared park, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Different aspects that influenced the policy development process (e.g., leadership, existing programs as models)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>How does outdoor play fit with quality of programs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>Mention of different types of risk (risk for children, risk assessment, risk/benefit analysis)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role of Educators</td>
<td>Stakeholders perceptions of the role of educators’ in implementing outdoor play</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>Barriers to implementation of outdoor play (e.g., educator attitude and training)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why now?</td>
<td>Why is the emphasis on outdoor play happening now?</td>
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## Preliminary Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Times mentioned</th>
<th>Number of speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Heterogeneity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
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<td>Risk</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Role of educators</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why now?</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterogeneity of programs</td>
<td>Mentioned 70 times</td>
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### Days per week
- 1-2 days
- 2-3 days
- 5 days

### Day structure
- Full days
- Half days (mornings/afternoons)

### Location
- Local and city parks
- Dedicated field/large space
- Nursery outdoor space
- Dedicated woodland

### Transport
- Walking
- Parental drop-off
- Buses
Policy
Mentioned 33 times

1) Having sites that serve as models is key: “We're scaling out something that pre-exists. This is in a much, much stronger position because if you were trying to do something that was completely new, it's a harder road to travel”

2) Outdoor play embedded in the curriculum: “In the Curriculum for Excellence, which is the current curriculum in Scotland, there's definitely very much encouragement to use the outdoors”

3) Impact of international (mostly Scandinavian) models: “When John Swinney got his role as the education minister, he created what was classed as the International Advisors to Education...and a couple of them...completely defer to the Scandinavian model of using the natural environment to support health or being an educational attainment”
Policy

4) Leadership interested in outdoor play: People in leadership roles on board with outdoor play

5) Emphasis on child health and wellbeing more broadly: “So, our role was basically to demonstrate how...forests and the outdoors can also deliver on health and education”
Quality
Mentioned 34 times

1) Need to ensure quality as part of expansion

2) Outdoor programs are of better quality: “But when we started looking at quality as part of the ELC expansion and the focus on looking at quality as the main policy driver for the expansion, then outdoor learning experience, outdoor play, as part of that pedagogical approach came across as a very strong focus”

3) Being outdoors doesn’t guarantee quality: “You can take kids outside but it doesn't necessarily mean that they're getting a good experience. They'll be playing, they'll be learning through play maybe but it could be enhanced and so that’s what forest school hopefully provides, that additional level of learning and enjoyment and everything that comes of it”
Risk
Mentioned 38 times

1) Learning how to do risk assessments: for government, educators and children

2) Shift from risk analysis to a risk/benefit analysis: “Well, it was and one of the lessons that came... was about the risk benefit analysis, about shifting towards a risk benefit analysis rather than just a risk analysis”

3) Exposure to risk is helpful to children: “The problem with (minimizing risk) then is that they don’t know how to manage their own risk”

4) Insurance issues: hard to get, constrains activities – height of trees children are allowed to climb
Role of Teacher: “Children at the center”
Mentioned 38 times

1) “Child-led”: following the children’s interests, scaffolding

2) SOUL: Stand back, observe, understand, listen
   - Can lead to low levels of interaction with children

3) Curriculum: play-based (Scottish model of play-based learning), cross-curricular
   - Minimal, flexible planning but some variation
   - Materials: Natural, loose parts mostly, “bridging items” (diggers, wheelbarrows), “story stones” (letters, numbers)
Role of Teacher: “Children at the center”

4) Natural environment: Promotes creativity, imagination, freedom to make decisions. “Children are captivated by outdoors and need less adult attention” AND “we just let nature be. It’s got everything that they need”

5) Different than indoor play: “A different environment and different way of teaching...there’s science experiences and outcomes...each activity is a cross curricular thing...it doesn’t have to be ‘now we’re doing an exercise in literacy’. There’s lots of story telling and by the fire we can make up stories”
Barriers
Mentioned 85 times

1) Parents: attitudes, weather, dirt, sickness, clothing, risk. "They (parents) had no experience of play outdoors the way I had as a child. So they were all like, but they’ll get dirty, they might hurt themselves"

2) Children: dislikes, preparation. "I think some children don’t particularly like being outdoors, they don’t like the rough and tumble, being out and some children prefer an indoor learning environment..."

3) Educators: attitudes, knowledge & training, support, physically demanding. "I think during winter, you have to be fit, you have to be healthy." AND "the fear factor coming from the lack of knowledge of what the natural world is"
Barriers

4) Weather: proper clothing, equipment. “We get a lot of rain. And we also get little insects called midges, which...can make it absolutely awful and probably turn some young children away from the outdoors forever”

5) Systemic issues: workforce, funding, 1140 expansion, Care Inspectorate. “The Scottish government has made its commitment to start paying everybody a living wage. It’s a real problem for the expansion. The commitment to go to 1140 by 2020, it will be dependent on expanding the workforce, expanding the places, building more nurseries”

6) Social class issues: cost, middle class programs. “the families least likely to take up the service as those most disadvantaged families who could actually benefit the greatest” AND “so them (disadvantaged children) coming home in dirty clothes, which sounds silly but for families whose kids wear the same clothes every single day, it’s a real consideration”
Why now?
Mentioned 24 times

1) Societal concerns: obesity, mental health, physical activity, attainment, lack of outdoor play time

2) Research: benefits of outdoor play. “I think it’s all the research we’re getting. More people are starting to realize the benefits for what children are learning...there’s a lot of evidence that supports this approach of unstructured free play. From the point of view of children’s health and well-being and mental health, and their creativity and problem-solving”
Why Now?

3) New opportunities: Increase to 1140 hours of ELC for families per year.

- Part of Curriculum for Excellence. “If you look at the Curriculum for Excellence as a curriculum running from 3-18, there has always been a place for outdoor learning...

- Building stronger families and community. “New emphasis on early learning and care and outdoor play as a way to build better communities”

- Less costly than new infrastructure. “It’s less costly to have outdoor provision because you don’t have the build to consider. We’re lucky in Glasgow we have many parks, lots of green space”
Some conclusions

• The current focus on outdoor play is coming from the government
  • It is seen as the solution for concerns about child wellbeing as well as alleviating physical space constraints

• Having demonstration sites has been central because:
  • People (including politicians) can see what it looks like
  • They were of better quality

• There has to be flexibility in how outdoor play programs are delivered – full time won’t work for lots of children, parents and educators
  • Flexible delivery means outdoor play is not likely to solve the physical space issue
  • Raises funding/cost issues
Some conclusions

• There are many challenges to overcome
  • Lack of trained staff is a major issue
  • There may be lessons to be learned from the Quebec expansion (risk of trading access for quality)

• Risk is a major issue
  • Requires a shift from risk analysis to risk/benefit analysis

• Government people were on board
  • However, changing parent and educator attitudes is an issue
Thank You

• Lawson Foundation for inviting us to do this work

• Inspiring Scotland, especially Rachel Cowper and Lynn Henni

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