(RE)CONSIDERING (RISKY) PLAY IN A

CANADIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD CONTEXT

by

Melanie Walters

B.A., Capilano University, 2015

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Early Childhood Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2020

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

(Re)considering (Risky) Play in a Canadian Early Childhood Context

submitted by   Melanie Walters   in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of   Master of Arts

in   Early Childhood Education

Examining Committee:

Dr. Marianne McTavish, Professor of Teaching, Associate Dean, Teacher Education, UBC
Supervisor

Dr. Anthony Clarke, Professor, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, UBC
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. LeAnne Petherick, Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, UBC
Additional Examiner

Abstract

Early childhood settings bring forth much complexity. This particular Canadian research study discussed the phenomenon of risky play in its conceptualized form (Sandseter, 2007), as a socially constructed and contested idea, and as a complex topic for reconsideration in young children's play. Dominant discourses of safety surrounding early childhood praxis initiated this deep inquiry into risky play. Through this study, the researcher's intention was to more clearly describe the essence of children's play desires, their abilities to assess danger, their perceptions regarding their risky play adventures, and to introduce new ways to (re)consider (risky) play.

The research took place in a large western Canadian city at a mixed age early childhood center inquiring into their particular co-created context of risky play. Using a phenomenological approach to interpretive research, the study involved introspective accounts of reconceptualized praxis in early childhood education from the researcher's critically reflective lens in her role as an educator. Introspective pedagogical narrations involving a small group of children between four and five years of age illuminated emerging themes of children's play interests and their fascinating lived experience perspectives involving risky play. The narrations created marvelous moments to ponder and to question further. Through these narrations, the study found that these young children were incredibly capable, strong, confident, curious, creative, persistent, imaginative and intuitive. The study also brought forth provocative ideas of materials relations to consider. This research offers multiple deeply introspective and phenomenological understandings of risky play; inviting (re)consideration of (risky) play through alternate perspectives.

Lay Summary

This qualitative research study was conducted using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology aims to deeply describe lived experience and associated reflections of a particular topic. Through the researcher's professional experience as an early childhood educator working with young children, the topic of risky play was considered. The research took place in a large western Canadian city at a mixed age early childhood center with a small group of children. The study involved the researcher's insight through an introspective account of changes in thinking and practice, and through challenging dominant ideas of safety over the course of several years. The study also shared narratives of practice involving the children's fascinating experiences of risky play. The main aims of the study were to share the researcher's critical reflection regarding her shift in practice and the children's perspectives and narratives of risky play, highlighting their strengths, desires and creativity; reconsidering risky play possibilities.

Preface

The content of this thesis is based upon original and unpublished work conducted by Melanie

Walters, the graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Marianne McTavish. The research

conducted for this study was approved by the Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB) at the

University of British Columbia on August 20, 2019, under the certificate number H19-01475.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

I begin by first acknowledging with gratitude that the thoughts, narrations and experiences shared in this thesis have taken place upon the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people.

I would like to express my appreciation of the many people (some of whom remain unnamed) who have provided me with guidance, encouragement, support, and advice during the process of completing this Master's thesis, which I hope will expand others' ideas of risky/(risky) play.

I would like to thank my supervising committee, Dr. Marianne McTavish and Dr. Anthony Clarke, for their commitment to this research project. I am deeply grateful for Marianne's willingness to listen to my ideas and her ability to focus my thought processes, especially during the final push to completion. Tony's intrigue in my research, particularly with "Becoming Blue," encouraged me to proceed and has provided me with much validation. Marianne and Tony's support has been exemplified through their insightful wisdom, questions, suggestions, feedback, and attention to the details, all of which have been fundamental in this process. I would also like to thank my external examiner, Dr. LeAnne Petherick, for her appreciation of this research study and assertion that it will add value to and challenge existing educational discourses.

I would like to thank the many scholars who have contributed to the great range of research on risky play and have influenced my thinking. Notably, I would like to thank Dr. Ellen Sandseter for her vast research on the topic of risky play which enabled me to find strength and confidence in exploring these concepts in my practice with children. Her visit to my work site is

Dedication

With gratitude and profound love to my family. To my sister, Susan, for her unwavering support throughout this process. Her quick-witted sense of humor, delectable meals and accompanying wine, novel patience and commitment to quietude while I worked have helped me accomplish this great feat. To my parents, Bob and Helen, for nurturing my love of the outdoors by affording me with freedoms of a childhood spent playing outside with my sister, immersed in exploring the beauties, wonders and challenges of the central Albertan rural landscape. To my furry companion, Lucy, whose ever-wagging tail and playful spirit brings me great joy and always enticed me outside for refreshing stretch breaks away from the computer.

To the children of Gathering Place ECC for allowing me to walk alongside them in pedagogy and play, and to vicariously enjoy moments of their childhoods. To their parents for entrusting me with such a great responsibility. To my colleagues for their inquiry and support in taking up these ideas in company with me. These experiences have significantly and joyfully enriched my life.

Chapter 1: Introduction

There are many complexities involved in co-creating a culture and context that allows for risky play and I believe that children are capable of being critical thinkers and co-contributors to this kind of pedagogy. Over the past few decades, a discourse of safety has dominated notions about what is dangerous for children regarding their play experiences in early childhood. This discourse works to reduce children's play freedoms and heighten societal fears of danger and injury related to play. Using multiple lenses, researchers have contributed to a discussion that continues to challenge safety discourses and to support risky play (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet, 2012; Coe, 2017; Coleman & Dyment, 2013; Kleppe, Melhuish & Sandseter, 2017; Little, 2006; Little, Wyver & Gibson, 2011; Malone, 2007; Sandseter, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012; Stephenson, 2003; Wyver, Tranter, Naughton, Little, Sandseter, & Bundy, 2010). Several years ago, in my ongoing professional role as an early childhood educator working with young children, I began to question the impact of my pedagogical ways of thinking and acting upon the children's play choices. In a process of critical questioning and reconceptualizing of my pedagogical practice, I opened a space where children might more freely explore their surrounding environment, contribute to the curriculum, and have opportunities to reasonably encounter situations with elements of risk. I continue to be personally and professionally compelled by this risky play inquiry through children's narratives that create marvelous moments to ponder upon and question further the notions of play within an early childhood education (ECE) context.

Using a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997, 2007, 2011), I introspectively describe the evolving culture of the Gathering Place[1] Early Childhood Center (ECC), where I worked for ten years. The introspective descriptions delve into details of both the local context and discussion of my reconceptualization of my own praxis. In relation to affording risky play environments with young children in this particular early childhood context, I share examples of the co-created culture including the mixed age context, place connections, place possibilities, and peer mentoring. I then share "pedagogical narrations" (British Columbia Early Learning Framework [BC ELF], 2008, 2018, 2019) from that context. These pedagogical narrations illuminate complex pedagogical situations and accompanying issues. The descriptions and narratives provide a means to inquire deeply into the children's lived experiences of risky play. Through these shared artifacts, I seek to more clearly describe the essence of the children's play desires, their abilities to assess danger, and their perceptions regarding their (risky)[2] play adventures. Further, I offer an alternative perspective to thinking with risky play.

1.1   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study is to share an introspective description of a particular co-created risky play culture with a phenomenological focus illuminating both educator reconceptualization of practice and young Canadian children's meaning making, perspectives, and anecdotes about what is desirable (and dangerous) in their (risky) play choices. Additionally, the study intends to encourage educators to (re)consider (risky) play.

---

[1] A pseudonym has been used to maintain confidentiality of the Early Childhood Center.
[2] To illuminate the concept of risky play as a socially constructed and contested idea, I have intentionally bracketed the word (risky) in many places throughout the thesis. See the Definitions of Key Terminology (p. 4) for further explanation.

1.2   Research Question

The study addresses the following main question:

> What can be understood about children's engagement with the world in an early
>
> childhood environment that is conducive to and supportive of risky play?

1.3   Significance

While many adults continue to view children as vulnerable and in need of protection, this study aims to highlight ways that educators and families can collaborate together with children stemming from their strengths and interests. This collaboration could involve learning processes around concepts of safety, risk and hazard, might support children's (risky) play choices and possibly help to regain their rights to play freedom, such as physically exploring their surrounding landscapes, testing their physical abilities and boundaries, and joyfully experiencing childhood. The significance of this study is that it is instrumental in inspiring educators to question their thinking and practices around risky play, to more confidently afford risky play opportunities, and consequently (and possibly, most importantly), for children to regain the right to (risky) play endeavors within their daily activities. Further, this study asks educators, parents and society to think in new ways and to (re)consider other possibilities that (risky) play might entail.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliott, and Sanchez (2015) stated that "reconceptualist scholars have brought forward concepts of social constructionism to rethink the role of children in society and in early childhood institutions… [and] children can be rethought as human beings with rights, strengths, and multiple identities" (p. 196). Thus, through a reconceptualist, socially constructed praxis, children can be viewed as capable constructors of their own learning, and educators as co-constructors or guides. By adding to the current literature

through sharing researcher introspection on the evolving co-creation of a Canadian pedagogy of risky play and young Canadian children's lived experiences of (risky) play through pedagogical narrations, it is my goal that the early childhood education movement to afford risky play be significantly further cultivated, championed and (re)considered.

1.4   Definitions of Key Terminology

1.4.1   Affordance

Both in the literature and through this study, educators have been found to afford varying levels of risky play based upon individual comfort levels with how children use their bodies within their surrounding environments. However, the ways in which educators may view the affordances in their surrounding environments are perceptual in nature based upon social constructions, epistemological commitments and ministry directives. Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances described these as alterations between the natural environment and manipulators of the environment. An affordance is an invariant combination of variables or what the environment offers the individual. With this explanation, we can understand that both a low table and a tree with many branches may afford climbing. When a child begins to explore the affordances of materials (natural and otherwise) in the environment, educators are often faced with the decision of whether or not to allow the child this affordance. This decision is grounded in educators' own social constructions of safety and their epistemological values of what they perceive as appropriate, inappropriate or, creative possibilities, in concert with licensing directives.

1.4.2   (Re)consider

Throughout the research thesis, the word (re)consider has been bracketed to highlight the intentional revisiting within the concept of reconsideration. Through deep thinking and critically reflective practice, reconsideration has occurred and continues to occur multiple times,

bracketing out any presuppositions about the phenomenon of risky play, thus creating new possibilities or (re)considerations about the conceptual idea of risky play.

1.4.3   (Risky)

In order to illuminate the concept of risky play as a socially constructed and contested idea, I have intentionally bracketed the word (risky) in many places throughout this thesis. Bracketing suggests that we do not know if children view their play as risky or simply as play or as something else. Where risky play is not bracketed, it is meant to describe the conceptual form of risky play as observable characteristics specific to Sandseter's (2007) conception and categories of risky play further described in chapter two.

1.4.4   Co-creation

With a renewed approach to early childhood education practice, I began to see myself as a partner in learning with children in our specific context. This meant learning alongside each other and together creating new possibilities to explore and expand upon. Where the term co-creation is utilized, it is intended to encompass the influence of children and educators together, with input from parents, engaging in complex discussions and decisions that affected our whole program. This shared pedagogical approach contributed to co-creating a culture that supported notions of risky play.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1   Overview

There is an abundance of literature discussing the many aspects of play and its integral role in learning. As this thesis is focused on risky play and children's phenomenological experiences of (risky) play, the broad topic of play is only generally discussed. First, the review discusses the broad topic of play to contextualize children's ways of learning about the world around them. This is followed by a detailed description of risky play, including a discussion on safety discourses and the concepts of risk and hazard. Finally, pedagogical roles and influences on risky play in relation to supporting children's play desires are discussed.

2.2   A Focus on Play

The most important thing about play is that it is an integral part of children's lives that contributes to their well-being, overall development, learning and growth. Play is children's way of experiencing the world around them through their senses, engaging with others and with ideas. The British Columbia Early Learning Framework (BC ELF) (2018) described play as "extremely varied; it can be individual, collective, spontaneous, planned, experimental, purposeful, unpredictable and dynamic" (p. 27). Play takes many shapes and forms and may be seen as a means for inquiry, experimentation and learning. The positive emotions connected to play provide an important foundation in creating a disposition that embraces learning (BC ELF, 2008). Play is deemed so critical to children's development that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 31, recognizes a specific right to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child.

Gray (2013) analyzed and summarized previous attempts to define play. He stated that "play is not neatly defined" and further discussed that human play contains the following five characteristics. Play is:

- Self-chosen and self-directed: Players choose how and when to play, with the freedom to quit at any time.

- Intrinsically motivated – means are more valued than ends: A player gains more from the activity of play itself, rather than an end result of their actions.

- Guided by mental rules, but the rules leave room for creativity: Because of its rule-based nature, play is the means to self-control and socially agreed upon rules.

- Imaginative: Play provides the engine for cultural innovations, where players think in ways that go beyond the concrete and into the imaginative realm of the minds of players.

- Conducted in an alert, active, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind: The mind is wrapped up in the ideas, rules and actions of play, relatively undistracted. This state of mind during play is ideal for creativity and the learning of new skills.

Through these five characteristics, we can more clearly understand play as a freely chosen, desirable activity that is intrinsically motivated, engaging for the player, bound by self-made rules, and is pleasant, creative and imaginative. With these characteristics in mind, educators can pay close attention to their relationships and educational practice with children when navigating pedagogical theory and practice.

Social participation is also characteristic of play. This can be further described by several of Parten's (1932) six social participation categories: unoccupied play (infants' random movements with no clear purpose); solitary play (children play on their own and do not seem to

notice other children playing nearby); onlooker play (children observe others engaged in play and may ask questions, but make no effort to join in); parallel play (children begin to play side by side with other children, yet with no interaction); associative play (children begin asking questions of each other, seeming to have similar goals, but no set rules); and social play (children begin to share ideas and materials, following established rules and guidelines). Keeping the many elements of social play in mind, educators can better understand the individual and social motivations involved in play. Establishing play as the forefront of pedagogical relationships, pedagogy may take creative and imaginative turns, potentially leading to innovative and joyful practice.

2.3 Contextualizing Risky Play

Extensive research on approaches to risky play has been conducted by Norwegian researchers and such play has been found to be a regular part of children's daily outdoor life. Sandseter (2009) described risky play as "thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury" (p. 4). Sandseter stated that children have a natural urge for such play. Australian research aiming to promote risk-taking and challenging play found that risky play takes place primarily outdoors during free play and Little, Wyver and Gibson (2011) reported that context is important in this regard. They found that thrill and excitement were often missing from traditional playgrounds (prefabricated or constructed) and that these components were necessary in providing opportunities for children to challenge themselves, test their limits, explore boundaries and learn about injury-risk. Sandseter (2007) related risky play to the chance of getting hurt and the thrilling feelings of fear experienced by young children when their skills exceeded the challenges provided by the available play equipment, thus leading them to use the equipment in ways it was not designed for.

Recently, a Canadian study (Coe, 2017) of four young children's risky play experiences was conducted within the context of an Ontario Forest Kindergarten. This study supports nature play and curricula occurring on a variety of terrains in all kinds of weather conditions, including cold temperatures and snow. This research suggests that natural outdoor environments, landscapes and weather conditions are beneficial spaces for extending children's skills through risky play.

2.4 Conceptualizing Risky Play

Through initial studies done in two Norwegian preschools, Sandseter (2007) illuminated common risky play behaviors such as climbing and jumping from heights. She observed 38 children's (aged 3-5 years) risky play experiences and conducted interviews with the children and their educators. During this study, Sandseter (2007) conceptualized the following six categories of risky play:

1) Play with great heights (danger of injury from falling),

2) Play with high speed (uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something or someone),

3) Play with dangerous tools (that can lead to injuries),

4) Play near dangerous elements (where you can fall into or from something),

5) Rough-and-tumble play (where children can harm each other), and

6) Play where children can 'disappear'/get lost. (p. 243)

These six categories also highlight considerations of both perceived risk and actual risk. It is important to identify subjectivity, as what one person may view as risky will not necessarily be viewed as risky by another, and both interpretations will impact how the individual handles the risk in the situation. Thus, these categories can act as general objective guidelines of what risky

play entails. Sandseter (2009) later identified these six categories of risky play as "having two categories of risk characteristics in children's play":

1) environmental characteristics (the setting and staff influences),

2) individual characteristics (how the play was carried out by the child). (p. 10)

In a recent Norwegian study of children aged one to three years old, Kleppe, Melhuish and Sandseter (2017) adapted the definition of risky play to be seen in relation to motor development and the ability to walk. The authors described risky play for one-year old's as "play that involves uncertainty and exploration – bodily, emotional, perceptual or environmental – that could lead to either positive or negative consequences" (p. 12). They added two newly identified categories for children in this age group:

1) Playing with Impact (which involves danger from crashing, either themselves or an object into something, such as a child repeatedly throwing themselves upon a mattress or repeatedly crashing their tricycle into a fence), and

2) Vicarious Risk (where children watch another child engage in risk-taking, that causes elements of fear, tension or excitement through this observation of others, wherein a child intently observes other children engaged in risky play, having the same arousing effect as if they were playing themselves). (p. 12)

While the previous categories were directly related to children's risky play, injury prevention research by Brussoni, Olsen, Pike and Sleet (2012) discussed play as being critical to child development and that limitations on play may be fundamentally hindering children's health, well-being and decision-making abilities. They challenged dominant discourses of safety through the idea of unintentional injury prevention to "keep children as safe as necessary, rather than as safe as possible" (pp. 3137-3138). Further they supported risky play and argued that

"outdoor free play in versatile natural environments is important for developing motor fitness and abilities, environmental awareness and navigation competencies, as well as promoting creativity" (p. 3137). These arguments exemplify the need for further acceptance of and the championing of children engaging in individualized risky play opportunities. Mindful of injury prevention, one can understand risky play as beneficial for children's learning experiences and hopefully view children as capable assessors of their own safety, thus creating a new narrative.

2.5   Safety Discourses

Consideration of children's safety is one of the most important underlying aspects of care by parents and early childhood educators. However, safety has become a dominant discourse which is tacitly embedded within understandings of adults' responsibilities toward children. While safety concerns are justifiable, the past few decades have brought about a play safety debate pertaining to many Western societies, including Australia, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. Wyver, Tranter, Naughton, Little, Sandseter, and Bundy, (2010) comparatively examined the pervasiveness of "surplus safety" within Australian and Norwegian early childhood contexts. They described the term as:

> The excessive measures adults take to prevent an injury from occurring, no matter how minor…[further] these excessive measures can be found at many levels, including policies relating to children's environments, interactions with young children and beliefs about children's abilities. (p. 264)

With growing concerns of societal problems and legitimately alarming news stories involving child abductions, childhood injuries (even deaths), and increasing gun violence, Malone (2007) argues that parents, educators and society have created an excessive sense of protection resulting in the phenomena of "bubble wrapped" children. Anxieties and fears have

11

been perpetuated and result in restrictions on what used to be common childhood practices such as cycling or walking to school alone, riding the bus independently, playing out in neighborhoods, and climbing trees. When children's play spaces become padded and sterile, the environment and intrinsic opportunity for encouraging children's exploration and creativity to flourish disappears. These excessive safety measures convey a lack of trust in children's abilities and transmit a devaluing message to them about their ideas and desires. In an overly protective environment, a safety-first discourse works to restrict children's play freedom. Therefore, the loss of important learning opportunities, physical activity, independence and freedom to explore the world beyond home, school or childcare can lead to disconnected social relationships within communities and to surrounding natural environments and parks.

2.6   Safety, Risk and Hazard in Play: Educator's Responsibilities

Embedded within an educator's role is the responsibility of keeping children safe and free from harm. Additionally, an educator is responsible for providing and nurturing rich learning opportunities for continued development (BC ELF, 2008). When providing rich learning opportunities, educators will inevitably encounter situations with children that involve risk. The Canadian Public Health Association (2019) identified this challenge as being able to "recognize the balance between children's engagement in beneficial risk coupled with avoidance of hazards and danger" (p. 1). The pedagogical challenge is balancing an environment that affords opportunities for risk and that is attendant to potential hazards.

Safety is "the condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury or loss" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). With this definition, one can understand safety as protection, injury avoidance and security. Based upon this definition, little room is left for interpreting risk as having the potential for positive experiences in learning. Conversely, risk is defined as "the

possibility of loss or injury: peril" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition can be understood as having the probability to encounter and navigate danger or hazard within the environment. A child can learn to recognize and manage uncertainties and challenges, making choices about whether or not to engage with danger based upon their own limits. Hazard is "a source of danger" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This potential source of harm or danger is something in the environment that could put a child at risk and is particularly important in context where the child has the inability to recognize it as a potential hazard, for example, there could be a large rock partially covered by sand or other debris where the child is about to jump from a height. Landing on the large rock has the potential to lead to a broken bone or concussion depending upon which part of the body the child might make direct impact with the large rock. This kind of harm or hazard is foreseeable and preventable by the educator or responsible adult, thus becoming their responsibility to attend to that risk prior to play. Educators can take the opportunity during a hazard check to discuss with and teach children about identifying (and possibly removing) potential hazards in the environment.

When educators mitigate such hazards, play spaces can afford opportunities for creative uses of the environment and materials affording risky play. Some children seem to intuitively know their own capabilities and limits, desiring particular challenges and not others. For example, they are responsible for deciding where and how high to climb, when to jump and whether or not to do it again. It seems as though perceptions of safety and risk vary depending upon the participants and positive learning experiences may occur within both realms. One might then view this as the "possibility of education," to be in-between these ideas and not settled in either (S. Kind, personal communication, November 2014).

2.7   Benefits of Risky Play

The premise of risky play as beneficial to children's development has been discussed through research conducted in many countries including Australia, Norway and Canada. According to Little's (2006) Australian study, "the ability to identify and appropriately manage risks is an important life skill that children need to learn" (p.151). She further discussed that the significance of children's learning through risk-taking could be understood by considering it in the context of the interrelationship between the individual and the environment, and when children have opportunities to engage in situations beyond their current ability and experience. In her Norwegian studies, Sandseter (2007, 2009) also described the possible learning aspects gained by children engaged in risky play to include the competence of mastering and assessing risk, letting children explore challenges in their surroundings, and preparing them for handling real risks and dangers in childhood and later in adulthood. Malone's (2007) Australian study contributed to these benefits of risky play by stating that "resilience is built through the ability of an individual to adjust and adapt in the face of crisis" (p. 523), thus building knowledge and confidence through experience.

Another important aspect to consider in children's developing competencies through challenging and risky play is that children begin to sensibly balance their individual skills, interests and abilities, as identified by Stephenson (2003). Wyver et al. (2010) added that learning through experience of minor injury, including falls, cuts and bruises, is widely recognized by injury prevention professionals and organizations as an important part of normal development which increases an individual's assessment of risk abilities. In their Australian research, Little et al. (2011) found that opportunities for enhancing children's development through skill mastery were related to individual interests and abilities, and challenging

14

environments. They recommended that future designs of early childhood playgrounds incorporate additional risky play opportunities.

In further support of risky play, Canadian injury prevention researchers Brussoni et al. (2012) found that a risk deprived child is more prone to obesity, mental health problems, reduced overall wellness, lack of independence, and a decrease in learning perception and judgment skills. They also argued that outdoor free play in versatile natural environments is important for promoting creativity and developing motor fitness and abilities, environmental awareness and navigation competencies. Coe's (2017) research highlighted support for the value of the Canadian outdoor learning environment where children engaged with slush, ice and snow in frigid temperatures. For example, the inconsistent stability of the ice on a small body of water led to an element of environmental risk in the children's play. Therefore, the children had to work together with each other and the teacher, thinking critically to establish safety protocols such as testing the strength of the ice before being able to play upon it. These benefits of risky play and supportive arguments exemplify the importance of opportunities to engage in similar individualized risky play opportunities in other environments.

2.8 Pedagogical Responsibility

While early childhood educators fulfill very important roles of promoting safety and providing rich learning experiences for young children in early learning contexts, they more fully satisfy their professional roles through pedagogy. van Manen (2002) stated "a teacher is guided by pedagogy" (p. 55) and "true pedagogy requires an attentive attunement of one's whole being to the child's experience in the world" (p. 49). One might then conclude that a child's ability to experience risky play requires careful attention and thoughtful consideration from educators. Through thoughtful pedagogy, educators practice a "certain kind of seeing, of listening, of

responding to each particular child or children in this or that situation" (p. 10). van Manen continued to describe this "tone of teaching" as "the cultivation of thoughtfulness and tact depending upon the ability to perceive and listen to young people" (p. 43). Ways in which educators, parents and societies view children and their ideas determine their ways of interacting with them and ultimately play a role in the fulfillment of each child's potential.

Further, pedagogical responsibility is another important aspect to consider in regard to supporting risky play. While policies and procedures based upon governmental regulations appear to be restrictive, there are ways to interpret these as guidelines with a basis for pedagogical responsibility. Sandseter (2009) highlighted Norway's governmental guidelines for preschool aged children as they actually emphasized children's play and learning through play rather than focusing on prescribed school activities. Brussoni et al. (2012) argued, "like safety, play is deemed so critical to child development and their physical and mental health, that it is included in Article 31 of the (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" (p. 3135). Both of these are governing documents in working with young children, and they highlight a more positive side on their influence of educators and society. Consistent with these supportive arguments, Malone (2007) promoted the view that educators and curricula should greatly extend children's experiences to support environmental learning to develop a sense of community, environmental stewardship, geographical literacy and environmental competence.

Although pedagogical beliefs about children's abilities and risk-taking behaviors may create tension for educators when complying with regulations, Wyver et al. (2010) noted that important pedagogical work involves giving children the freedom to explore challenges and risks in play, as well as making independent risk-taking decisions. Important parts of pedagogical work in Norway, highlighted by Sandseter (2012), included the benefits of mastering risks,

experiencing various weather conditions and exploring the natural landscape. These components are widely acknowledged and encouraged in Norway and are further emphasized in their curriculum documents such as the *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* (2017). When educator's pedagogical responsibilities include supporting affordances of risky play, children can demonstrate their strengths, abilities and critical thinking, and therefore become powerful constructors of their own learning.

2.9   Images of Children and Childhood

Adults' views on children speak to their engagements with and around them, such as a fear-based, anxious parenting society where children are viewed as vulnerable and unable to make decisions on their own. This subsuming of responsibilities results from the restriction of childhood practices such as playing outside in their neighborhoods, riding a bicycle or taking the bus to school alone. In turn, this restricted image of children and decreased opportunities makes them ill-equipped to deal with everyday risks (Malone, 2007). Contrary to these ideas, much of the available literature proclaims that children are highly capable individuals. Through overcoming their fear and recognizing their abilities, four and five-year-old children are aware of their risk mastery and regulate their risky play accordingly (Sandseter, 2009). Descriptions of the early stages of infant locomotion were discussed by Wyver et al. (2010) as becoming increasingly exploratory upon encountering new or unsafe terrain. They continued by noting that young children learn from the experience of injury and make good judgments about risk of injury, yet adults involved in their care often underestimate young children's risk assessment abilities, resulting in overprotection.

Stephenson (2003) highlighted dispositions to learning through risk-taking as intelligent and creative behaviors that push individuals to go beyond established limits, where they do not

know what is going to happen; leading to acceptance of confusion, uncertainty and failure, and characterizing them as critical thinkers. Self-discovery is actualized here, realizing oneself as adventurous, daring, brave, strong, confident and successful. Norwegians have been found to view children as individuals with their own desires and varying levels of interest, engagement and competence in risky play. They also have a special love for outdoor life and view risk-taking as important to children's growing up and learning through realizing affordances in their play environments (Sandseter, 2012). Through their studies, Brussoni et al. (2012) further support the notion of children perceiving themselves as competent at negotiating their own safety through risk-taking and felt that they were primarily responsible for their own safety. Ways in which educators, parents and societies view children and their ideas determine their ways of interacting with them and ultimately play a role in the fulfillment of each child's potential. In relation to "building strong images", Malaguzzi (1994) stated:

> It's necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold. Those who have the image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass, gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don't need that as an image of children. Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and strengths. (p. 55)

Local ideas about the image of the child are described in the BC ELF (2008) as "personal beliefs about children and childhood, but also beliefs about what is possible and desirable for human life at the individual, social and global levels" (p. 4). The framework supports and identifies the creation of a shared image of the child as capable and full of potential, with individual strengths and opportunities grounded in their unique social, linguistic and cultural

heritage. The newly revised BC ELF (2019) "upholds the image of every child as a gift, as strong and capable in their uniqueness and full of potential, living and growing in complex interdependence with humans and all world relations" (p. 15). Thus, by upholding shared perspectives such as these, individual qualities and opportunities can be enriched where every child and family can participate in learning, growing and contributing to their shared or common worlds. Through reflection on these perspectives, strong images of children as capable critical thinkers and agentic co-constructors abound.

2.10 Listening to Children's Desires

The literature reviewed highlights children's desires and natural propensity for risky play. Sandseter (2007) said that some children expressed a level of fear that was attractive and very exciting, "sometimes it hurts a bit, but is fun anyway, and scary" (pp. 243-247) which corroborates the idea that children naturally seek out these kinds of play. In her later study, Sandseter (2009) also pointed out that some children have high activity levels and or risk-taking personalities and that it brings about pleasant experiences and emotions such as excitement, fun, joy, lightheartedness and that much of children's play involves actively seeking out fearful situations, as one of a number of possible play scenarios.

To describe the phenomenology of risky play, Sandseter (2010) conducted a further qualitative study, consisting of semi-structured interviews at two Norwegian preschools with twenty-three children aged four to five years. Through a description of Apter's (2001) reversal theory, Sandseter explained the motivation behind risk taking as being related to the increase of pleasurable arousal (paratelic state) which is dynamic and shifting, creating contrasting emotions at times (pp. 68-72). Sandseter described these contrasting emotions as being experienced as quick reversals, where one moment pleasure or excitement was felt (paratelic state) and then

promptly reversed to displeasure or fear (telic state). Therefore, a child who enjoys the experiences of exhilaration and fear will likely continue to seek experiences similar to the ones that resulted in those feelings initially. Whereas, a child who unpleasantly experiences only fear or anxiety during risky play is less likely to seek out similar experiences.

As a result of the 2010 study, Sandseter deduced that simultaneous ambivalent emotions, such as fear and fun, also seemed to be present in risky play. She explained these sensation-seeking mixed emotions as bordering fear and exhilaration, expressed by screaming, high pitched laughing and loud yelling, exemplifying the pleasure of an intense arousal. During the study, children seemed to want to stay in the play situation and repeat it willingly. Some children described their bodily experiences as, "my heart goes 'doing-doing'", "it's so fun I almost get sick", "it prickles all over my body", and most commonly "it tickles in my tummy" (p. 78). Sandseter (2010) concluded that "as long as the child manages to stay primarily in a paratelic state, while experiencing danger in small enough doses to uphold the protective frame, the ambiguous state of experiencing both exhilaration and fear is the core value and the main aim of risky play" (p. 82). Thus, if the main aim of risky play is to repeatedly experience exhilaration and fear, and risky play is highly desirable for children, it is imperative that adults listen to children, trust children's own judgment and provide opportunities for children to engage in these ways of being in the world.

For the youngest children in the age range of one to two years old, Kleppe et al. (2017) stated that risky play involves exploring and testing their surroundings and their bodies in relation to these surroundings (p.12). Additionally, injury prevention studies (Brussoni et al., 2012) indicate that older children, aged seven to eleven years old, want to be trusted with decisions with respect to managing risks and safety. Brussoni et al. (2012) also discussed a study

of sixteen Canadian preschools showing that of the thirteen percent of the time that children used play equipment, they only used it how it was intended three percent of the time (this exemplifies children's ways of maintaining challenge in their play through creative and potentially unsafe uses of the equipment provided). As evidenced by this research, children have strong desires for physical challenge in their play experiences and risky play is common in early childhood settings beyond places like Norway, showing the need for a much closer look at the complexities involved in listening to children's desires and affording this play.

2.11 Adult Influences on Play

The notion of governance arises when play discussions turn to strict management of children's play experiences. As previously mentioned, it is no wonder that children's risky play experiences are very complex to support, yet as the literature has illuminated, they are extremely important aspects of learning that lead to children becoming competent individuals. Early childhood settings in Canada are governed by licensing bodies, which include regulatory guidelines set out to ensure minimum safety standards are met. How educators in early childhood centers choose to interpret and enact these guidelines varies, usually depending upon epistemological perception and individual comfort levels. Little (2006) discussed Australian policies relating to provisions of care as vital to ensure safety standards. However, she found that children's risk exposure must not be reduced, rather, individual child differences must be considered when providing a safe, yet challenging environment. In Sandseter's (2007, 2009) studies, she found that educators' own risk perceptions in the situation influenced how they reacted, and their actions of interfering, constraining or encouraging risky play contributed to the potential risk in the situation. She also highlighted the point that risk involves consideration of both perceived and actual risk.

Initiating this idea of risk perception, Stephenson (2003) noted that children's physical challenge opportunities were satisfied through educator's attitudes more than equipment. Teachers who enjoyed being outdoors and with experience in outdoor settings, tended to have greater interest in physical play and took a more liberal approach to supervision that allowed risky play opportunities. Playgrounds that offered open-ended ways of using materials also played a role in risky play opportunities by affording a satisfying range of challenges for and also created by children. The influence of early childhood settings was also discussed by Little et al. (2011), where they found that settings are influenced by educator beliefs, such as traditional (reluctant) versus forest school (permissive) approaches. Through further research, Sandseter (2012) found that the overarching reason for educators to limit risk was due to feelings of accountability for children's safety that could lead to being viewed as a bad educator and, ultimately, the possibility of job losses and litigation. In addition to this conversation on governing children's play opportunities, a study in Australia conducted by Coleman and Dyment (2013) showed that many educators lacked knowledge about the importance of physical activity in young children, therefore highlighting a need for more formal training in this regard. Perhaps through more specific education and training, a greater comfort level and ability to read between the lines of policies and procedures could be achieved around children's risky play. Recently, British Columbia adopted a newly created *Active Play Policy* (BC Community Care and Assisted Living Act – Director of Licensing Standard of Practice, n.d.), thus providing specific education and accountability for educators to ensure children are engaged daily in outdoor play for varying amounts of time depending upon age.

2.12 Adult Interactions during Risky Play

As previously discussed through the ideas of safety discourses and governance, adult interactions during risky play enact a large role in children's opportunities for such play. More specifically, ways that adults interact with children during physically challenging and risky play are highly influential upon children. Wyver et al. (2010) found that the extent to which the personality of parents and their parenting style influencing children's freedom to play is under-researched (p. 270). Little et al.'s (2011) interviews with educators and mothers, and adult interactions with children during outdoor play, identified physical and verbal behaviors. Adult behavior was categorized to include a range of physical and verbal attributes such as, "no active interaction (supervision), positive interaction (offering physical support, modelling, praise or encouragement, instructions), and negative interaction/intervention (redirecting or stopping the behavior using some form of behavior management)" (p. 122). The authors found tensions existing between parents' and educators' perspectives of appropriate play experiences, as well as a need to loosen regulatory restrictions on children's play environments. Although the study's findings referred to verbal behaviors during active physical play, it gave no examples of actual language used with children. To more positively accept children's risky play experiences and further disrupt safety discourses, parents and educators would likely benefit from concrete examples of a new narrative that includes supportive language and behaviors.

Research pertaining to adult language used with children during risky play involved Coleman and Dyment's (2013) Australian study related to supervising adult's perceptions, interpretations and other factors that limit and enable children's outdoor physical play experiences. In this study, all educators believed it was their role to interact with children during

outdoor play time. One educator described her experience of difficulty around children climbing trees as:

> They've sometimes gotten way too high or have been swinging off the branch of the tree and then jumped down. That branch may not be strong enough for their weight. You might notice it bowing too much and [you] then have to come in and intervene in things that you perceive are not safe. (p. 214)

The study discussed the educator verbally repeated steps to take with a child and offered to hold a hand when jumping from a height. These kinds of responses are very common in early childhood settings. Additionally, when educators have experience and knowledge in the area of physical activity, they will likely be more comfortable in affording such opportunities, rather than intervening. In this study, many educators perceived a need for further training in physical education to gain comfort, skills and ideas for facilitating and participating in a wider variety of games and activities related to physical activity (Coleman & Dyment, 2013).

2.13 Summary

This chapter provides a review of research that is relevant to the importance of play and the unsettling decline in play freedoms over the past few decades. The review began by discussing play as an integral aspect to inquiry, experimentation and transformation in learning about the world around oneself and highlighting the importance of play as being freely chosen, desirable, intrinsically motivating, engaging and creative (Gray, 2013).

Next the review discussed both the contextualization and conceptualization of risky play. It was determined that natural outdoor, non-traditional environments were the most conducive physical features to affording risky play opportunities where children could explore in ways that resulted in feelings of thrill, excitement and fearful fun. Sandseter (2007, 2009) offered the

conceptualization of categories and characteristics of risky play to more clearly identify what is involved and to recognize it as a valuable form of play. Previously, risky play was not conceptualized and fit generally into the realm of play. Safety, risk and hazard were defined and discussed to identify the beneficial balance of play occurring between safety and danger. The recent dominant safety discourse contesting risky play has contributed to the research discussing its many benefits. Research shows that "bubble-wrapping" (Malone, 2007) children perpetuates anxiety and fear and diminishes creativity, critical thinking and strong images of children.

The role of pedagogical responsibility, our images of children and pedagogical relationships within educational practice were also discussed. Although educators hold roles of enormous responsibility to ensure safety and provide rich learning opportunities, children can be empowered to meaningfully contribute to that pedagogy. When educators view children as intelligent, strong, capable and creative, and they listen to their desires, rich possibilities for learning can be co-created. In summary, ways in which educators respond to children engaged in risky play is significant for their play outcomes, self-confidence, creativity, physical prowess and critical thinking skills, and for setting a "tone of teaching" (van Manen, 2002) that creates acceptance, engagement and affordance with risky play pedagogies.

The following research is centered around the description of the ongoing evolution of a risky play pedagogy with a further desire to highlight capability and more deeply describe children's lived experiences, understandings and pleasures in their (risky) play experiences.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Overview

This chapter outlines the interpretive research design for this study including the methodology used and the details of procedural aspects of the study. First, the purpose and the research question to answer the main foci of the study are identified. Next, the theoretical framework and phenomenological research methods are outlined to affirm appropriateness for answering the research question. Then the process of data collection and a detailed description of pedagogical narrations are discussed. The research context and participants chosen are described next, followed by insight into the researcher position. Next, ethical considerations outlining trustworthiness and types and sources of data relevant to this study are identified. Then, the analysis of data and triangulation are discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with insight into the limitations of the study.

3.2 Purpose of the Study

There are two main foci of this research:

1) to gain a clearer understanding of what this specific risky play pedagogy entails through a description of the evolving cultural and pedagogical shift of the program leader's approach, and

2) to encourage (re)considerations of (risky) play through thinking deeply about children's play desires and creativity, their abilities to assess danger and make decisions, and their perceptions regarding their (risky) play experiences.

3.3 Research Question

To answer the foci of this research, I ask the following main question, as it relates to each focus:

What can be understood about children's engagement with the world in an early

childhood environment that is conducive to and supportive of risky play?

3.4   Theoretical Framework

With a desire to describe the co-creation of a specific risky play pedagogy and to make

meaning of children's understandings and perceptions of (risky) play, I am framing this research

as reconceptualizing through social constructionist and relational materialist theoretical

perspectives of interpretive research. These perspectives suggest that individuals learn socially,

culturally and relationally through complex interactions with others, materials and dynamic

environments, creating multiple perspectives and learning possibilities. This theoretical

positioning situates my transformative process as an educator and my subjective stance on the

topic of risky play. This particular research study is framed within an evolving

reconceptualization of the philosophical process and cultural co-creation of Gathering Place

ECC, involving the specific risky play pedagogy and children's lived experiences of (risky) play

as the main foci. These frames also highlight children, their experiences, perspectives and inter-

relations with materials as the basis for this (re)consideration and shift in praxis and pedagogical

approach.

Many theorists have contributed to social constructionist perspectives which support

these ideas. For instance, Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as:

The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent

problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem

solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)

This suggests that learning occurs through interrelationships and at the edge of the ZPD, where

potential can be reached. Vygotsky viewed interactions with adults and children and children and

peers, through questioning, clarifying, summarizing and predicting, as an effective way of developing skills and strategies in learning. These ideas suggest that children learn from others, co-constructing knowledge through social interactions, engagement and collaboration with peers and adults, as exemplified throughout this thesis.

Bronfenbrenner's (1992/2005) bioecological model of human development focused importance on reciprocal interactions between children and their environments over time. His ideas showed that children's development is influenced by interactions in the ever-changing environment surrounding them. Macrosystems encompass all influences that take place at a cultural level, including socio-cultural beliefs about the value of early childhood care and education and about children's rights to play freedoms. Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny (2017) discussed Bronfenbrenner's analogy of the varying systems of social and cultural structures affecting a child's life as "nested each within the next like a set of Russian (matryoshka) dolls" (p. 6). This research connects to these ideas of placing importance on the shifting socio-cultural context in early childhood environments.

Before this reconceptualization and transformative experience as an educator began, my beliefs about child development and learning were embedded in developmental theory and Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Bredekamp, 1987). Whitty and Iannacci (2009), described DAP as stemming from thinking within developmental norms, which posit that child development and learning follows a specific linear process of ages and stages. They depicted this dominant discourse of normative thinking as prioritizing children who mirror the norm and as viewing others as deficient, leading to binary (either/or) thinking. Whitty and Iannacci outlined that such curriculum and practices may be more focused on fitting children into universalized normative developmental ages and stages, leading to measurements and comparisons of

children's abilities/inabilities. Thus, when little emphasis is given to individuality, strengths and difference, the variation present in the socio-cultural contexts of children's lives may be devalued.

Through reconceptualist perspectives, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) critically examined developmental appropriateness and the ensuing issues of quality that emerged, opening a conversation of multiple perspectives and approaches to early childhood education environments and the desire to produce quality. In order to remain critically reflective, it is important to note that the ideas presented in this thesis are not meant to assert that a specific pedagogy of risky play exhibits quality, rather they highlight a deconstructive process that led to multiple complex perspectives surrounding the phenomenon of risky/(risky) play.

With many inspirations and the introduction to critical questioning, I began a process of deconstructing and challenging my beliefs and practices around DAP (Bredekamp, 1987), rather than dismissing it altogether. Cannella (2006) identified deconstruction as being "defined in multiple ways, as a method of reading and interpreting (the word and/or the world) that reveals hidden meanings, silences, contradictions, and sites of power" (p. 16). She challenged early childhood education, including developmentalism, through critically questioning, deconstructing, evaluating and identifying dominant themes in the field. Cannella proposed that through these processes a journey of critique and possibility might begin. Further, she offered an alternative approach that focused on social justice and human agency. Burman (2007) described deconstruction as "a process of delineating and commenting on these discourses" (p. 301). She also cautioned against the act of reconstructing too quickly; imparting the idea that deconstruction is an ongoing process that opens one up to new and ongoing critical perspectives.

Similar processes ignited my evolving reconceptualization of practice as an early childhood educator.

Through deconstruction and critical reflection, one can challenge and disrupt taken-for-granted notions of child development and early childhood education practices. Tying the importance of these ideas together, reconceptualization strives for social transformation and reconstruction of early childhood education, envisioning possibilities through construction, deconstruction and reconstruction (Whitty & Iannacci, 2009). Reconceptualization invites educators to think and act in ways that focus on children's socio-cultural contexts and critical understandings of children and their potentialities. We can then rethink our understandings of children as "human beings with rights, strengths and multiple identities" (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot, & Sanchez, 2015, p. 196).

Further contesting dominant discourses and expanding the importance of relationships with environments and materials in children's learning experiences, Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) and Lenz Taguchi (2011) described a relational materialist approach to learning and becoming. This approach draws upon material feminist theories including Barad's (2007) onto-epistemological ideas of learning and becoming; mutual, interdependent and intra-active processes. Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) remind us that agency can be understood as a "quality that emerges *in-between* different bodies involved in mutual engagements and relations" (p. 530). Further, Lenz Taguchi (2011) posits that relational materialist perspectives compel us to think about children's learning and identities in new ways, as "becoming organisms" through "an effect of multiple encounters and inter-relations" in a process of transformation (p. 38). In this connection of being inter-related, organisms and materials can be considered as having agentic inter-relation with children's imaginations and theorizing. Challenging the idea that humans are

at the center, relational materialist perspectives disrupt anthropocentrism and bring attention to the recognition of human relations with organisms and materials as being central to our relationship in the world.

Material encounters in early childhood education are often situated in developmental processes that instruct particular uses, properties and functions for representation, with experimentation often focusing on human agency, thus excluding the shifting role that matter and non-humans play (Kind, 2014). Through disruption of these discourses, we can assume that when we re-think of materials as being agentic and participatory, processes of inquiry can lead to unpredictable, emergent twists and turns of possibility. Following the idea of materials being central to our relationships in early childhood education, Kind (2014) eloquently described the multiple ways materials "live in the world":

> Materials can evoke memories, narrate stories, invite actions, and communicate meanings. Materials and objects create meeting places. In early childhood educations we gather around things to investigate, negotiate, converse, and share. Materials – a block of clay, pots of paint, a brush, a colorful wire, a translucent sheet of paper, a rectangular block – beckon and draw us in. Materials are not immutable, passive, or lifeless until the moment we *do* something to them; they *participate* in our early childhood projects. They live, speak, gesture, and call to us. (p. 865)

This suggests thinking of materials as joint participants in our interactions; as mutually responsive. Kind challenged me to think *with* materials through their agentic movements and transformations.

These ideas of materiality open up multiple possibilities for further inquiry, discussion and (re)consideration. When pedagogical praxis is reconceptualized as co-created with children

and materials, they may become recognized as agentic and taking part in both transforming

environments and being transformed by environments, through playing active roles in learning

and responding intra-actively with materials.

3.5 Phenomenological Research Methods

Using a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997, 2011, 2007),

the research has two main components:

1) introspection; a reflective examination and description of my own personal thoughts,

feelings and experiences specifically related to the beginning and evolving co-creation of

the culture of the program that I led pedagogically, and

2) lived experience reflections; through sharing pedagogical narrations (BC ELF, 2008,

2018, 2019) that reflect deeply and seek to meaningfully understand and think in ways to

(re)consider children's (risky) play experiences.

Phenomenology was described by Moustakas (1994) as a research method that seeks to

understand how people experience a particular phenomenon or situation. The goal of

phenomenology is to describe the essence of a lived experience through deep study of the

particular phenomenon from the perspective of the participants as well as retrospective

recollections of lived experience descriptions. These goals reflect the two main components of

the research study as previously outlined.

A phenomenological research study usually involves bracketing, intuition, analysis, and

description (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing is important to phenomenological reduction through

an unbiased perspective involving the process of isolating the phenomenon and separating it

from what is already known about it. Intuition requires that the researcher become fully

immersed in the phenomenon of study, understanding it from many levels, especially by those

that have experienced it. The data analysis process involves the researcher in full immersion into the rich, descriptive data, organizing it into themes that can be used to describe the perspective of those that lived it. Description occurs when the researcher uses their understanding of the data to describe, make sense of and define the phenomenon and communicate it to others. Thus, by utilizing the main components of introspection and lived experience reflections and Moustakas's (1994) aspects of bracketing, intuition, rich description and thematic organization, I explore the essence of (risky) play as lived by children I worked alongside. By sharing introspection and lived experience reflections, I also exemplify a pedagogical shift in practice (a form of self-study) contributing to ways of (re)considering the concept of (risky) play.

Like Moustakas (1994), van Manen (1997) similarly described a phenomenological view of research as "an intentional questioning and theorizing of the way people experience the world" (p. 5). This involves a study of the essence of what it means to live a particular experience. For one to understand the nature of children's lived experiences of (risky) play, they must reflect upon and separate their own experiences to gain the essence of that particular experience of phenomena. van Manen (2007) more deeply described phenomenology as a project "driven by fascination: being swept up in a spell of wonder, a fascination with meaning" that "percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations-and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative effect" (p. 12). The formative relations created by *being swept up in a spell of wonder* speak to many of my experiences as an educator, some of which are exemplified in chapter five.

As risky play pedagogies are uncommon in Canadian early childhood contexts, especially with children five years of age and younger, it is necessary to better understand the social construction of risky play and how and why it is afforded in this particular context through an in-

depth look at the specific cultural process. First, I consider what allows the dominantly contested phenomenon of risky play to occur by exploring, examining and deeply reflecting upon the culture of this particular early childhood setting. As van Manen (2011) stated:

> The practical significance of phenomenological knowledge is formative in nature: it enhances our perceptiveness, it contributes to our sense of tact in human relations, and it provides us with pathic forms of understanding that are embodied, situational, relational and enactive.

Through this initial practice of researcher introspection, my own perceptiveness to understanding the children's perspectives was greatly enhanced. This study draws upon Moustakas' (1994) and van Manen's (1997, 2007, 2011) details of phenomenological research practice and intends to exemplify highlighted aspects included in both researchers' descriptions.

3.6   Data Collection

Phenomenology involves a variety of data collection methods some of which I draw upon from Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1997, 2007, 2011). I have engaged with the following: exploration, description, interpretation and analysis of the meaning of individual lived experience through accounts of conversations, participant observations, photography, anecdotes and narratives, and lived experience descriptions. Researcher introspection emerged along the continuum of retrospectively looking back and reflecting upon previously lived through experiences.

Through explorative inquiry using these multiple data collection methods, I aimed to make meaning of the children's lived experiences in this early childhood context and culture of risky play, specifically their play desires, their understanding of their abilities and how they engaged in (risky) play. van Manen (1997) stated that "the aim of phenomenology is to transform

lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (p. 36). Therefore, if one's own lived experience is a textual description of reflexive and reflective appropriation, another person may gain the essence of that experience through a rich description that poetically creates meaning and understanding of the essence of the lived through phenomenon.

The data that is drawn up in this study was originally collected as a regular part of my daily work in observing children, thinking pedagogically, critically reflecting, making professional and pedagogical decisions, engaging in collaborative dialogue and co-creating a cultural approach to our center-specific pedagogy alongside children, colleagues and families, and then recording and writing these up in the form of "pedagogical narrations" (BC ELF, 2008, 2018, 2019). These pedagogical narrations, which are defined below, and that I share in this research, have been shared previously by me with parents, colleagues, our organization, the broader early childhood education community and at conferences (all with parental permissions).

3.7   Pedagogical Narrations

The British Columbia Ministry of Education adopted the term "pedagogical narration" (BC ELF, 2008, 2018, 2019) to locally describe the unique processes involved in making both children's learning and the complexities of early years pedagogy visible. More specifically, pedagogical narration is defined in the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (BC ELF) (2019) as:

> The process of noticing and collecting moments from daily practice and sharing these
>
> with colleagues, children, and families to make children's learning processes and

inquiries, as well as educators' pedagogical choices, visible and open to interpretation

and reflection. (p. 51)

Through pedagogical narration, educators are challenged to contest predetermined outcomes,

such as developmental norms, to be curious and respectful of children and their ideas, to co-

construct knowledge with children, families and colleagues, and "to connect with the living

inquiries and keep the learning process 'alive'" (p. 51). These ways of thinking and practicing in

early childhood environments bring forth much complexity, multiple interpretations, alternate

perspectives, critical dialogue, and endless possibilities in contemplating and enacting

pedagogical practice. The role of educators as advocates, educational leaders, researchers,

critical thinkers, and co-constructors of knowledge comes to the forefront through pedagogical

narration (BC ELF, 2019).

Educators continually make pedagogical choices involving their practice with children,

the environment, routines, rituals and materials. Pedagogical narration highlights connections

between intentional choices, emergent curriculum and critically reflective practice. Readers of

the BC ELF (2019) will find a series of critically reflective questions (pp. 69-90) that may

provoke their thinking, invite discussions of meaning and perspectives of pedagogy and practice

"in a spirit of wonder, justice, and research" (p. 69). When educators are curious, listen deeply,

embrace wonder and then share the stories, they invite dialogue for varying interpretations,

diverse voices and potentialities. By making traces (such as materials created by children, written

field notes, audio recordings, photos and video clips) and the emerging pedagogical narration

visible, attention is brought to the ways in which children are making meaning of the world. The

BC ELF (2019) states that "pedagogical narration can take many forms and can be shared in a

myriad of ways; however, they are never complete" (p. 56). Further, working with pedagogical

narrations is not linear; rather it is a cyclical process that can lead to multiple trajectories and

create space for innovative ideas to flourish in pedagogical practice (BC ELF, 2019).

3.8   Research Context

To accomplish this research, I have shared lived experience descriptions in the form of

pedagogical narrations, that occurred at Gathering Place ECC over the past decade. As a part of

the daily program, we spent several hours outdoors, in the play yard, adjacent meadows and

nearby forest. These places offered many opportunities for children to explore their physical

abilities and boundaries outdoors. The children regularly engaged in large motor activities such

as climbing, jumping, balancing, fast running, playful hiding and splashing and sloshing around

in puddles or other small bodies of water. Children often try out new ways of moving their

bodies when outdoors and it was within this context of the daily program that we co-created a

pedagogy of risky play.

As previously highlighted in chapter two, research has shown that risky play primarily

occurs outdoors and in all types of weather (Sandseter, 2009, Little, Wyver & Gibson, 2011,

Coe, 2017). Thus, research related to risky play correlates smoothly with all seasons and weather

patterns, creating data-rich opportunities any time of the year, for instance, ice/snow/deep puddle

play, to highlight children's propensities to play on/in/near these elements. In addition to outdoor

exploration, time spent indoors may also support risky play experiences. As described by

Stephenson (2003), perceived or actual risk is associated with educators' attitudes more often

than actual equipment or materials. If educators read between the lines of policies, procedures

and regulatory practice related to exploratory play, initiating a shift in their pedagogical

approach, they may (re)consider current social constructions of (risky) play. The research context

appropriately highlighted the uniqueness of the program's specific pedagogical approach to

materials and praxis which created various affordances (Gibson, 2015) for risky play. The context also created multiple opportunities to further inquire into the children's meanings and understandings of their lived experiences of the phenomenon under study.

The pedagogy of risky play that I led included much critically reflective dialogue with my colleagues, the children and their families, and unsettled the safety discourses more commonly characterized as bubble wrapping (Malone, 2007) in early childhood contexts. Visiting scholars, university and college groups, researchers, non-governmental organization personnel, licensing officers and other interested parties came specifically to see our particular pedagogical approach to risky play in action in our early childhood setting. Not only did these visitors reinforce the value of our approach, they also shared multiple perspectives and curiosities, further engaging the critical component of our pedagogical practice.

3.9   Participants

The participants for the research study were children between the ages of four and five years of age, who were previously enrolled in the early childhood center. With parental consent, I later share four retrospective pedagogical narrations (in chapter five) related to the evolving program approach to risky play, children's lived experiences of (risky) play and play that can cause us to (re)consider (risky) play. These particular pedagogical narrations have been chosen as they reflect various aspects of the phenomenon under study, are thick and rich in description, are reflective of deep thinking and exemplify critically reflective practice. The pedagogical narrations involve child participation, illuminate children's perspectives and lived experiences of (risky) play, and invite further questions for educators to think in new ways to (re)consider (risky) play.

3.10   Researcher Position

The past twelve years produced an intense process of disruption, self-examination, critical reflection and dialogue with others resulting in my transformative praxis with children. The ensuing deconstruction contributed to shifting my own ways of thinking about children's growth, capabilities and learning away from the modern ideas of developmentalism, such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp, 1987) and child centeredness. Using a critically reflective, social constructionist approach (Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008) and relational materialist (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Lenz Taguchi, 2011) lens, I continue to reconceptualize my thinking and practices in early childhood education by creating meaning through pedagogical narrations and interactions with children, others, materials and the environment. I seek to create alternate possibilities where children are valued as citizens with rights and active participants in their early education experiences.

By seeking alternative early childhood pedagogies that allow children to co-construct knowledge, we can critically question what is left out when concepts such as play become dominated by fear-based rhetoric, leading to safety discourses that restrict play and full exploration of one's environment. With relational materialist and social constructionist ideologies we can view children through expanded lenses.

3.11   Ethical Considerations

I take my roles of a professional early childhood educator and an ECE researcher very seriously. I understand the differences between minor and major injuries and, in my daily work with children, suspended all data collection (observations, field notes, photography, etc.) immediately to help and support any child experiencing painful consequence while physically exploring.

The study's trustworthiness can be verified through the many levels of scrutiny I have undergone in sharing the pedagogical narrations. My perspectives and perceptions have been questioned with breadth and depth by colleagues, parents, the greater ECE community, at professional development conferences, and also with my supervising committee members. Further, I understood and upheld any wishes not to participate in or to withdraw from the study at any time and on any level from photography to full participation. The parent information letter as well as consent forms can be reviewed in the Appendices section of this thesis. Finally, I adhered to all University of British Columbia Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB) (n.d.) requirements.

3.12 Types and Sources of Data

Within a social constructionist approach, the research process is iterative; meaning that the process lends itself to much repetition. This particular phenomenological inquiry includes a retrospective selection of pedagogical narrations. The following data collection sources were used as part of my daily work as an early childhood educator engaging in critical and reflective practice: participant observation, field notes and reflections, emergent questioning, photography, video and audio recording, introspection, drawing, anecdotes and pedagogical narrations. Many of these sources of data were collected informally as part of my educator role, that included creating pedagogical narrations with the intention of seeking to highlight the children's learning and perspectives of their lived experiences with colleagues, parents and the wider ECE community, and with the ultimate goal of advocating for risky play. The sample of data chosen (introspective accounts and pedagogical narrations) describes the co-created culture of risky play and aims to explain the essence of the children's lived experiences of (risky) play.

3.13 Data Analysis

During the data management process, I reviewed previously collected data in the form of pedagogical narrations that included observations, anecdotes, photography and critical reflections. These pedagogical narrations have shifted and changed somewhat over time as new questions and theories accumulated. Upon further review and consideration, or (re)consideration, these pedagogical narrations organized and made visible my reflections, thinking and theorizing. Following this idea, I linked the data using an inductive approach to relevant research, generating the beginning of new concepts and theory. Bryman and Bell (2016) discussed the inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research as "one in which the generation of theories and interpretations is the main goal" and "methodologies that seek to determine how individuals interpret their social world" (p. 15). This inductive approach helped guide me in making greater sense of the children's descriptions and understandings of their (risky) play experiences and ways in which educators can (re)consider their own attitudes toward (risky) play. This part of the data collection process was iterative and highlighted the emergence of themes, such as reconceptualizing my approach to learning alongside children and thoughtfully relaxing restrictions on children's natural play experiences by involving children in the co-creation of these. Other themes that emerged include championing the children's capabilities, interests, natural creativity and play desires, facilitating reciprocal learning and peer mentorship, highlighting place possibilities and material encounter inquiries, and co-creating a pedagogy of risky play. These themes contributed to the overall discussion and the conclusion of the study.

3.14 Triangulation

Through the collection and analysis of data in the form of pedagogical narrations, the strategy of triangulation has helped assert that these research data interpretations and the

previously mentioned themes are credible. Through the sharing of pedagogical narrations, I

ensure that I have "portrayed the participants' real views and authentic behaviors" (Marshall &

Rossman, 2016, p. 229). These pedagogical narrations exemplified the children's experiences

through a phenomenological lens, furthering authenticity. Also, as previously discussed under

ethical considerations (p. 40), these pedagogical narrations were subject to intense scrutiny by

sharing them with parents, colleagues, the wider ECE community and at professional

development conferences. Convergence is shown as the varying themes align and agree.

Additionally, some data has extended original notions of risky play, such as the *Stairs to the*

Clouds and *Becoming Blue* where the children involved seemed to be enacting other possibilities

of (risky) play. These are both recognizably valid components of triangulation and continue to

lead me to further explain and construct plausible theories (Mathison, 1988) about the children's

lived experiences and understandings of (risky) play and how educators might (re)consider this

phenomenon.

3.15 Limitations of the Study

It is important to recognize that these thoughts, experiences and pedagogical narrations

have taken place from within a privileged context. Being a part of a large university early

childhood service is a privilege itself. There is a great operational support system, a diverse

community of practice, recognition of the field of early childhood education and highly educated

clientele, as the majority of parents either study or work on campus. While there are multiple

other benefits in being a part of this community, being physically situated adjacent to a large

urban forest, near vast open spaces, within thoughtfully created childcare centers and play yards

also speaks to our undeniable privilege. Recently this position of privilege has prompted me to

problematize how urban and inner-city early childhood programs might be able to experience

their own versions of nature based risky play. I have also wondered what questions of safety might have to be considered before educators become willing to explore with children beyond their early childhood settings. Such problems then make sense in the cycle of this social discourse of safety. I have only just begun to touch the surface of these issues as they could potentially expand into further areas of research related to this topic of (re)considering (risky) play.

Three of the four pedagogical narrations in chapter five feature males as the children involved in risky play with moments of bravery and physical prowess. While I have witnessed several female children in moments of bravery, such as climbing high and jumping down, I had not deeply developed the pedagogical narrations to go along with the photographs and notes I had taken. This is a clear and obvious limitation of this study as it implies that one gender engages more with risky play than the other, even though my experience in working with children debunks that idea.

The study is less flexible in embracing new thoughts and practices around safety discourses, as it leans toward suggesting overcoming them altogether. I realize this is a limitation of the study and that in order for a person to support risky play, their own comfort level must be recognized. As safety and risk are subjective and interpretive, each individual may have a different stance on these ideas. Thus, through acknowledging varying individual levels of affordance and ways of viewing safety, risky play might be further investigated.

Readers may be left wondering about the absence of injury in this thesis. As with daily life, there is always risk of injury present and as an early childhood educator I was ready and well prepared for that. Practicing early childhood educators in British Columbia must hold a valid child related first aid certification that requires renewal every three years (BC Community

Care and Assisted Living Act, 2004). All licensed ECE facilities are also required to have up to date emergency supplies and first aid kits. Both of these requirements enable educators to dutifully respond to any injury from a well-equipped and knowledge-based perspective. Children enrolled in Gathering Place ECC occasionally suffered minor injuries (falls, scrapes, bumps and bruises), and sometimes these were due to experiences with risky play. Also, such minor injuries often occurred through exercising body mechanics such as walking or running, losing balance and then falling and bumping an elbow, landing on their forehead or scraping a knee. Other times children misjudged their positioning (such as losing their footing while climbing up to a height) also resulting in falls, bumps, bruises and scrapes. Through our pedagogical approach to play, much was learned from minor injury, including involving children in risk assessment and the educators' abilities to move forward and continue supporting the exploration of the children's ideas and desires. However, this study is about children's natural inclinations and desires for varying levels of risk suited to their current abilities, interests and motivations to challenge their skills.

Another limitation of the study is in reaching an audience wider than the existing community inquiring into and researching risky play. Although I have presented on risky play at early childhood conferences, I wonder how to provoke educators to critically question and challenge their varying levels of safety practices. With this thesis, I hope to prompt others to (re)consider (risky) play with positivity, as an integral and joyful approach to pedagogical relationships with children, families, other educators, themselves, more-than-humans and materials. Finally, I hope that this challenge will reach a broader group including licensing officers, policy makers, health officials, safety consultants and, ultimately, the parents of the children I am advocating for.

3.16 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and procedures used in this interpretive research study. First, the purpose of the study, main foci and research question were re-identified to determine the suitability of the theoretical framework and research methods chosen in answering the research question. The theoretical framework was outlined to describe the early childhood reconceptualist movement from thinking within developmental norms to challenging these universalized notions of children's growth, development and learning. Social constructionist and relational materialist perspectives emerged with this paradigm shift, seeking alternative early childhood pedagogies that allow children to co-construct knowledge and play active roles in their own learning through reciprocal intra-actions with others, materials and their dynamic environments.

Next, phenomenological research methods were discussed to establish the use of introspection and lived experience reflections throughout this study. These methods help in further defining the phenomenon under study, seeking to share the essence of what it means to live particular experiences. Through deep study including exploration, description, interpretation and analysis, the phenomenon can be defined and communicated to others. The data collection was next discussed. As phenomenological textual descriptions are reflexive and reflective, it is appropriate to retrospectively include accounts of conversations, participant observations, researcher introspection, photography, anecdotes in the form of pedagogical narration in this particular research study.

Through pedagogical narrations, it was discussed that poetic and reflective descriptions of the essence of the children's lived experiences can be phenomenologically expressed. This

unique, locally British Columbian process involves making both children's learning and the complexities of early years pedagogy visible (BC ELF, 2019). This cyclical process can lead to multiple trajectories in pedagogical practice and establishes the role of educators as researchers, critical thinkers and reflective practitioners. In pedagogical narration, there is an emphasis on curiosity and being respectful of children and their ideas which further leads educators to co-construct knowledge with children, families and colleagues.

Next, the details of the research context, participants and researcher position were outlined. A childcare center situated next to a large urban forest, where the researcher previously worked, was selected as the study site. Children involved in the pedagogical narrations were between the ages of four and five years old. Since the aim of this study was to introspectively and phenomenologically describe a particular shift in pedagogical practice to (re)consider (risky) play, the setting and methodology was ideal. This methodology supported the introspective description of reconceptualization resonating the perspectives of social constructionism and relational materialism.

Then, ethical considerations, types and sources of data, data analysis and triangulation were briefly discussed. Ethical considerations were identified to ensure that all BREB requirements were met. It was identified that the data chosen (introspective accounts and pedagogical narrations) would best describe the co-created culture of risky play and meaningfully illustrate the essence of the children's lived experiences of (risky) play. Finally, the limitations of the study were identified and discussed; the privileged context, potential gender bias, lack of flexibility toward safety discourses, absence of discussion of injury, and inability to reach a more varied audience.

Chapter 4: Findings: An Introspective Account of a Co-created Culture of Risky Play

4.1 Overview

This chapter describes the contextual setting in relation to my paradigm shift in praxis through my introspective lens as an educator and researcher. First, the local context of the research site is deeply expanded. The study is situated in the conceptual, cultural, physical, philosophical and socially co-created, continually evolving space of Gathering Place ECC. Then I introspectively describe my reconceptualization of praxis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the significance of risky play, further providing insight into my reasons why and how this particular risky play pedagogy came to be.

4.2 Local Context

4.2.1 Mixed Age Group Pilot Project

Regulations in British Columbia had recently changed to allow family care providers (with ECE certification) to enroll children of multiple ages, up to a maximum of eight children. Our director had the innovative idea to pilot a project that would exceed these agreements, but under the group care provision. An educator employed in another program in our organization offered to research the pilot project and it became her doctoral research: *Caring, Dwelling, Becoming: Stories of Multiage Childcare* (Thompson, 2014). A thorough proposal was sent to the licensing body and after negotiations, approval was given to our organization to pilot a maximum of four mixed age programs. They would operate with a group childcare license for children between the ages of three to five years, to a maximum of twenty-four children enrolled. The pilot project required that children enrolled under the age of three years, would need an

approved placement from licensing prior to their admittance and there would be a maximum of ten children in this age group. The agreement also stated that the pilot project must have a coordinator, be researched, and implement both a primary caregiving system (to ensure all children's care needs were met) and responsive curriculum (to ensure children of the varying ages and developmental abilities were challenged appropriately).

These requirements were new to our organization, British Columbia and Canada and it was the task of the educators involved to conceptualize this new way of providing early childhood education. Twenty-two educator participants underwent a process of critical reflection and team building. This dynamic and committed group of educators began conversations that contested developmental norms, traditional practices, and ideas of learning, teaching and caring. Discussions then turned to ways of attending to children, approaching responsive curricula and exploring innovative ways of being with children. It was during this time of creating a new program and style of caregiving that I became fully immersed in transforming my own practice.

During this transformation, I returned to university part time to complete an undergrad degree in Early Childhood Care and Education and to become better informed about the emerging practices, theories and innovations in the field of ECE. I drew from many theoretical and philosophical inspirations including the Reconceptualist Movement in Early Childhood Education, the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, the BC ELF (2008, 2018, 2019), Max van Manen and his ideas expressed in *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (1997) and *The Tone of Teaching: The Language of Pedagogy* (2002), Dr. Kind, Dr. Delgado and the faculty of Capilano University, and I became intrigued by Sandseter's (2007, 2009, 2010, 2012) ideas on risky play. Although I did not want the research process to end, the mixed age research project was completed in 2015 finding that these four programs

could continue to operate by maintaining the core requirements of having a coordinator, implementing primary caregiving systems and approaches of responsive curriculum.

4.2.2   Place Connections

As much of the research on risky play comes from Norway, this led me to inquire into their ways of being within the outdoor environment. In Scandinavia, close connections with nature and surroundings are described by the term *Friluftsliv* (Gelter, 2000). Gelter (2000) explained *Friluftsliv* (free air life) in its original philosophical meaning as a "lifestyle based on experiences of the freedom in nature and the spiritual connectedness with the landscape" (p. 2) and more-than-human world which requires principles of respect and responsibility for natural surroundings. Similarly, in Canada we can look to "a critical pedagogy of place" (Gruenewald, 2003) which means being "connected to experiential learning, problem-based learning, constructivism, outdoor education, indigenous education, environmental and ecological education… as well as other approaches that are concerned with context and the value of learning from and nurturing specific places, communities or regions" (p.3). Critical place pedagogy principles involve children having meaningful experiences in the natural world, thus enabling them to love it. This place-based pedagogy challenges educators to "expand the scope of their theory, inquiry and practice to include the social and ecological contexts of our own and others' inhabitance" (p.10).

These approaches can propel us to enact ideas such as Indigenous ways of being (Cohn & Hasharon, 2011) which prioritize land and place connections as holistic, relational and reciprocal relationships in learning. As Cohn and Hasharon (2011) pointed out, the continually shifting environmental and social conditions that once made Indigenous practices, such as "knowing, feeling and seeing the sacred text of the land," possible are no longer a reality in many places (p.

17). However, it is by "learning about these practices that we may develop our own place-specific, culturally-appropriate practices" (p. 16). Cohn and Hasharon illuminated that deep ecology proposes the creation of the ecological self as being intertwined with self, others and the environment. This relates to practices of Indigenous ways of knowing (Cohn & Hasharon, 2011) through education as philosophy, values and action. These practices are a way of life that then become further enacted through rituals and ceremonies within a community-based approach to learning, contextualized within the family, community and culture. It is through these holistic, value-based, place-specific ways of being that we may create our own place connections and cultural practices.

As I entered this study, I began asking these guiding questions: How do we acknowledge the land (and its histories) and surrounding natural resources upon which we dwell, through our ways of being within the world and with each other? More specifically, what values around land and place connections do we enact in our daily pedagogy of risky play? We started with discussions about more-than-human entities, values of nature and acknowledgment of first peoples and their current and historical connections to the land. Following the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action* (2015), we had recently begun interweaving the *First Peoples Principles of Learning* (B.C. Ministry of Education and First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2015) into our program. We regularly gathered in the forest, read Indigenous children's books and practiced saying a land acknowledgment with the children. Through these approaches we aimed to create a sense of awareness and respect, and open discussions related to Indigenous knowledge, pedagogy, place connections, history and culture.

4.2.3 The Possibilities of a Place

Situated next to a large urban forest, the outdoor space at Gathering Place ECC in particular seemed to invite risky play. Free from typical playground equipment, the yard was naturally landscaped with large boulders, meandering pathways, various sizes of climbable trees and shrubs, hills, hiding spaces and a ten-foot-high living willow hut (a living structure that was planted and then interwoven by myself and other educators in ways that it continuously grows, shifts and transforms). A large sand pit, a tree house, a rain barrel and a moveable fire pit were main features of the yard. Additionally, loose parts (Nicholson, 1972) such as portable wooden ladders, tree stumps, wooden planks, scrap pieces of wood, various sections of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) piping, hammocks, ropes, twigs, pinecones, sticks and river rocks afforded the children multitudinous possibilities for play. To exemplify the importance of incorporating loose parts into play spaces, Nicholson (1972) said "in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are proportional to the number and kind of variables in it" (p. 6). Thus, the amalgam of these rather ordinary materials and young children lent themselves to the invitation of much creative active play. There was often sorting, arranging and transporting, tinkering, pouring, dumping, mixing, balancing, climbing, jumping, swinging, running and hiding that took place. Yet, many of these same places and materials created space to wonder, observe, retreat and "while" (Jardine, 2008).

Jardine's (2008) ideas on "whiling" included lingering over a topic or idea, "working at it, composing it, composing ourselves over it, remembering and cultivating one's memory of it" (p. 226) which bring deeper meaning to children's risky play activities (such as perching atop the willow hut for long durations of time) and our role in honoring and affording such opportunities. He said that "*to be* worthy of *while* means not being a disconnected, fragmented, distanced,

manageable object, but to be lived with" (p. 225). If we give children the opportunity to more fully enjoy their bodies' movements and feats while exploring their surrounding environments, perhaps they will connect with the complex world in meaningful ways. Possibilities of Gathering Place ECC afforded children with many opportunities for high activity as well as places to retreat, daydream, imagine, make meaning and reconsider the events of the day.

Additionally, places outside of the gated yard consisted of vast grassy expanses with large scattered trees and some small forested areas. In this expanse, there were left-overs from modern human settlements (housing complexes previously situated there that had been condemned and demolished). These left-overs included swing sets, benches, picnic tables, a community garden, a paved laneway and a group of boulders in a circular pattern. These places became destination spots or treasured places to roam to, explore, express bodily creativity and engage in various forms of risky play.

The "gathering place" is where we began and ended our visits in these woods. We sat together there and said "hello" and "goodbye and thank you"...

Figure 4.1: The "gathering place"

Inside of the nearest small forest, was a "gathering place" with a mock fire pit and stumps in a circle, where we often sat. Once, we observed a coyote wake up from sleeping in its den, pause and look at us before meandering off in another direction. We visited this gathering place regularly and created a ritual of saying "hello" and "goodbye and thank you" to the birds, insects, rocks, plants, trees, air, rain, squirrels, raccoons, coyotes and the people who came before us for sharing this beautiful space with us.

Often the children took turns navigating the climb to the top of an old stump, perching atop and looking around at everything from a heightened view of the world. They regularly protected "baby" plants by building small enclosures with sticks and twine around them. Other times they would muck around in the deep puddles and pond, "fishing" for dinner to cook on our "bonfire." They also had great fearful fun playing hide-and-seek with flashlights in the dark dusky afternoons of November. Often these dusky adventures and games would take place around the time parents began arriving to take their children home at the end of the day. It was a great invitation for parents to become a part of this wondrous play and often times they willingly participated, perhaps as an enjoyable way of reconnecting with their own childhoods. Other times, the children lovingly created artifacts from natural materials that they later "gifted" to the forest as acts of gratitude.

All of these experiences within our natural surroundings opened up many ideas for further inquiry into our reciprocal relationship and connectedness with nature and natural phenomena. The multitudinous possibilities that these (and other surrounding) special places created include a perceived sense of wonder and closeness with nature and the landscape that

guided me as an educator and as a person. It was there in those moments of my work with children that I felt a sense of reprieve from the banal order of modern life.

4.2.4   A Lively Environment

The "environment as third educator" (Gandini, 1998) was an underlying principle of our program as we were inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to education, where the three teachers are: the adults, the children and the physical environment. Gandini (1998) said;

> In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible: it must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up-to-date and responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge. (p. 177)

Based on Gandini's ideas, I chose to call the environment lively as it would shift and transform with the creations of the children, provocations from educators and others, experiences with materials and questions and intra-actions with(in) the environment.

Ideas about studio practices largely influenced our ways of exploring the environment and materials within the program. Kind (2014) described the multiple ways materials "live in the world" creating places for investigation, curiosity, creativity and discussion (p. 865). At Gathering Place ECC, children worked with materials in a repetitive way of truly getting to know a material over time. The material could be the willow or maple tree in the yard and how a child's experience within that tree might shift and change over time (through attempts at climbing, seasonal changes, observation of others climbing, courage and bravery, physical prowess, etc.). The material may be fabric and how fabric can speak to a child's imagination and

create transformation from a child to a ninja, to a princess, or to one practicing coyote Kung-Fu. The materials for exploration in the art space consisted mainly of paper, drawing materials, wood, clay, stones and paint. The materials became lively and agentic when children were called to engage with them, creating a transformative space for new possibilities. Each material was repeatedly explored over time to create an interrelationship and understanding of the material, its properties and the child's reliving of their experience with the material. Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind and Kocher (2017) said:

> Thinking *with* materials transforms early childhood education, provoking educators to notice how materials and young children live entangled lives in classrooms, how they change each other through their mutual encounters. We are curious about the ways such a shift in perspective might change our interactions with materials, children, other educators – and perhaps even change the nature of our engagement with society and the world. (p. 2)

This is a pivotal quote in exemplifying the transformation of Gathering Place ECC over the years and my reconceptualization of praxis in early childhood education. As previously described, many components have contributed to this reconceptualization and the co-created culture of our program and it has been the ongoing consideration, reflection, critical thinking and (re)consideration of these components that has led to this ongoing shift in praxis. As an educator, I have significantly shifted my ways of thinking and being with children through our mutual encounters, complex interactions, curiosities and my deep reflection. In turn, this paradigm shift and reconceptualization of my praxis has brought me to inquire deeply into risky play, how children live their experiences of (risky) play and social discourses surrounding the concept.

4.2.5   A Culture of Peer Mentoring

Within the co-created culture of our mixed age setting, more experienced children acted as guides to less experienced children, thus enacting mentorship and support through practices of "dialogic pedagogy" (Vadeboncoeur, 2017). Following Vygotskian (1978) ideas about teaching and learning, Vadeboncoeur (2017), illustrated this dialogic pedagogy as involving the social, cognitive and emotional work by learners and teachers in a relationship. In this co-constructed relationship of social practice, dynamic and responsive approaches further development. Interwoven in the cultural relationship of Gathering Place ECC, these guides share their lived experiences as meaning making to support novice risky players. Within our specific cultural co-creation of risky play, a more experienced child/guide who had been enrolled in the program for a few years would often move alongside a new, less experienced child offering physical and or verbal support (as a different child would have previously done with them). For example, the child guide may offer verbal and physical support while the less experienced child attempts to walk, balancing on an elevated plank. In situations such as this, the guide might use culturally specific language, such as: "Put your arms out so you can balance; the plank is wobbly; can you feel it moving? Here! I'll hold your hand while you walk; go slow because wood is slippery when it's wet!"

Socio-cultural supportive relationships such as these greatly impact young children's learning and exploration and aid in creating new meanings. Having the ability to draw upon previously lived experiences and emotions supports and extends this concept. Within our culture of risky play, we were continuously enacting similar experiences, remembering and discussing previous experiences, then re-interpreting and changing their meanings over time with additional

people from various socio-cultural backgrounds, thus bringing deeper meaning to the lived experience of peer mentoring.

4.3   Grounding the Significance of Risky Play

4.3.1   Reconceptualizing Praxis in Early Childhood Education

As previously described, I have significantly shifted my ways of thinking and being pedagogically. Moving from a relatively safety-discourse approach, I began to deeply problematize my interpretation and enactment of practice through increased inquiry into alternate approaches, further exploring conceptualizations of safety, risk and hazard. I asked myself to consider the limitations on children's play when implementing restrictive approaches. Vecchi (2010) wrote about crossing the border between previous ways of practice to a completely new approach of working with children. As part of this reconceptualization, I challenged developmentalism and became informed of multiple new theoretical perspectives (described in chapter three). For example, I participated in local dialogue circles (including the Investigating 'Quality' Project, 2008), embarked upon exploring the benefits and challenges of mixed age child care (the pilot project I was a part of), read many books and articles related to theoretical approaches within early education and completed an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Care and Education. In order for me to enact a pedagogy of risky play, I took a risk in my role as an educator, grappling with multiple aspects of safety discourses and pedagogical dilemmas. I observed and responded to children with a renewed way of listening to their desires and placing their motivations and inspirations at the forefront of my practice. This master's thesis is the culmination to date of my introspective account of transformative experiences as an educator

having lived the complexities of a risky play pedagogy and a description of the children's lived experiences of (risky) play; essentially bridging the border between safety and danger.

Vecchi (2010) wrote about observation and documentation "offering glimpses into the world of childhood; a world we have had access to in the past, but whose memories are difficult to hold onto…" as a sense of surprise that gives meaning to our work with children (p. 148). These words resonate deeply for me and interweave my passion into this risky play pedagogy through the pedagogical narrations that follow in chapter five. I believe that our vocation should remember and honor children as beings immersed in the joys, curiosities and time of childhood, thus reinforcing the importance of creating pedagogical spaces and sharing pedagogical narrations that exude these attributes. This dedication to our professional roles and evolving praxis also includes what we can learn from and with children and materials when we (re)consider our roles in the social discourses within which we live.

4.3.2   Why Risky Play?

Having undergone my own transformative practice, it is hard to remember that my practice used to be embedded in restrictive approaches to early childhood education. I had believed that I had the responsibility of keeping children safe; meaning that they should not try things with the potential of injury. I was an educator who made statements like: "Walking feet!", or "Chairs are for sitting!", or "You're too high!" During this reconceptualization, I began to reflect upon my own childhood experiences with risky play. With deep inquiry into my practice as an educator and new understandings of what it meant to listen to children, I crossed the border between safety and danger. Now it is hard to imagine myself in that previous frame of mind.

This deeply reflective inquiry brought me back to my own childhood (risky) play adventures. With inspiration from the children's experiences, I was able to return to my lived

experiences of climbing high in trees, playing out in my neighborhood, exploring the woods near our family lake cabin and sliding in the mud at the nearby creek. Finding the beauty, joy and surprise in what I learned from observing the children's creativity, play and listening to their perspectives propelled me on this journey to engage pedagogically with risky play.

Decisions of what to allow and disallow evolved from a complex combination of regulations, assessing risk and hazard, dialogue with colleagues in the center, policy and rationale, parental and professional comfort levels, and, most importantly, individual children's abilities and desires. At the initial moment of encounter, I often found myself struck with awe at the magnificence of the event itself. The feeling of being "swept up in a spell of wonder" (van Manen, 2002, p. 12) would cause me to consider what it might be like if I did not have to worry so much and instead could truly revel in these special moments. This wondering caused me to disrupt the safety discourses that had previously been embedded unproblematically within my own practice. Notions of responsibility and safety were not completely left behind, rather, I was brought to (re)consider my role in ensuring a safe environment for children. My reconceptualization of this responsibility involved a realization of children's desires and prowess as integral to their own mastery of risk assessment and decision making regarding their play freedoms.

In my experience at Gathering Place ECC, every time something "new" or "never tried before" happened with the children, it created feelings of both excitement and discomfort within me. In this juxtaposition, I often felt absolutely amazed by the creativity and bravery of the children and their ideas, and simultaneously, a sense of dread and unease should something go wrong. These affordances come laden with the possibilities of risk of injury and judgment by others (colleagues, parents, administration, passersby, licensing officials, etc.) as an irresponsible

59

educator. Often these "never tried before" experiences could become quite controversial and thus reinforce the notion of safety when faced with these pedagogical dilemmas. Examples of these experiences include; the building of a fire pit, lighting and gathering around small fires, climbing onto and sitting on the fence and then traversing the fence into the neighboring yard, and climbing high in trees. As the supervisor of the program, I felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility; responsibility to afford children the recognition of their unique ideas and capabilities, and simultaneously, responsibility for the potential of injury and upset parents, judgment from colleagues, reprimand from my superiors, etc. It was in these moments of navigating my own risk to afford these opportunities that I began to realize the significance and to champion the complexities of risky play.

4.4 Summary

This chapter was written through my deeply introspective lens as an educator and a researcher. First, the locally situated contextual setting was described. This involved several aspects including specific components related to the mixed age group pilot project, place connections, possibilities of a place, a lively environment and a culture of peer mentoring. The innovative approach of mixing age groupings (thereby challenging developmental norms) was introduced as the main catalyst in this transformative practice. The pilot project of mixing age groupings required that the project be researched and have a coordinator oversee the project. The other requirements were to create and implement both a primary caregiving approach to caring for children and a responsive curriculum design that would not only meet, but challenge the diverse ages, interests and abilities of the children. These last two components specifically invited deeper thought and engagement with disruptions of preconceived notions of child development, normative theory and curriculum design.

Descriptions of place connections spoke to the local context as situated within an urban forest on traditional Indigenous territories. The regular visiting to a particular place (the gathering place and surrounding area) in these territories brought forward an inquiry into ecological and critical place pedagogy. Through this inquiry, rituals emerged relating to understanding and connecting more deeply with the histories of the place itself. Many possibilities with(in) the Gathering Place and surrounding places were identified in great detail to illustrate the deep connections and relationships to the land, the surrounding environment and with each other. These possibilities and descriptions of the environment as lively contributed greatly to the renewed and dynamic ways of approaching curriculum. The role of the lively environment was illustrated as a transformative approach to exploring relationships with materials, more-than-human entities, environments and ideas surrounding the childcare center.

Finally, the culture of peer mentoring as a dialogic approach to teaching and learning were discussed. This dialogic approach involved a sociocultural supportive environment where children would act as guides sharing their lived experiences and meaning making with each other, thus co-creating new learning together.

Chapter 5: Findings: Pedagogical Narrations

5.1   Overview

This chapter includes the pedagogical narrations that phenomenologically describe the children's and researcher's experiences of risky play within the particular pedagogical praxis of the study site. The pedagogical narrations are written chronologically beginning with a magnificent climbing event, followed by an imaginative height perspective, next an experience of "ilinx" (Caillois, 1961, p. 23) while spinning and, finally, a child's transformative shift of becoming blue. This chapter is meant to highlight the essence of these particular lived experiences and the phenomenology of (risky) play at Gathering Place ECC.

5.2   Pedagogical Narration #1: A Climbing Vignette

A child begins climbing the living willow hut. As I approach, the child rapidly climbs up and through the interconnected web of woven branches, with speed, swiftness, and agility, emerging through the top of the canopy. The child is now perched atop the ten-foot willow hut. With challenging, yet precise climbing movements, including the use of frictional tension to move up and down inclines, suspension on twigs, concentration of body weight, bridging or crossing gaps, and dealing with obstructions, the child has navigated the climb with what could be described as "arboreal locomotion" (Preuschoft, 2002). Immediately thereafter, two more children quickly ascend into the willow hut. (Walters, 2015)
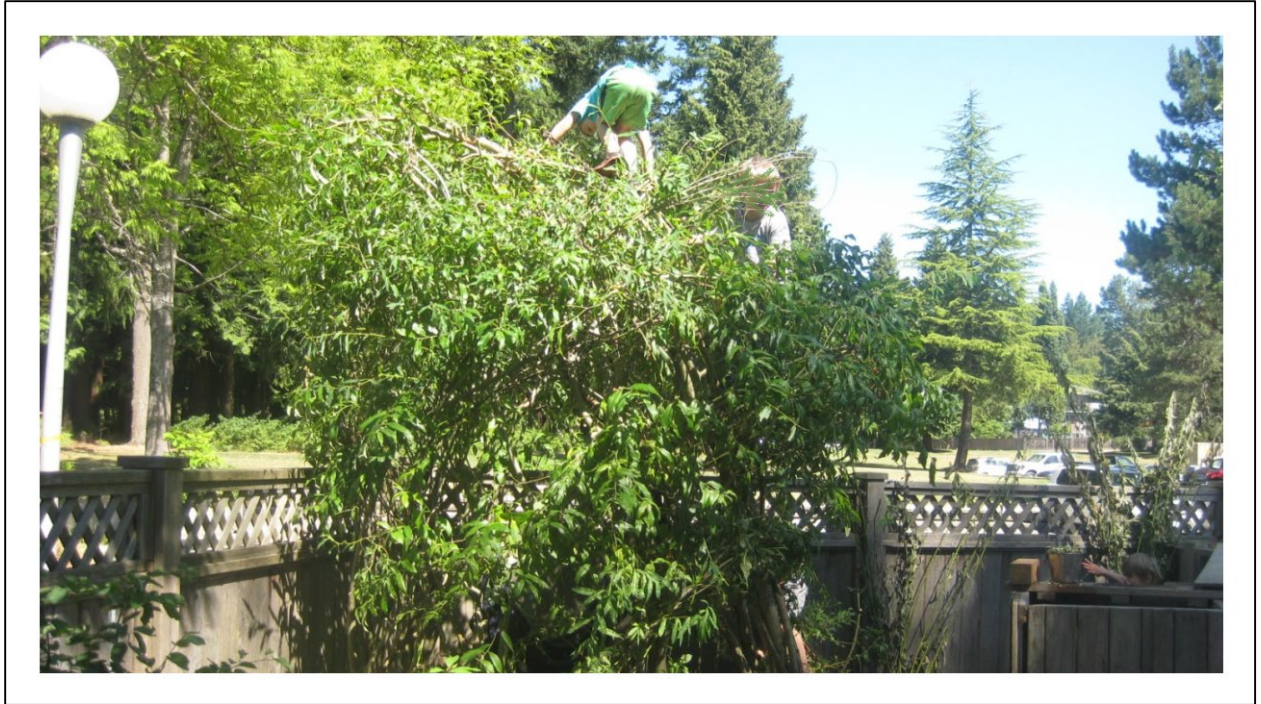
Figure 5.1: The initial willow hut climb

Figure 5.2: All three children navigating the climb

Figure 5.3: Stopping and turning around

Figure 5.4: Pausing, looking at the size of the branches

Figure 5.5: Resting at the top of the hut

I am brought to briefly reflect upon each child and myself individually. Asher[3], the first

four-and-a-half-year-old boy could be described as very physically capable and agile, as he often

went to climbing walls on weekends with his parents and rode his bicycle (without training

wheels) to daycare every day. This was the first time any children had attempted to climb the

willow hut and it all happened very quickly before my eyes. Once he reached the top of the

willow hut, Asher proudly looked around and down at his peers clambering up after him. While

this physical experience of climbing may not have been pushing him into the next level of his

physical abilities, Asher was enacting peer mentoring. One of his peers asked how he had

---

[3] Pseudonyms have been used for all children's names throughout the pedagogical narrations in order to maintain confidentiality and permissions have been granted for the use of all photos.

climbed up there and this resulted in a meaning making experience where Asher had to recall which branches were strong enough to hold or step on. He then provided very specific verbal guidance from up above.

The second four-and-a-half-year-old boy, Lyosha, had a great amount of motivation to climb and reach his favorite peer at the top of the willow hut. He had recently returned from a relatively long absence at daycare due to chemotherapy treatment for leukemia. His mother reported that he was frustrated by the temporary inability to play with his friends and challenge his body. During his absence and recovery, Lyosha had spent much time being forced to rest physically, channelling his energy into reading books and building elaborate designs with Lego. However, he now seemed physically strong enough, and most importantly, determined to participate in this exciting challenge. He reached the top out of breath and joined his friend, where they perched and looked around with their enlarged view of the world.

The third boy, Nathan, five-years-old, was the least active of the three and often preferred seated or low exertion activities. His parents said that evenings and weekends were often spent engaging in activities such as walking, playing with manipulatives and watching television programs. However, at the time, he had formed strong relationships with the two other boys and clearly wanted to be involved in play with them. My observations revealed that these peers and their social interrelationship propelled him, creating the desire and motivation required to attempt the climb. Nathan initially began the climb and got stuck near the top. Given that he preferred low exertion activities, I assume it was partly due to low muscle tone in his arms, core and legs as well as lack of physical coordination and partly due to fear (as his facial expressions and nervous voice during his climbing attempt were attributed to fear). Seemingly unable to or unsure of where to put his foot next, he then cautiously began to descend, then stopped and

watched from a midway point as his two peers confidently descended over and around him, through the interconnected branches. Later, after observing the other two boys climbing and descending repeatedly, Nathan asked the first, most capable climber how he had climbed up there, and then somewhat shakily reattempted and successfully managed the climb to the top of the willow hut with verbal guidance from his peer above.

Below, I watched with mixed emotions of awe, anticipation, fear and excitement, as well as anxiety about how this event might end up. Yet it also conjured up fond memories of my own childhood tree climbing adventures. In this moment, I had to move outside of my comfort zone, as I too was taking a risk in pushing myself into a position of possible danger and immense responsibility as the responsible educator. However, I felt like I could not say "no" to these children when it was so clear they were quite capable of finding and negotiating a new challenge for their physical levels of expertise. This created a pedagogical dilemma where I had to make an ethical decision. In British Columbia, early childhood educators are guided by ethical principles, explanations and standards of practice which monitor their professional practice (ECEBC Code of Ethics, 2008). Although I was worried about the potential of injury and the responsibility involved in the decision to afford them to continue climbing, I also knew that these children and potential others would be missing out on valuable learning experiences if I chose not to permit the climbing due to fear based decision making.

Through my lived experiences around similar previous experiences of risky play, I had learned that open transparent dialogue with colleagues, parents and administrators, about such kinds of events was the key to awareness, understanding and acceptance. After the children were back on the ground, I promptly engaged in conversation with my colleagues regarding this climbing event and I later followed up with each of these children's parents. These sets of

parents had slightly different views of their children's abilities yet were fully supportive of their curiosity and desire to climb the willow hut. This initial climbing event then became a regular ongoing practice in our program. A few months later I delved into an inquiry project, "Grappling with the Complexities of *Living* Risk-taking Play" (Walters, 2015), in response to creating a fully transparent approach regarding the children's risky play desires and capabilities. During the inquiry project I asked the children questions to more deeply engage with their expressions, viewpoints and understandings of safety and danger.

This specific climbing vignette was a major catalyst for exploring lived experiences of risky play in our early childhood setting and socio-cultural practice. While some adults might think this climbing event to be far too dangerous and posing several safety hazards, others (like me and my team of colleagues) might find it to be an audacious opportunity for lived experience meaning making through creative bodily expression. When such situations arose, our team thoroughly discussed and reflected upon them afterwards. This would happen on many levels; together with children in the moment, later within our team of colleagues, then with parents and administration. After initial discussions and reflection, we almost always returned to the discussions later the same day, over the days to follow and often months and/or years later. In a small group, we collectively discussed what had just occurred. Through this process of dialogic pedagogy (Vadeboncoeur, 2017), we took turns listening to each other's viewpoints (reciprocally), such as what the children's motivations might have been to climb the willow hut and how it potentially made them feel (proud, excited, powerful to be up high). We also delved into how it made the responsible educator (in this case, me) feel (in awe, worried, excited, proud, anxious). In a supportive way of questioning, I later asked the children: "What might happen if you fall?" and "How can you keep yourself and others safe?". Then putting these ideas together

cumulatively, I asked further questions such as: "What should we do the next time?" and "What 'rules' should we create around climbing this willow hut?" (see Appendix C, page 104, in the Appendices for the original rules written in collaboration with the children). The dialogic process also included educator and parent perspectives on these topics, and as families left the program to move on to kindergarten or relocate, and new families joined, a dynamic and ever-shifting cultural co-creation of risky play continued to emerge and evolve.

5.3 Pedagogical Narration #2: The Stairs to the Clouds

During the inquiry project, "Grappling with the Complexities of *Living* Risk-taking Play" (Walters, 2015), I inquired into the children's perspectives of safety and danger in and around the play yard. As previously discussed, safety involves protection, being uninjured and secure, whereas risk includes the probability to encounter danger or hazard in the environment; hazard being a source of harm that could endanger a child. While the children were eager to point out what they perceived as hazards in the yard and discussed why they thought they were dangerous, the conversations and demonstrations of "what might happen if…" morphed into what the children knew they were capable of, rather than remaining focused on restrictions due to danger. I believe this is the link between the conceptual form of risky play and (risky) play, or children's perspectives of their play choices.

Figure 5.6: Galen's photo of his view of the clouds

During this inquiry, Galen, a four-and-a-half-year-old boy climbed right up to the top of the 10-foot-high willow hut. I watched and waited for a while. Each time a child climbed to the top for the first time, I was sure to observe keenly with attentiveness that resulted in an atmosphere of support and curiosity. After a few minutes of waiting and watching, I approached and asked Galen: "How's the view up there?" He began to describe his view from the top as:

> I like to be at the top because I like watching cars. And I can see far away and see the far away tree. And get to the top of the clouds. And when I get to the top of the clouds it makes me very, very small.

"I like to be at the top because I like watching cars.
And I can see far away and see the far away tree.
And get to the top of the clouds.
And when I get to the top of the clouds it makes me very, very small." - Galen

Figure 5.7: Climbing the stairs to the clouds; Galen's photo of the view from the top

I wondered if Galen would have been able to imagine and interpret himself within this enlarged view of the world from the fenced and restrictive surface of the low ground. While a colleague who had also witnessed this event and I discussed this climb, we wondered why the children chose this tree and not others in the yard. We thought that perhaps it was a result of the physical features of this living willow hut. We had worked together intertwining the branches over the years. We concluded that it might be that these woven branches were inviting the children up, like *stairs to the clouds*. Whenever I reflect upon this moment, I feel a sense of beauty and wonder through Galen's description of his lived experience. He was supported to climb the stairs to the clouds and see himself in a unique way that might otherwise be impossible. I continue to marvel at Galen's creative thought process and perspective of himself as "very, very small" once at the top of the clouds.

The initial act of Galen climbing to the top of the willow hut would be categorized as risky play (Sandseter, 2007) due to the nature of playing with height and the likeliness of a sense of thrill and excitement during the climb. However, once the initial climb was completed, I believe that something else was happening for Galen. This is where the lines between the conceptual form of risky play and (risky) play become blurred. Likely he experienced these exhilarated feelings upon his first climb, however, what Galen shared with me about his view from the top makes room for a new way of (re)considering (risky) play. Perhaps risky play is risky for the educators and adults affording the action. Whereas the child as the doer is experiencing the joy and wonders of play. In this narrative, Galen now had a space to ponder and make sense of the world around himself through a perspective shift which enabled him to further "while" (Jardine, 2008) over it. In his last year at Gathering Place ECC, Galen enjoyed countless willow hut perches and I assumed that his desire to go up there was more about nourishing his curiosity, lingering over ideas in the expansive world above ground. Experiences such as these cultivate a certain kind of pedagogical praxis that affords creative and abstract thinking to flourish, enabling children to create theories and connect in meaningful ways with the complex world around them.

I connect these ideas to a specific willow hut perch. I fondly recall one time when Galen was up there for a long time, perching, *whiling* and looking around amidst the interwoven branches. After quite some time, I heard him calling out to someone, saying "Hi! Hi!". I looked over the fence and saw a colleague from another center with a group of children as they were approaching the nearby road, and I waved. At this moment Galen called out to them saying: "Remember to look both ways when you cross the road!". The educator replied: "We will! Thanks!" and "You're pretty high up there!". To which Galen replied: "Yeah, I can see

EVERYTHING…". Perhaps in this profound moment of *whiling*, Galen was positioned to realize how others might be experiencing perspectives of safety and danger.

Figure 5.8: *Whiling* **over perspectives of safety and danger**

5.4   Pedagogical Narration #3: "It tickles in my tummy!"

At the time of this narrative, we had recently installed a new fabric spinning swing in a quiet covered area of the yard. Zahra, four years old, had been spinning herself around for quite a while. I was nearby and watched her face change each time she completed a turn. I observed her facial expression change from smiling to frowning, to excitement, to fear, to nausea and back to smiling very quickly. She stopped herself and laughed, then said aloud: "It tickles in my tummy!" and continued spinning. At that very moment, the literature I have read made a connection for me in understanding the varying emotions involved in thrill seeking, and just how quickly the reversal from pleasure (paratelic state) to displeasure (telic state), back to pleasure

can happen (Sandseter, 2010). It was clear to me that Zahra was thoroughly enjoying the thrill of feeling these varied emotions and sensations.

"It tickles in my tummy!" - Zahra
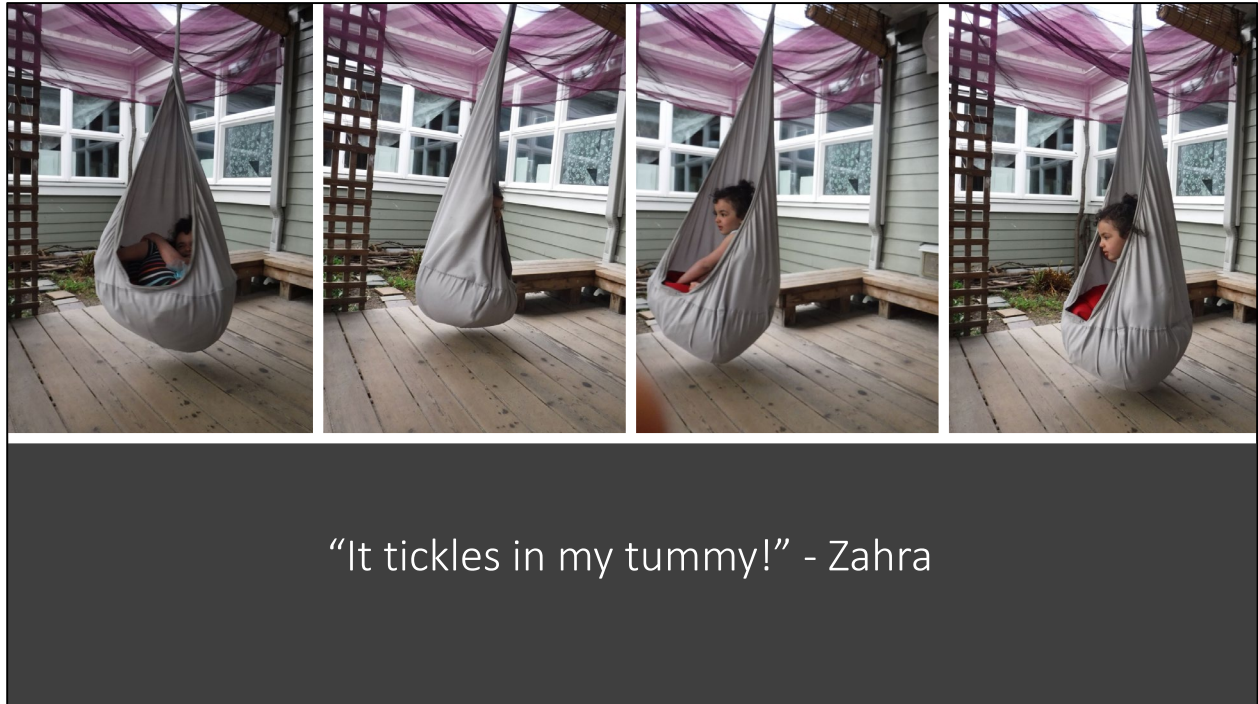
Figure 5.9: "It tickles in my tummy!"

In our dialogic exchange after Zahra finished spinning, I asked her how the spinning had made her feel. She further described the "tickle in her tummy" as: "It was a 'whooshing' feeling, like when I jump on the trampoline. Or go down the big park slide really, really fast!". I commented on how I had been watching her face change and that at one point the color of her skin went very pale. I told her I also noticed her eyes being unable to stay focused on what was around her. Then she said that she felt sick in her stomach, like when she has thrown up before. She explained that she slowed down right away when she felt that way. Zahra said she was stopping herself from throwing up because she had watched her friend throw up after spinning just the day before. Then I said the name for that spinning, dizzy, whooshing feeling, she was enjoying; "*ilinx*", which involves seeking states such as vertigo (Caillois, 1961; Little et al.,

2011). I shared with Zahra that I remembered being her age, and I too loved spinning around and get dizzy until falling down.

Further to this pedagogical narration, a person might ask what risky play affords and constrains? One can assume that risky play has the potential to afford both positive and negative experiential learning opportunities. Such as in this instance of affordance, what the environment (spinning swing) or an adult will allow (not stopping the child from spinning) to happen in a risky play situation affords both feelings of thrill and excitement, also nausea and dizziness. It can be understood that the willow hut affords climbing, our swing affords spinning and the educators afford responsive negotiations in risky play occurrences. The spinning swing continued to afford a myriad of opportunities for children as they later learned to climb on the outside of the swing, holding tight and wildly spinning around as if it was a rope swing. The swing continued to afford opportunities for spinning in another way, by children facing forward and inserting their torso and arms into the hole. Then the children would use their feet to kick off of the surface of the deck, raising their legs and spinning around as fast as possible. These experiences also afford thrilling, exciting and potentially fearful feelings for children. Occasionally a child would lose their balance and fall, but they usually returned to repeating the action. However, these thrilling, exciting and fearful feelings associated with risky play would also have the possibility to constrain one's emotional bravery required to enact risky play in the first place. For example, a child who has taken the chance to jump and then falls and becomes injured, such as a sprain or broken bone, will likely be more cautious and reserved through their lived experiences of injury when encountering that same activity in future risky play encounters. Similarly, environment and educator influences may also constrain risky play through creating

undesirable outcomes for children and educators, and educators may not afford such opportunities in the first place.

5.5 Pedagogical Narration #4: Becoming Blue

The following pedagogical narration has provoked multiple ideas, questions and wonderings. The reviewed research on risky play has summarized it as "thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury" (Sandseter, 2009) and play has generally been described as activities that are freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, creative, imaginative and enjoyable (Gray, 2013). I have previously described instances where I perceived my role in affording risky play to be the riskiest position, as I held the ultimate responsibility for the safety, learning experiences and well-being of the children in my care. With this particular pedagogical narration, I propose another (re)consideration of (risky) play. Within this additional (re)consideration of (risky) play, I include encounters that go beyond the realm of what is socially constructed as safe, clean, appropriate and expected in many early childhood environments. When children are afforded opportunities that fall outside of the social expectations and participate in co-constructing their own learning, educator roles may become very complicated. This pedagogical narration has been included within a study on risky play to illuminate the complexity of risk and the varieties of risk in early childhood settings.

This pedagogical narration reflects a brief moment in time during a lively encounter with blue paint in our dedicated art room. This particular encounter encompassed movement, creation and emergence, and ignited my curiosity into thinking further about dominantly restrictive practices (with art materials) in early childhood environments. I realized I was in a complex moment of risk where I had the opportunity to loosen restrictions more than I ever had before and afford opportunities for creative potential. As these moments unfolded, I noticed what

Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2017) suggested paint might do; "spread, cover, layer, mix, transform itself and others, and leave traces behind" (p. 46).

In our program, children, educators and families, created a dialogue based upon relationships with each other and materials, in this case, blue tempera paint. This dialogue was furthered by "an effect of multiple encounters and inter-relations" (Lenz Taguchi, 2011, p. 38) with materials in ways that explored their liveliness, thus enabling us to think of them as agentic. We thought about materials as having the ability to inspire and provoke us to respond to the intra-activity between materials, bodies, movements and curiosities, much like with physically risky play in the outdoor environment. Lenz Taguchi (2011) described the rhizomatic movements and embodiedness of intra-activity as an emergence; "the flow of events thus becomes a collective and collaborative responsibility on behalf of *all* organisms present, whether they are human or non-human. Responsibility is thus built into the immanent relationship *in-between* everything in the encounters" (p. 48). Thinking with this idea, experimentation with materials affords participants multiple opportunities for emergent processes where transformation can occur.

From my perspective as the educator directly involved in that dynamic moment in time, the narration only begins to capture the essence of what it meant to live that particular experience. Further inquiring into the encounter, my questions and thoughts included: "How did this material (blue paint) come alive through the responsiveness of the children?", "What did the blue paint call for?", "What embodied movements took place?", "How did the children live the experience of becoming blue?", What does this say about becoming and transformation?", "How often do moments like these become governed and directed, rather than supported or led?", and "How far would you go to support children in their natural curiosity and joyful approaches to

experimenting with materials?". While I have not specifically answered these questions, they exemplify the phenomenological approach of inquiring into lived experiences (with blue paint) and could easily be adapted to inquire into lived experiences of risky play. van Manen (1997) described the "becoming" of questions as "the essence of the question is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities…to truly question something is to interrogate it from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being" (p. 43). This description of becoming with questions as an interrogation from the heart of our existence powerfully describes the passion I have for my vocation as an early childhood educator. With questions such as these, we can possibly open spaces for children to more fully experience the joys of childhood and for educators to deepen their practice. Thus, this pedagogical narration exemplifies the heart of praxis and socio-cultural approach of Gathering Place ECC.

Figure 5.10: Traces of becoming blue

On that morning, Lucas and another child had been running around the center with a silly intensity to their energy. As they ran from area to area, I observed them giggling loudly, throwing things on the floor, and interrupting other children engaged in play. I could have easily taken them outside, but I believe that it is first important to try to engage children in sustained play. Instead I provoked their curiosity by inviting them into the art space to see what color had joined the other colors that day. For several weeks we had slowly been introducing new colors from the rainbow for exploration. Upon asking this question, Lucas saw the blue paint and gleefully undressed and began painting himself. Then he knelt down in the center of the room and embodied a hatchling. He stayed there for quite a while, as I watched with fascination and curiosity. He got up a few times and then went back down again. For whatever reason, the blue paint had inspired him to crouch and emerge, crouch and emerge, crouch and emerge… repeatedly.
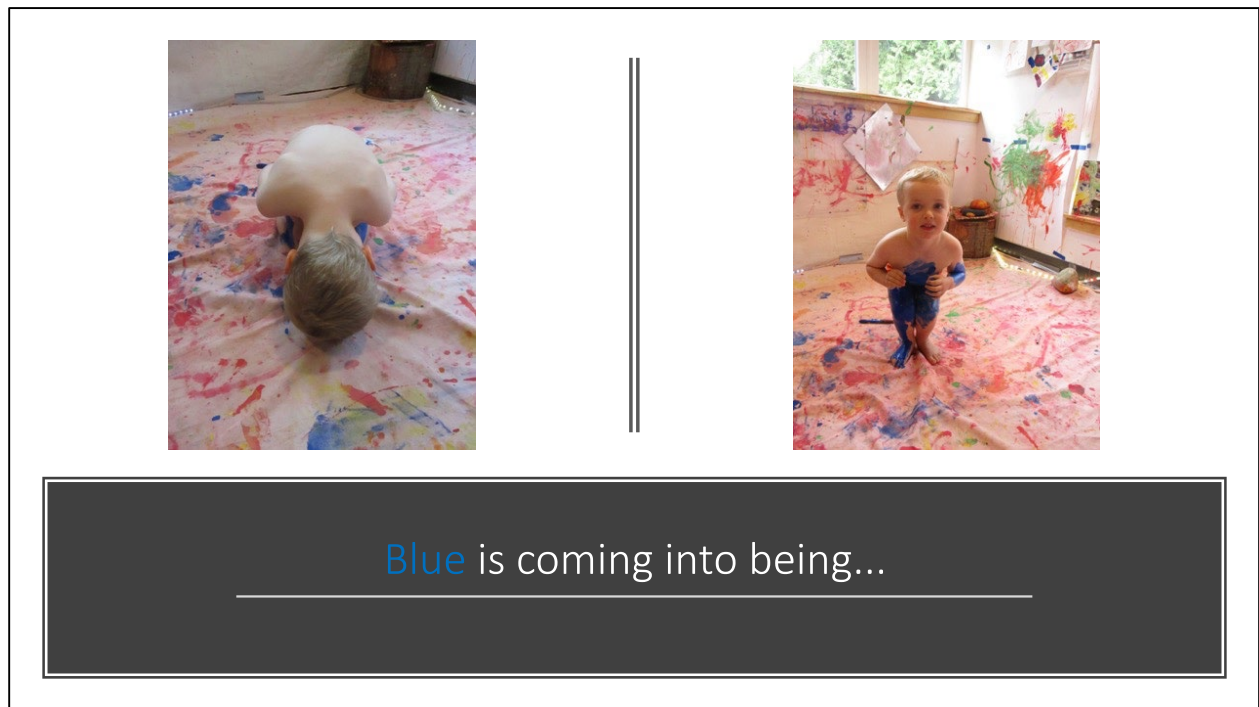
Figure 5.11: Blue is coming into being

I believe we are always in a process of becoming and transformation, with many influences and ideas provoking us. Somehow the blue paint had spoken to Lucas, inspiring him to embody this emergence. His emergence could be interpreted as a mutually responsive encounter between the paint and Lucas's body; the paint affording the opportunity for Lucas to become blue. Upon review of this pedagogical narration, Lucas described his experience here as transforming. I asked him to describe what that meant to him. He thought for a while and then said: "I was changing. Turning into something else!". And that's where his explanation ended. This was extremely provocative to me because we cannot know what the future holds and here was a four-year-old sharing this insightful perspective with me.

> Today blue joined the other colors in the art studio rainbow.
>
> Here's what happened...

Figure 5.12: Transformation

Both indoors and outdoors, the materials we engaged with were transformable. The children's perspectives and the materials themselves afforded this transformability. We had few rules and no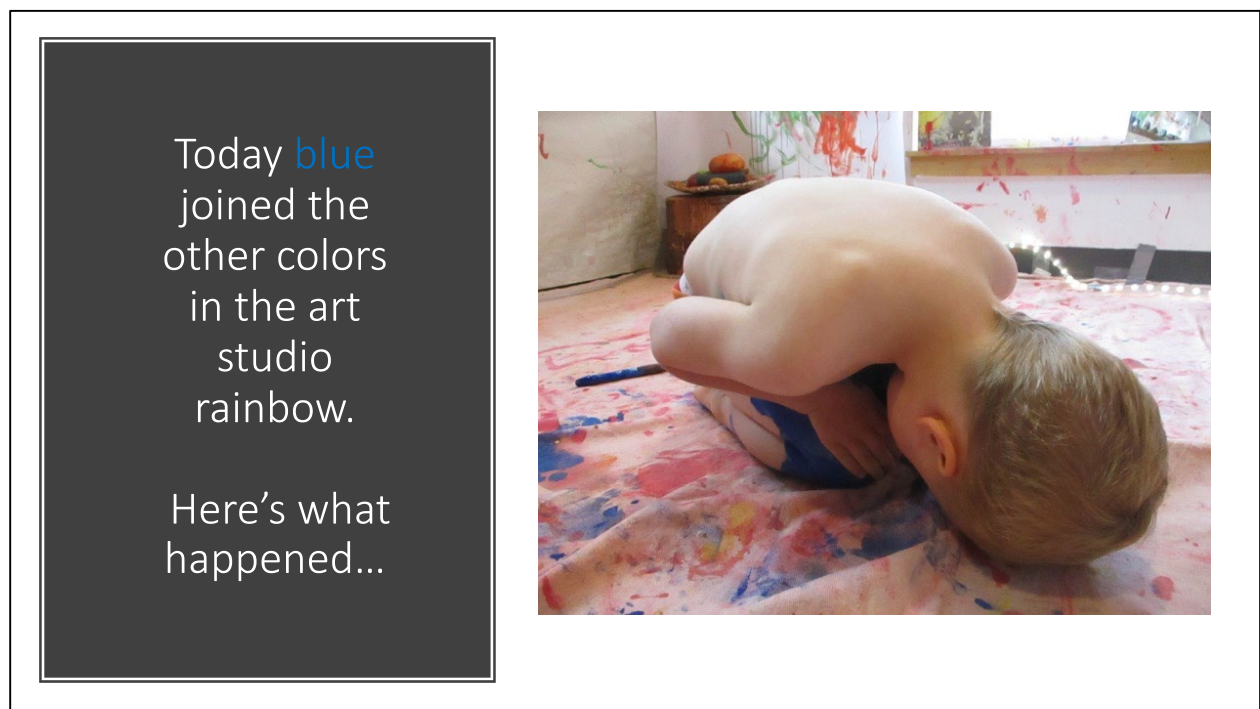ticed that this approach lent itself to much creativity. The children's ideas contributed to the curriculum. We worked together and practiced pedagogical listening to be responsive. We saw new ways of using materials as opportunities for learning. Each material was repeatedly explored over time to create an interrelationship and understanding of the material, its properties and the child's reliving of their experience with the material. These repetitive moments of reliving an experience can also be thought of as phenomenological experiences. Children's thinking can take on different forms and their creativity flourishes through these opportunities for expression. These opportunities also open possibilities for educators in (re)consideration of the uses of materials and children's engagement in the environment and beyond.
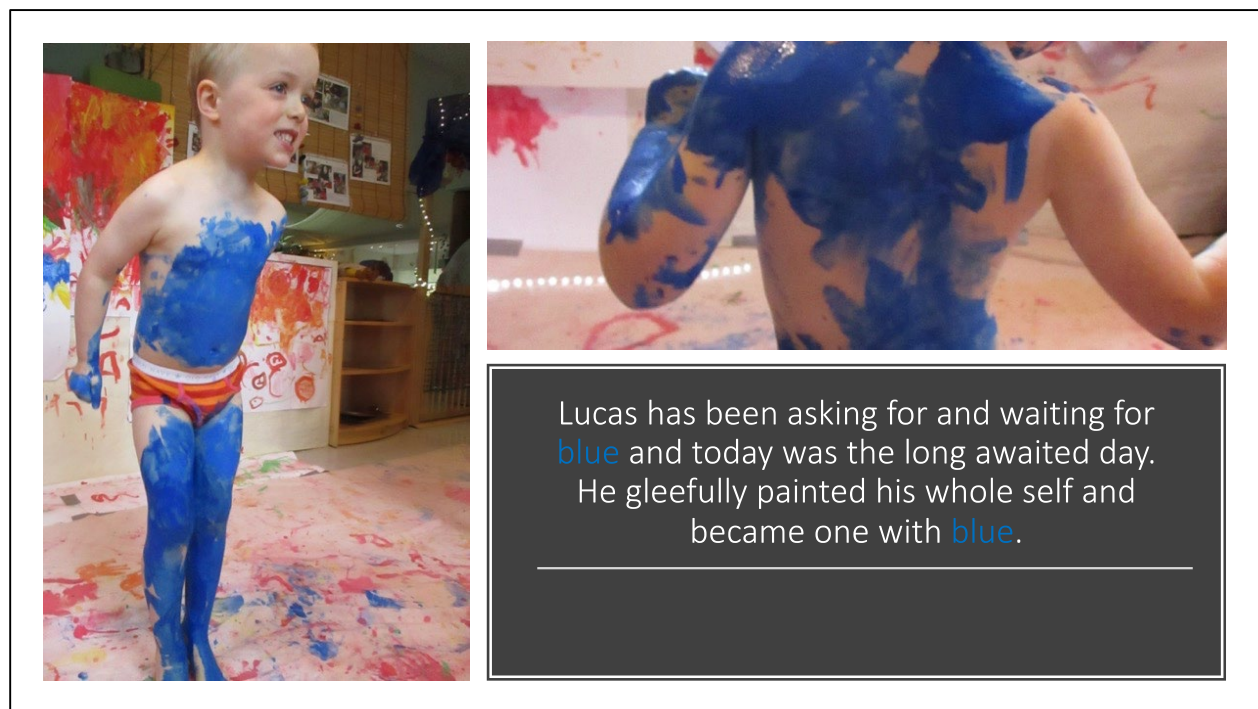

Lucas has been asking for and waiting for blue and today was the long awaited day. He gleefully painted his whole self and became one with blue.

Figure 5.13: A gleeful, embodied experience

Blue was Lucas's favorite color. I was not surprised at his gleeful response. In this particular moment there was a lot of awkward laughing, back arching, wiggling and high-pitched squeals (of delight?) contrasted with moments of silence. Lucas's embodied movements of intra-activity with the blue paint clearly show his response to the blue paint meeting his skin.

The culture of our program enabled children to make choices and decisions about things that affected them. Stripping down to underwear when exploring a material was by choice and had become common practice. It was not limited to the importance of caring for clothing, rather primarily for children to feel, experience and respond to a material. Notions of being dirty became almost non-existent, except when playing in dirt. If children were interested in painting on, drawing on or charcoaling their bodies we worked hard to support those interests. It was the child's choice to remain painted or to wash themselves afterward or later in the day. These were decisions made with much thought and (re)consideration of the children and our pedagogical practice in mind. It was important to me in making space for deep exploration and experimentation as ways of opening reciprocal learning, dialogue and transparency about our program approach.

Full immersion in the blueness of blue…
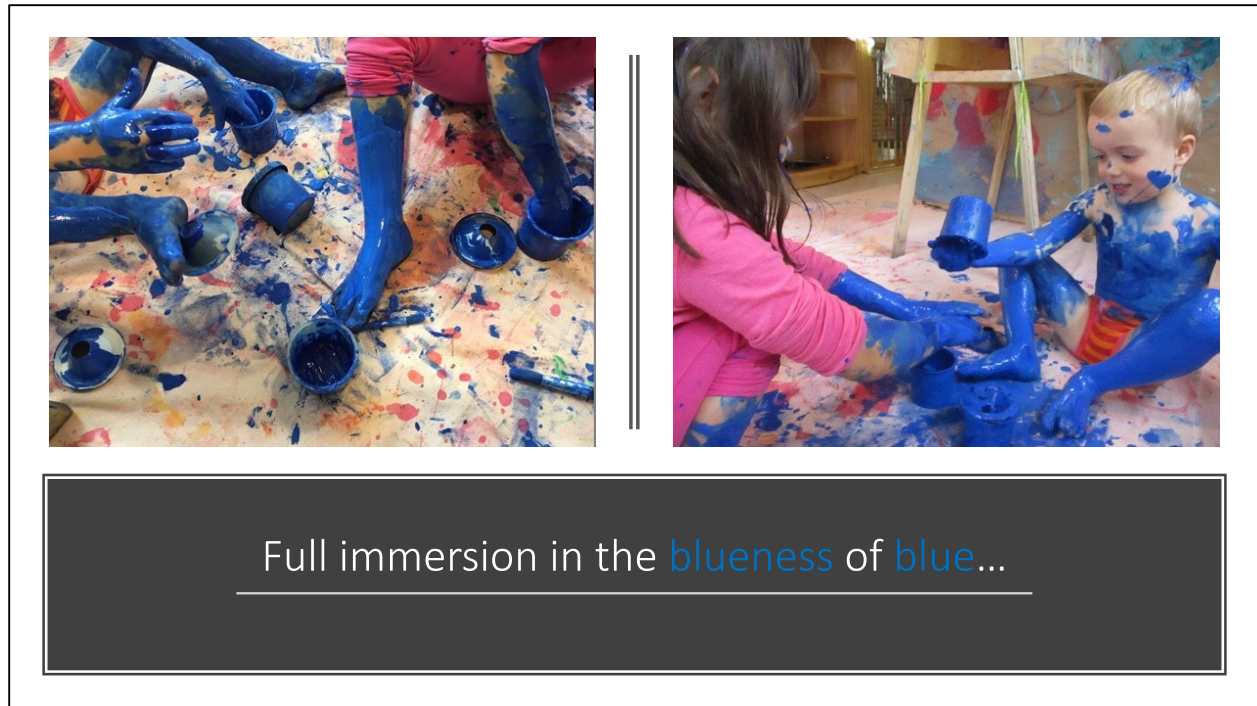
Figure 5.14: Full immersion of blue

Hands meet paint, paint meets skin and the forces of these intra-actions become lively. The paint rubs up and down against the skin with a smooth slurping, squishing, shiny wetness. As paint dries on skin, it becomes tight and crackles. More paint is added, and it is smooth and malleable again.

When thinking about how far you would go in creating affordances, whether with risky play or (risky) play, some questions to consider are: What are your understandings and values about process-based learning and materials inquiries? What influence do educators have in creating an atmosphere where children can truly explore, deeply engage, respond to, return to, wonder about and reminisce about their lived experiences with materials? How do materials invite humans into intra-action?

Even hair has to be blue…

Figure 5.15: Blue hair

This was the pivotal moment for me. Moustakas's (1994) and van Manen's (1997, 2007, 2011) ideas on phenomenology summarize my findings as involving deep questioning and theorizing to gain the essence of what it means to live a particular experience. Questions about phenomenological ways of being can re-focus the deep processes of thinking, reflecting, living and responding to the world around us. I was amazed, inspired and vicariously gleeful in this moment. When Lucas's hair became blue, I was struck with the powerfulness of this experience. How often do children truly have the opportunity to dwell in full exploration of a material without educators making restrictive comments such as: "Stop, that's too much paint.", "Paint is for paper." or "Wash your hands, you're dirty!". These dominant responses are often the result of the fear of others' perceptions, scrutiny and judgment, not to mention the aftermath of dealing with potentially upset parents who dislike cleaning paint off of their child and clothing. Parents

84

and others will likely question what their child might be learning by engaging in these kinds of messy, chaotic play. Yet, we can return to Lucas as he crouched similar to a hatchling in the center of the painted canvas, slowly emerging, becoming something else, transforming, becoming blue. We can liken this experience of becoming blue to the liveliness of climbing the willow hut, or the stairs to the clouds, where play is interpreted as transformational; there is an essence of play being (re)considered as a creative emergence of childhood where children's lived experiences with materials hold great depth and meaning.

Figure 5.16: Drying blue painted bodies

Moments later, another child came to me, showing me their blue hands. The contrast between their blue hand and my unpainted hand was stark. We held hands like this for a few minutes while we discussed what we should do next to try to keep the rest of the center from getting covered in blue paint. I wondered how the children would get dry without standing

around waiting for a long time. While our program approach was to embrace encounters with materials, this moment posed a dilemma for me as the responsible educator. I thought about the balance between respecting the children's responsiveness to the material and respecting the environment. Realizing that these blue children were now full of a chaotic energy, I was faced with the decision of what to do next. I did not want to control the situation with expectations of cleaning up, as that would work against our approach, yet I could also foresee some potential problems arising. We talked about our carpets, floors and furniture that might get stained by the blue paint. Ultimately, we agreed we would try to keep the paint tracks in the art space as much as possible. One child suggested that we tip toe across the room to dry outside. I thought this was a great suggestion, honoring both the children's experience with blue paint, and respecting our environment. I chose to take them a little further to the grassy field outside of the yard where they could run or roll in the grass while drying off.
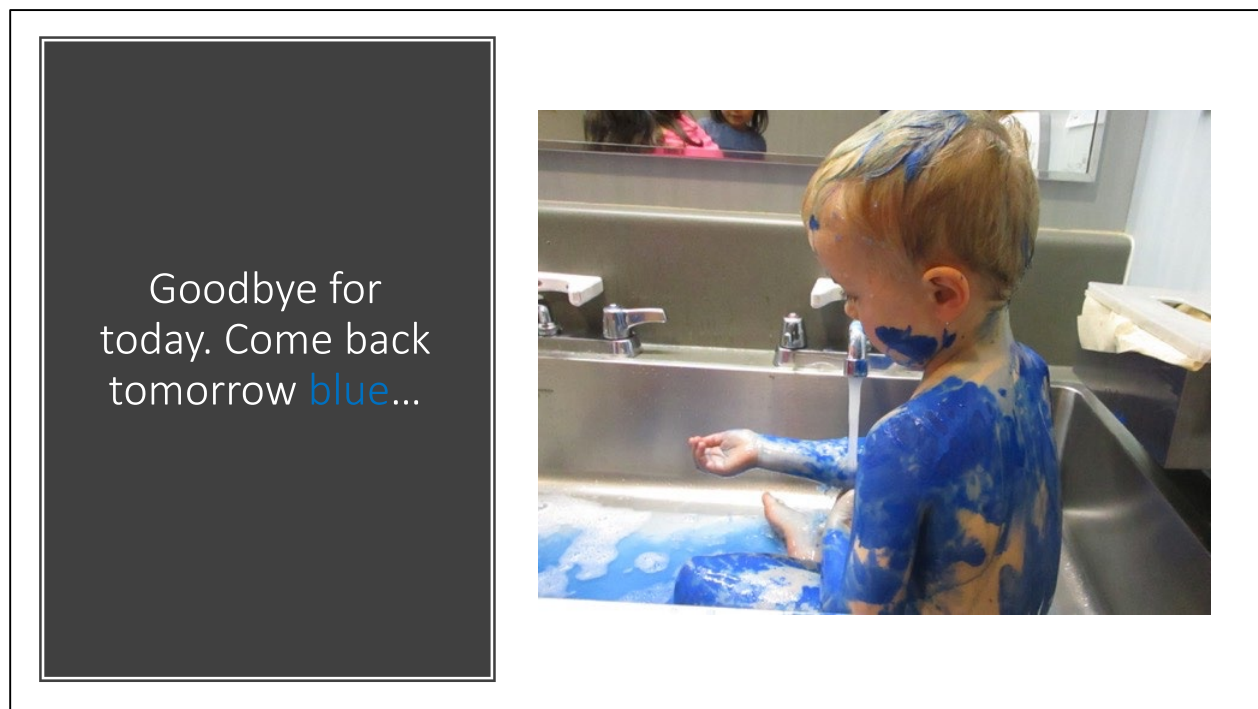

Goodbye for today. Come back tomorrow blue…

Figure 5.17: Washing away blue

After running to dry in the grass, I took the children on a walk around the block. As part of my experience with the blue paint that day, I realized that I was engaging in my own vicariously (risky) play moment and I wanted to share the experience with others. Although most of the children washed the blue paint off of their bodies upon our return to the center, traces of that blue Monday carry their memory for all of us. I promptly created a pedagogical narration complete with photos, observations and anecdotes to share with the parents and to invite dialogue about the encounter.

Initial responses included:

- "This is wonderful! Look how much fun he was having! Oh, he sure loves blue, doesn't he?" - Lucas's maternal grandmother.

- "He was very blue! The paint lasted a few days. Yes, he loves painting and mucking about, doesn't he?" - Lucas's dad, a few days later.

- "I love that it was a no holds barred activity. That is my dream!" - A comment from a colleague working in another program.

- "This is really interesting and should be shared with a wider audience." - A thoughtful suggestion from an auxiliary educator.

Upon further reflection, I realized that taking the children outside to dry off and walk around the block, was my way of disrupting notions of artistic processes being controlled, contained and dirty. My aim was to draw attention to materials explorations as enjoyable, lively and deeply compelling experiences that do not require immediate cleaning and removal. This encounter spoke to me in ways that I could not have imagined, and it continues to permeate my thoughts creating further opportunities for dialogue with materials.

87

Our team often reflected upon the dynamic experience with blue paint and the many ways it continued to live on in our program, creating traces to remember it by, connecting it to other materials explorations, discussing it with parents and children. Later I shared information about our pedagogical praxis with tour groups and educators from other programs, and I also presented the *Becoming Blue* pedagogical narration at a local conference where new questions and curiosities arose (Walters, 2019). Now, whenever I visit Gathering Place ECC, I look for the corner of the art room wall where the blue handprints continue to live. Upon seeing them, I immediately return to the vivid memory of that morning; re-living my (risky) play experience alongside Lucas and the other children as they were becoming blue.

5.6   Summary

This chapter focused on four pedagogical narrations shared to exemplify the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997, 2007, 2011) of children's lived experiences of (risky) play. First, a never tried before climbing vignette exemplified our socio-cultural approach to the process of peer mentoring through dialogic pedagogy (Vadeboncoeur, 2017) within our local context of the mixed age grouping. It became clear that the children were capable assessors of their own risk as two children continued the climb to the top of the willow hut and one child turned around, waiting and thinking, before finally re-trying the climb with guidance from his more experienced peer up above.

Next, another child also climbed the willow hut, yet it acted as his stairs to reach the clouds. This pedagogical narration focused less on the act of climbing and more on the wondrous aspects of (risky) play. Through this child's willow hut perches, he was able to imagine himself and the world around him with a new enlarged perspective. His moments of whiling (Jardine,

2008) contribute to the concept of (risky) play as being about children's own views of play and less about the fear of potential dangers as the social construct of risky play suggests.

Then, a spinning swing event very clearly illuminated the phenomenology of (risky) play experiences. As the girl spun around and around, she went through various physical feelings and emotions, such as paratelic and telic states (Sandseter, 2010), about the spinning motion itself. Yet, it was clear that she highly desired the simultaneous ambiguous feelings as she continued to swing and spin herself around.

Finally, a pedagogical narration about a blue painting encounter where a child became blue was shared as part of this risky play research. Ideas of becoming and transformation were discussed as mutual engagements and inter-relations (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010) between materials and humans in the environment. Through the phenomenological description of this encounter with blue paint and the transformation of the participants, it was assumed that children themselves do not conceive such experiences as troublesome or risky. Rather, we can assume that these adult imposed discourses inform children that these ways of experiencing the environment around them are somehow wrong. The argument was made that the risk involved in risky play lies within the responsibilities of the educator.

In summary, these four pedagogical narrations phenomenologically demonstrated children's engagement in experiences of risky and (risky) play. Further, the narrations exemplify the need for opportunities in children's lives to experience the essence of childhood as a joyful, sometimes thrilling, desirable time of curiosity, observation, experimentation, mutual engagement, meaning-making, emergence and transformation.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Implications for Practice, and Concluding Thoughts

6.1　Overview

The final chapter of this thesis begins by re-introducing the foci and the research question. The foci were:

1) to gain a clearer understanding of what this specific risky play pedagogy entails through a description of the evolving cultural and pedagogical shift of the program leader's approach, and

2) to encourage (re)considerations of (risky) play through thinking deeply about children's play desires and creativity, their abilities to assess danger and make decisions, and their perceptions regarding their (risky) play experiences.

Then, discussion of implications for practice are highlighted, followed by a description of potential areas for future research. The thesis ends with a summary and closing thoughts.

6.2　Returning to the Research Question

To respond to the foci of this research, I asked the following main question:

What can be understood about children's engagement with the world in an early childhood environment that is conducive to and supportive of risky play?

6.3　Discussion and Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for early childhood educators engaging with risky play. When educators inquire into risky play, there are many aspects for consideration. This study has found some of these to be: exploring dominant ideas of safety in relation to risky play; recognizing children's play desires and abilities to assess danger; environmental affordances; committing to pedagogical narration; and (re)consideration of (risky) play.

As described in chapter two, Sandseter (2007) identified common risky play behaviors often resulting in thrill and excitement, such as climbing and jumping from heights, and conceptualized six categories of risky play (p. 243). Through understanding how risky play is defined, educators may be enabled to identify varying components of risk and can then actualize their individual comfort levels surrounding the concept. In chapter four, I discussed my reconceptualization of praxis through problematizing my interpretation and implementation of providing a safe environment for children. It was identified that my perception of safety shifted through deep inquiry into the topic and observing and recording children's risky play experiences. This study found that children are highly capable, creative, risk-assessing, critical thinkers that can act as mentors to their peers, thus challenging educators to reconsider restrictive approaches to play.

Throughout this study, I have identified many of the dominant and restrictive thoughts, practices and language I previously used regarding safety through a critically reflective lens. The findings of this study point to the importance of educators engaging in thoughtful inquiry and critical reflection of their pedagogical practices. Through pedagogical narrations (chapter five), it was found to be imperative that the team of educators discuss and reflect upon new risky play occurrences. This opened further dialogue among the team to discuss individual comfort levels, and later, extend those discussions with parents and administrators. Children were also involved and contributed to a living policy (see Appendix C, Willow Tree Rules) about climbing the willow tree. It was found that when educators explore conceptualizations of safety, risk and hazard, they can further understand how these concepts influence their responsibilities, limitations and acceptance of children's risky play.

Other considerations involve the affordances in early childhood environments. Throughout this study, open-ended materials, natural landscapes and loose parts (Nicholson, 1972) were found to offer multiple opportunities for challenging physical prowess, bodily expression and creative play. The findings suggest that children have a natural propensity toward risky play and that early childhood environments are full of materials that afford such play. For example, the ten-foot-high willow tree afforded climbing and its branches could be viewed as stairs to the clouds (chapter five) inviting children up to the top. Thus, it is important for educators to consider the environment when inquiring into risky play to gain new understandings of children's desires and joys through such play.

The study findings have additional implications for educators to use pedagogical narration (BC ELF, 2008, 2018, 2019) to open dialogue in seeking to understand children's experiences of risky play and educators' practices in that regard. Pedagogical narrations hold multiple purposes. They highlight moments of wonder and deep inquiry into how children are engaging with the world around them. They can act as a means for dialogue with self (reflectively), colleagues, parents and others in the ECE community, inviting questions, wonderings and assumptions. This dialogue may lead educators to examine their practice and think deeply about their pedagogical choices. Pedagogical narration can also initiate critical reflection when responding to these questions, wonderings and assumptions, bringing forward deeper questions such as, "How do I listen to children's desires?" or "What are children's understandings of risky play?" This study illuminates the importance of early childhood educators undertaking pedagogical narration as a means of transparency and dialogue into practice.

The study also suggests that we do not always know how children consider their experiences with risky play, whether they view it as risky or as play or as something else. The study implies that many forms of play are dominated and framed solely by adults' rules, boundaries, and perceptions, thus limiting full exploration from children's perspectives and suggesting that risk lies within the role of the educator. Through introspection and critical reflection, the study highlights the awareness of restrictive attitudes toward risky play also influencing other areas of play. The findings in chapter five, specifically *The Stairs to the Clouds* and *Becoming Blue* pedagogical narrations highlight the importance for (re)consideration of (risky) play.

6.3   Future Research

In relation to this study on *(re)considering (risky) play* there are several potential areas to further research. As previously discussed in the limitations of the study section, the notion of risky play as privileged could be further inquired into. Since risky play has mainly been identified in this thesis as occurring primarily in outdoor play environments and natural landscapes, it would be interesting to examine indoor opportunities of risky play. Also, the concept of the responsible educator's potential position of risk, rather than the focus on children's risk of injury could be more deeply inquired into. The idea of risky play as a social discourse is another topic to more fully investigate. Discursive practices regarding language, meanings, interpretations and actions involving risky play and how these influence children's play would provide yet another area of interesting research. Highlighting the interest and capabilities of females as active participants in risky play is also another important area to further investigate. These suggestions for future research stem from curiosities and unanswered

questions that arose during this research on risky play and would address gaps in the current literature on the topic.

6.4   Summary and Closing Thoughts

This master's thesis is the culmination to date of my introspective account of transformative experiences as an educator having lived the complexities of a risky play pedagogy and a description of the children's lived experiences of (risky) play; essentially bridging the border between safety and danger. Through this study and my work experience as an early childhood educator, I have found that children who are supported to engage in experiences of risky/(risky) play, have opportunities for complex meaning making. This meaning making is dynamic and emergent through processes of inquiring into intra-actions with others, environments and materials. What children see others doing around them within their socio-cultural environments creates opportunities for children to observe, experiment and create new possibilities for exploration. Often others come alongside offering support through a culture of peer mentoring and discussion. Beyond observations of others, children may also make meaning of the world by recalling previously lived experiences as they encounter new similar situations, such as the third child in the willow hut climbing vignette or the child in the spinning swing. This research has affirmed that children connect ideas through curiosity, exploration, experimentation, imagination, others and materials, underscoring the socially constructed nature of children's learning.

The reviewed literature substantiates that while minor childhood injury is common and a regular part of growing up and learning (Wyver et al., 2010), the safety discourse overshadowing play often narrows opportunities for children. This study holds that safety discourses also create real fears for educators involving varying levels of responsibility, scrutiny, judgment, and a

range of possible consequences for educators should a child in their care be injured. Over the course of my reconceptualization of praxis, I more fully realized that my educator risk was fundamental in affording risky play opportunities for children. As the educator directly involved, it was my role to tailor the experience based upon which level of affordance I was comfortable with. I realized that I had the responsibility to afford children the recognition of their unique ideas and capabilities, and it was in these moments of navigating my own risk to afford these opportunities that I began to realize the significance and champion the complexities of risky play. This study has furthered my realization that I am a strong advocate for risky play as I consider multiple opportunities, such as those presented, to further children's critical thinking, problem solving, meaning making and experiences of joy.

In this introspective process of recalling and connecting my deconstruction and reconceptualization of praxis to a pedagogy of risky play, I found that the potential risks to myself as the responsible educator affording risky play were my main concerns. Through deeply questioning the social discourse of safety, I learned that children are amazingly capable, strong, confident, curious, creative, persistent, imaginative and intuitive, and that the joy they experienced through risky play far outweighed the concerns. Through the interrelated aspects of the individual and their social environment as illuminated in the risky/(risky) play pedagogical narrations, it is clear that many positive learning experiences may occur. These include establishing one's own limits and boundaries, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, feelings of bravery, pride and accomplishment, peer mentoring, negotiating, creativity and imaginative thought processes, emergence and transformation, and meaning making of one's own lived experiences. Much meaning making and enjoyment can be fulfilled when children's varying skills and abilities are given attention through a specifically co-created and transparent

socio-cultural approach to risky play that involves seizing moments of potential difficulty as extending learning opportunities.

Through pedagogical narrations that phenomenologically described children's lived experiences, this study illuminated children's capabilities, interests and learnings and educators' theories and questions, and they can act as tools to disrupt dominant discussions such as discourses of safety. Pedagogical narrations provoke questions that propel the emergence of possibilities for learners and teachers together. These unanswered questions may spark educators to plan and purposefully direct curriculum through inquiry-based approaches to learning. With pedagogical narrations that are thoughtful, rich in description and highlight questions to think about children's lived experiences, such as in chapter five, others may come to better understand the topic of risky/(risky) play phenomenologically. Through this research, I have found that play is often thrilling and exciting and the boundaries may become blurred, creating a potential risk for educators. The following apt message reminds us to keep the joys of childhood in sight; "if we just look at the risk, we lose the wondrous part of play" (A. Clarke, personal communication, February 4, 2020).

Further, I propose that engagement with environments and materials, such as whiling atop the willow hut or becoming blue with paint, be (re)considered as (risky) play. The introspective aspects of this study and pedagogical narrations illuminate the complexity of risk in early childhood settings. This research further creates moments to reflect upon, continuing reconceptualization through emergent processes and transformation, and connecting to this inquiry on (re)considering (risky) play.

I believe that the socio-cultural contexts we co-create, with each other through our relationships, personal histories, previously lived experiences and our practices within these

contexts, inform and influence our individual and collective meaning-making processes. As exemplified throughout this thesis using a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997, 2007, 2011), Gathering Place ECC's socio-cultural context is situated in a place of continually becoming. In this emergence, people come and go, ideas shift, and change, questions and thoughts deepen inquiry, materials and humans transform, pedagogical narrations evolve… Each time these transformations create something anew based upon previous and current interrelationships with each other, ideas and questions, the environment and non-humans, through our lived experiences of risky/(risky) play, offering alternative perspectives.

Writing this thesis has prompted me to more fully realize that interpretive research is a process that remains incomplete. The study itself may be complete, however, my thoughts, wonderings, questions, memories and critical reflection continue on beyond the act of writing this thesis. It is through such processes that one can continue to deeply study and (re)consider the topic of inquiry. Borrowing Cannella's (2006) idea of reconceptualization as never being finished, but a constant critique bringing forth new constructions, this conclusion serves as an end to this particular study. However, my inquiry into Sandseter's (2007) concept of risky play and this reconceptualization of (risky) play continues to live on for me. It permeates my thoughts, memories, questions, reflections and aims of creating additional pedagogical narrations, prompting further critical questioning of risky/(risky) play pedagogies, possibilities and perspectives.

References

Apter, M.J. (2001). An introduction to reversal theory. In M.J. Apter (Ed.), *Motivational styles in everyday life: A guide to reversal theory* (pp. 3-35). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

B.C. Community Care and Assisted Living Act. (2004). *Community care and assisted living regulation.* Victoria, British Columbia: Crown Publications. Retrieved March 2018, from http://www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/217_2004

B.C. Community Care and Assisted Living Act. (n.d.) *Director of Licensing Standard of Practice – Active Play.* Retrieved October 2019, from https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/child-day-care/active_play_june_2016.pdf

B.C. Ministry of Education and First Nations Education Steering Committee. (2015). *First peoples' principles of learning*. Retrieved March 2018, from http://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/PUB-LFP-POSTER-Principles-of-Learning-First-Peoples-poster-11x17.pdf

Bredekamp, S., ed. (1987). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8.* Exp. Ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992/2005). Ecological systems theory. In U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*, (pp. 106-173). London: Sage.

Brussoni, M., Olsen, L., Pike, I., and Sleet, D. (2012). Risky Play and Children's Safety: Balancing Priorities for Optimal Child Development. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 9(9), 3134-3148.

Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2016). *Social Research Methods (4th Canadian Edition)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press Canada.

Burman, E. (2007). *Deconstructing developmental psychology (2nd Edition)*. London: Routledge.

Canadian Public Health Association, 2019. Risk, hazard, and play: What are risks and hazards? Retrieved August 2019, from https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/resources/play/play_risk_vs_hazard_e.pdf

Caillois, R. (1961). *Man, play and games*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc.

Cannella, G.S. (2006). *Deconstructing early childhood education: Social justice & revolution (2nd Edition).* New York: Peter Lang.

Cohn, I. and Hasharon, R. (2011). Indigenous ways - fruits of our ancestors. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning, 11*(1), 15-34. doi: 10.1080/14729679.2010.532992

Coe, H. (2017). Embracing risk in the Canadian woodlands: Four children's risky play and risk-taking experiences in a Canadian Forest Kindergarten. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 15*(4), 374-388. doi:10.1177/1476718X15614042

Coleman, B. and Dyment, J.E. (2013). Factors that limit and enable preschool-aged children's physical activity on childcare centre playgrounds. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 11*(3), 203-221. doi: 10.1177/1476718X12456250

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., and Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives.* Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press.

ECEBC (2008). *Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia: Code of Ethics*, (6th ed.). Vancouver, British Columbia: Canada.

Gandini, L. (1998). Educational and caring spaces. In Edwards, C., Gandini, L., and Forman, G. *The Hundred Languages of Children*, (pp. 161-178). Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Gelter, H. (2000). Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian philosophy of outdoor recreation. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 5*, 77-92.

Gibson, J.J. (1979). The theory of affordances. In J.J. Gieseking and W. Mangold (Eds.) (2014). *The people, place and space reader.* (pp. 56-60). New York: Routledge.

Gibson, J.J. (2015). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. New York: Psychology Press. doi.org/10.4324/9781315740218

Gray, P. (2013). Definitions of play. *Scholarpedia, 8*(7):30578. Retrieved October 2017, from http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Definitions_of_Play

Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher, 32*(4), 3-12.

Hayes, N., OToole, L., and Halpenny, A. M. (2017). *Introducing Bronfenbrenner: A guide for practitioners and students in early years education*. Chapters 1 & 2. London: Routledge.

Hultman, K. and Lenz Taguchi, H. (2010). Challenging anthropocentric analysis of visual data: A relational materialist approach to educational research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 23*(5), 525-542. doi:10.1080/09518389.2010.500628

Jardine, D.W. (2008). On the 'while' of things. In Jardine, D.W., Clifford, P., & Friesen, S. (Eds.), *Back to the Basics of Teaching and Learning: Thinking the World Together* (2nd ed.) (pp. 223-242). New York: Routledge.

Kind, S. (2014). Material encounters. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies, 5*(4.2), 865-877.

Kleppe, R., Melhuish, E., and Sandseter, E. B. H. (2017). Identifying and characterizing risky play in the age one-to-three years. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 25*(3), 370-385. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2017.1308163

Lanzi, D. (2011). The image of the child and the idea of learning. *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange, 18*(4), 1-5.

Lenz Taguchi, H. (2011). Investigating learning, participation and becoming in early childhood practices with a relational materialist approach. *Global Studies of Childhood, 1*(1), 36-50.

Little, H. (2006). Children's risk-taking behaviour: Implications for early childhood policy and practice. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *14*(2), 141-154.

Little, H., Wyver, S. and Gibson, F. (2011). Influence of play context and adult attitudes on young children's physical risk-taking during outdoor play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 19*(1), 113-131. doi: 10.1080/1350293X.2011.548959

Malaguzzi, L. (1994). Your image of the child: Where teaching begins. *Child Care Information Exchange, 96*, 52-56.

Malone, K. (2007). The bubble-wrap generation: Children growing up in walled gardens. *Environmental Education Research, 13*(4), 513-527. doi:10.1080/13504620701581612

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. (2016). *Designing qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Mathison, S. (1988). Why triangulate? *Educational Researcher,* 13-17. Retrieved September 2018 from https://Academia.edu/7116059/Why_Triangulate

Merriam-Webster, (n.d.). Hazard. Retrieved October 2018, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hazard

Merriam-Webster, (n.d.). Risk. Retrieved October 2018, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/risk

Merriam-Webster, (n.d.). Safety. Retrieved October 2018, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/safety

Ministry of Education, (2008). *British Columbia early learning framework.* Victoria, British Columbia: Crown Publications.

Ministry of Education, (2018). *Draft 4 – field test version, revised British Columbia early learning framework*. Victoria, British Columbia. Retrieved on February 6, 2019, from https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/early-learning/teach/earlylearning/draft_early_learning_framework_2018.pdf

Ministry of Education, (2019). Revised British Columbia early learning framework. Victoria, British Columbia. Retrieved on October 4, 2019, from https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/early-learning/teach/earlylearning/early_learning_framework.pdf

Ministry of Education and Research, (2017). *Framework plan for kindergartens*, *Norway.* Retrieved on February 13, 2019, from https://www.udir.no/globalassets/filer/barnehage/rammeplan/framework-plan-for-kindergartens2-2017.pdf

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE
     Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412995658

Nicholson, S. (1972). The theory of loose parts, An important principle for design methodology.
     Studies in Design Education Craft & Technology, 4(2), 5-14.

Parten, M. B. (1932). Social participation among pre-school children. *Journal of Abnormal and
     Social Psychology, 27*(3), 243-269.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Kind, S., and Kocher, L. (2017). *Encounters with Materials in Early
     Childhood Education.* New York: Routledge.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Nxumalo, F., Kocher, L., Elliott, E., and Sanchez, A. (2015). *Journeys:
     Reconceptualizing early childhood practices through pedagogical narration.* North York,
     Ontario: University of Toronto Press.

Pence, A. and Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. (2008). Discourses on quality care: The investigating
     'quality' project and the Canadian experience. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood,
     9*(3), 241-255.

Preuschoft, H. (2002). What does "arboreal locomotion" mean exactly and what are the
     relationships between "climbing", environment and morphology? *Zeitschrift für
     Morphologie und Anthropologie, 83*(2/3), 171-188.

Sandseter, EBH. (2007). Categorizing risky play – how can we identify risk-taking in children's
     play? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 15*(2), 237-252.

Sandseter, EBH. (2009). Characteristics of risky play. *Journal of Adventure Education and
     Outdoor Learning, 9*(1), 3-21.

Sandseter, EBH. (2010). "it tickles in my tummy": Understanding children's risk-taking in play
     through reversal theory. *Journal of early childhood research: ECR.* Sage Publications.

Sandseter, E. B. H. (2012). Restrictive safety or unsafe freedom? Norwegian ECEC practitioners'
     perceptions and practices concerning children's risky play. *Child Care in Practice, 18*(1),
     83-101. doi:10.1080/13575279.2011.621889

Stephenson, A. (2003). Physical risk-taking: Dangerous or endangered? *Early Years, 23*(1), 35-
     43. doi:10.1080/0957514032000045573

Thompson, D. (2014). *Caring, dwelling, becoming: Stories of multiage child care.* (Doctoral Dissertation).

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Calls to action.* Winnipeg, Manitoba. Retrieved March 2018, from http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner. (1989). *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Retrieved December 2018, from http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx

University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB). (n.d.) Retrieved Nov. 2017, from https://ethics.research.ubc.ca/behavioural-research-ethics

Vadeboncoeur, J. A. (2017). *Vygotsky and the promise of public education.* New York: Peter Lang.

van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy,* (2nd ed.). The University of Western Ontario: The Althouse Press.

van Manen, M. (2002). *The tone of teaching: The language of pedagogy*, (2nd ed.). The University of Western Ontario: The Althouse Press.

van Manen, M. (2011). Phenomenology online: A resource for phenomenological inquiry. Retrieved December 2018, from http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/epistemology-of-practice/

Vecchi, V. (2010). *Art and creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the role and potential of ateliers in early childhood education.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walters, M. (2015). *Grappling with the complexities of 'living' risk-taking play.* Unpublished undergraduate inquiry project, Department of Early Childhood Care and Education, Capilano University, North Vancouver, Canada.

Walters, M. (2019, May). Becoming blue: A phenomenological experience of becoming blue. *SPARK 2019: Surfacing Connections, Challenging Divides.* Session presented at SPARK

2019: 2nd Biennial Early Childhood Education Graduate Student Conference, Vancouver, Canada.

Whitty, P. and Iannacci, L. (Eds.). (2009). *Early childhood curricula: Reconceptualist perspectives.* Detselig Enterprises.

Wyver, S., Tranter, P., Naughton, G., Little, H., Sandseter, EBH., and Bundy, A. (2010). Ten ways to restrict children's freedom to play: The problem of surplus safety. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 11*(3), 263-277.

Appendices

Appendix A Parent Information Letter

(Re)considering (Risky) Play in a Canadian Early Childhood Context

My name is Melanie Walters and I am a graduate student at UBC in the Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education program. I have been an Early Childhood Educator for 23 years. For the past 22 years, I have had the opportunity to work at ████████████████ as a permanent staff member. I have worked with the toddler age group (1-3years) and more recently with the mixed age group (16months-5 ½ years). My experiences in working with children, families and colleagues have greatly influenced my interest in society's views of risky play and my own shifting pedagogical approach in this regard.

I believe that children are capable co-constructors of their learning and that when educators and parents work together to recognize children's abilities, interests and play desires, truly interesting and creative concepts of play can emerge. During my time working with the mixed age group, I went through a process of critical questioning and reconceptualization of my own practice as an Early Childhood Educator. In turn, my pedagogical approach to children and their play also shifted over time and opened up a space for children to more freely explore their surrounding environment, contribute to the curriculum and have opportunities to encounter situations with elements of danger. While there are many complexities involved in co-creating a culture of risky play, I believe that children are capable critical thinkers and co-contributors to this pedagogy. I continue to be personally and professionally compelled by this topic of inquiry through the children's risky play narratives and ways of creating radical moments to ponder upon and question further.

These interests, the evolving co-creation of a risky play pedagogy and children's narratives of their lived experiences, will be the main focus of this research project; *(Re)considering (Risky) Play in a Canadian Early Childhood Context*. Through this project, I

hope to gain a clearer description of what a risky play pedagogy entails and to encourage educators to reconsider risky play by thinking deeply about children's play desires, abilities to assess danger and their perceptions regarding their risky play experiences.

The research will have two main components: 1) introspection; a reflective examination and description of my own personal thoughts, feelings and experiences specifically related to the beginning and evolving co-creation of the culture of the program that I led pedagogically, and 2) lived experience reflections; through sharing narratives of practice that reflect deeply and seek to meaningfully understand and think in new ways to reconsider children's risky play experiences.

This research project will involve between 3 and 5 Pedagogical Narrations specific to risky play experiences. These Pedagogical Narrations will be retrospective, in that, upon gaining consent, I will share the photos, anecdotes, narratives and reflections previously completed as part of my regular work as an Early Childhood Educator at ██████████████. This retrospective data will be shared in the form of Narratives of Practice to be included in my research thesis. The findings from this study will potentially benefit children, other educators and parents.

I am working under the supervision of Dr. Marianne McTavish, Associate Dean of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, and Professor of Teaching, Language and Literacy Education, UBC. Any questions regarding the research project can be addressed to:

Dr. Marianne McTavish:
or
Melanie Walters:

Appendix B Parent Consent Form

Parent/Legal Guardian Consent Form
(Re)considering (Risky) Play in a Canadian Early Childhood Context

Principal Investigator: Dr. Marianne McTavish
                              Department of Language and Literacy Education, UBC

Co-Investigator: Melanie Walters
                              Early Childhood Education, UBC

The research is for a graduate degree, Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education, and will form part of a thesis.

PURPOSE

Risky play has been a dominantly contested issue in Early Childhood Education over the past two decades. It has become a safety discourse which has effectively reduced children's play freedoms and increased societal fears of danger and injury related to play. The goal of this research is to describe the researcher's professional introspection, pedagogical shifts in practice and narratives of practice that highlight the joys of childhood through engagement with risky play. By deeply exploring the complexities of the topic and sharing retrospective accounts of children's lived experiences of risky play, we anticipate that this research will lead to a greater understanding of children's involvement in risky play. Further, this research may lead to a shift in educators' pedagogical practices and abilities to view risky play as essential to childhood.

PROCEDURES

You are invited to take part in this research to help us share your children's perspectives and lived experiences of risky play. Through this study we hope that sharing these retrospective accounts of children enjoying their physical prowess within nature, engagement with the environment and experiences in the art studio will support and benefit more children in the future.

Through this study, we want to retrospectively access accounts of the children's experiences with risky play. These retrospective accounts are in the form of Pedagogical Narrations that were

previously created by the Co-Investigator, Melanie Walters, as part of her regular work at the childcare center. We are asking you to give consent for your child's photos and anecdotes to be included in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participants will not be identified by name in any reports or the completed study. Any quotes or anecdotes will remain anonymous or will have pseudonyms attached to them. Any images captured of children who are not participants in the research study will be obscured when the photographs are added. Blurring the children's faces will allow the confidentiality of the non-participant children to be protected. If your child is a participant in the study, they will only be identifiable in photographs if you give permission by signing the consent for children to be identified in pictures on page 4 of this document. If your child is a participant in this study and you do not want them to be identified in pictures, their faces will be blurred to ensure their identity is kept confidential. The children's photos will be analyzed and reviewed as part of the research project and may be published as part of the final report.

Security of the data will be maintained by password protection (only the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator will have access to the password) and encryption of all electronic files, backing up all electronic files on an encrypted USB stick. Hard copies of the of study materials such as field notes, researcher journals and printed Pedagogical Narrations, as well as a back-up encrypted USB stick will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the home office of the Co-Investigator. No confidential information will be exchanged by email. Data will only be made available to the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator. All information will be destroyed five years after the work is published.

OPEN ACCESS

The research data will not be publicly available. However, the results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis to be published on the cIRcle UBC website at https://circle.ubc.ca, and may also be published, in part or in full, in academic journal articles, educational books and presented at scholarly conferences. The data used for these publications, journals and scholarly conferences will include images, the analysis and the summary of data from the Pedagogical Narrations, which will be de-identified as per the confidentiality statement above. Once the results of this study have been made publicly available, you may not withdraw your data.

POTENTIAL RISKS OF THE STUDY

We do not think that there is anything in the study that could harm you or be bad for you.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

We do not think taking part in this study will help you. However, in the future, others may benefit from what we learn through this study.

INQUIRIES or CONCERNS

You are not waiving any legal rights in signing this consent form for your child. If you have any concerns about your child's participation in this study, you may contact Dr. Marianne McTavish (see top of page 1) at the University of British Columbia, as the Principal Investigator.

YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598, or if long distance, email RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Parent/Legal Guardian Permission for Child's Participation in Research
(Re)considering (Risky) Play in a Canadian Early Childhood Context

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I have the right to say no to participation in this study. I have the right to withdraw from this study without giving a reason and without negative impact on my access to further childcare services. I give permission for my child to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this Parental Permission Form after I sign it.

I consent/I do not consent (circle one) for my child to participate in this study.

Please check the box and sign below:

[ ]   I consent to my child having their retrospective visual artefacts (photographs, paintings and drawings) examined for purposes of this study.

[ ]   I consent to retrospective use of my child's anecdotes and narratives for the purposes of this study.

[ ]   I consent to the use of identifiable images of my child for the purposes of this study (please check and circle YES/NO).
YES/NO

[ ]   I consent for the data of this research to be presented in publications and at scholarly conferences.

Parent/Legal Guardian's Name (printed) and Signature:

Your Name (please print): _____

Your Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Name of Child Obtaining Parental/Legal Guardian Permission:

Child's Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix C Willow Tree Rules

Original Willow Tree "Rules" written in collaboration with the children:

- Is it open or closed?

- Is an adult close by?

- No more than two children can climb at a time.

- Is the wood dry?

- Is it okay with your mom or dad?

- Are there two adults in the yard?

- How do you know you can climb up there?

- What might happen if you fall?

- What should you make sure of before you go up?

- Are the branches strong enough to hold your weight? How do you know?

- How can you climb carefully?

- How can you climb with precision? What is precision?

*These 'rules' were first written after conversations emerged from the first willow hut climb. The children came up with many ideas that I then posed as thought-provoking questions as a form of discussion prior to climbing. Not all questions were asked every time, but these 'rules' provided information for all educators and parents and were especially helpful in communicating our practice to auxiliary educators (not regularly working with us) who might have otherwise stopped children from climbing. Our yard was long and narrow making it necessary for two educators to be present, that way one educator could be close when children were climbing.