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How education policy actors interpret, portray and contest risk in children's physically active play in schools: a framing analysis

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ABSTRACT

Children's physical activity is low and play outdoors has been declining, coinciding with a greater preoccupation with risk in many countries. This study examines how policy actors frame the issue of risk in children's active physical play in schools. Using a theory-informed, multi-method, qualitative case-study design, 30 participants from a range of sectors involved in policy relevant to children's physical activity and play in schools participated in interviews and photo-elicitation. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four frames of active physical play in schools were identified. Two 'risk averse' frames (*protection* and *productivity*) dominated and were primarily expressed by policy actors inside the school system. These frames were characterised by a negative construction of risk, and concerns for adverse outcomes for children and schools. In contrast, two frames were 'risk tolerant' (*development* and *flourishing*), within which risk was constructed as 'uncertainty', which could lead to positive or negative outcomes in play, and supported a child's holistic learning, development, and wellbeing. While there were some 'real world' examples of risk tolerant frames, more commonly they were expressed in the context of how things should or could be in schools. Findings indicate school policies that prioritise injury prevention and productivity goals, may involve a risk-benefit trade-off over other fundamental objectives, elevating some risks above less visible ones, such as the consequences of play and physical activity restriction. Implications for education policy are discussed. Future work should seek to improve understanding of forces contributing to risk averse frames of physically active play in schools and contribute evidence for the benefits of risk-taking for children.

Introduction

Physical activity and movement are fundamental to child health, wellbeing, and development (Chaput et al., 2020). Play is a key domain of children's physical activity, and offers substantial

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potential for increasing children's physical activity levels (Janssen, 2014), which are low globally (Aubert et al., 2022). Play involves a spectrum of behaviours, which can be categorised and defined in different ways (Gray, 2017). For this study, we have adapted the definition used by the Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance (Aubert et al., 2022), originally developed by Truelove and colleagues (2017, p.164) for children aged 2–6 years. Our definition removes the word 'young' (children) and adds the word 'physical' to extend this definition to include the physically active play of older children: '*active physical play is a form of gross motor or total body movement in which children exert energy in a freely chosen, fun, and unstructured manner*'.

Play has a central role in child development (Whitebread et al., 2012), fostering language, self-regulation, social-emotional skills, musculoskeletal development, brain structure and function, and creativity (Whitebread et al., 2012; Yogman et al., 2018). Play also helps build emotional resilience and adaptive responses to adversity and stress (Yogman et al., 2018). Significantly, play has intrinsic value for children, providing pleasure and enjoyment, in and of itself (Whitebread et al., 2012). Children's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) (United Nations, 1989), of which most countries are signatories (UN Treaty Body Database, 2021), yet acknowledgement of this right is frequently absent in government policy (Payà Rico & Bantulà Janot, 2021; Ramstetter et al., 2022; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). The lack of policy attention is of concern given children's free play, particularly outdoors, has declined across many countries for several decades (Clements, 2004; Mullan, 2019; Yogman et al., 2018).

Schools provide an instructive example of how policy can shape the time, space, and freedom for play in children's daily lives. Schools are highly regulated settings, and most children spend large portions of their day at school, with up to 20% of the school day dedicated to free time between classroom learning (Ramstetter et al., 2022; Ridgers et al., 2020). Yet there has been little attention in education policy to children's physically active play, and recess/breaktime is typically overlooked in policy (Hills et al., 2015; Ramstetter et al., 2022). In recognition of this issue, UN-CRC General Comment 17 on Article 31 included specific obligations on schools to respect children's right to free play (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). Importantly for schools, many of the positive outcomes of play are also valuable attributes for classroom learning and academic achievement (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019; Whitebread et al., 2012).

A key challenge schools face in supporting active physical play is children's desire to seek exciting and thrilling experiences when they play (described in the literature as risky or adventurous play) (Jerebine et al., 2022a; Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023). By its nature, risky play involves uncertainty, and, correspondingly, a risk of physical injury (Sandseter, 2007). However, risk-taking is also progressive and commensurate with a child's developmental stage, skill level, and individual propensity; for one child it may be 'risky' to climb the ladder of a slide, for another 'risky' may involve standing at the top of monkey bars (Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023). Engaging in risky play fosters children's motor competence, confidence, and risk management skills, and is theorised to have an adaptive role in emotional regulation and improve mental wellbeing (Sandseter et al., 2023). Historians contend the decline in free play outdoors has coincided with a growing preoccupation with risk and adults exerting increasing attention on, and control over, children's activities (Chudacoff, 2007; Furedi, 2006; Sanderud et al., 2020), which is supported by time use analyses of school-age children's daily activities (Mullan, 2019). Risk is increasingly designed out of play environments, and children's risk-taking is forbidden by adults who perceive activities such as climbing trees, rough and tumble games, and playing with sticks, stones, or snow, to be unsafe (Brussoni et al., 2012). For schools, this creates a tension between their legal and moral duty to keep children safe and a growing literature on the detrimental effect for children's development and wellbeing of restricting their physical play opportunities (Ardelean et al., 2021). Even teachers and playground supervision staff who have positive perceptions of risky play, may fear blame in the event of playground injury, which can lead to risk-averse decision making and constraining supervision practices (Jerebine et al., 2022b).

Considering these challenges, this an important area for critical policy enquiry, however, to our knowledge, no study has investigated education policy actor perspectives on the issue of risk in children's active physical play in schools. A useful method of critical policy enquiry is framing analysis, which helps uncover how issues and perceptions of those issues are interpreted and portrayed in policy and public discourse (Koon et al., 2016). By framing issues in particular ways, policy actors transform social phenomena into problems, which imply a set of solutions, and simultaneously direct attention away from other aspects (Entman, 1993). The aim of this study, therefore, was to investigate the beliefs, ideologies, and attitudes of education policy actors, with respect to risk and children's active physical play in schools through the frames they employ. We address the questions: How do education policy actors frame children's active physical play in schools? what construction of risk and childhood do the frames represent? which frames are dominant, and which are contested or ignored in current policy discourse, and in the education system more broadly? and what are the implications for policy development moving forward?

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in a critical realist perspective, which posits that an objective world exists (ontological realism), however, our understanding of reality is mediated through our perceptions and observations, which, in turn, are influenced by various social and cultural factors (epistemological constructionism) (Danermark et al., 2019). For critical realists, risks exist in the world, however, what is labelled a risk is socially determined, varies between individuals, and can be influenced by a range of factors (e.g. culture, experience, knowledge, personality) that can change over time (Lupton, 2013). Consistent with our philosophical perspective, we adopted a theory-informed interpretive approach, drawing on framing theory (Entman, 1993), Beck's (1992) 'risk society', and the multiple constructions of childhood approach (MacDougall & Darbyshire, 2017) to develop a theoretical framework for the study.

Framing theory provided a theoretical lens for examining how policy actors view the policy issue of risk in children's physically active play. Framing theory posits that social phenomena like perceptions of risk in children's play, can be viewed in myriad ways (i.e. through various frames) (Koon et al., 2016). These frames will determine what policy actors consider the 'facts' to be, which will shape how policy issues are defined, what is ignored, and, correspondingly, which policy solutions are adopted (Entman, 1993).

To ground our understanding of policy actor framing in theories of childhood, we drew on the multiple constructions of childhood approach, which identifies several representations of children in policy (Baum et al., 2019; MacDougall & Darbyshire, 2017). These include '*child at risk*' (children are perceived as vulnerable and needing protection); '*economic child*' (children, and by extension, their families are framed as consumers in societal systems often within a neo-liberal context); '*child as developing being*' (childhood is viewed as a developmental stage on the way to adulthood); and '*child as citizen*'(children are perceived as 'citizens in the making', who have the right to, and are capable of, contributing to decisions that influence their lives) (Baum et al., 2019).

To ground our understanding of policy actor framing in theories of risk, we drew on the social theory of risk society, which provides a framework for understanding the influence of risk and uncertainty in contemporary societies (Beck, 1992), and has been used to make sense of risk and childhood in the context of forest schools (Harper, 2017), and physical contact in sports coaching (Piper et al., 2012) and physical education (Varea & Öhman, 2023). Risk society centres on the idea that features of post-industrial modernisation, including globalisation and rapid technological advances, have led to the generation of new and more complex risks (Lupton, 2013). These processes have also contributed to the breakdown of traditional social structures leading to greater individualisation, and an increasing emphasis on managing risks and personal decision making (Giddens, 1999). Risk society theory provided a basis to examine how policy actors construct risk in children's play and the expected role of schools in relation to risk. The theoretical framework for the study is depicted in Figure 1.
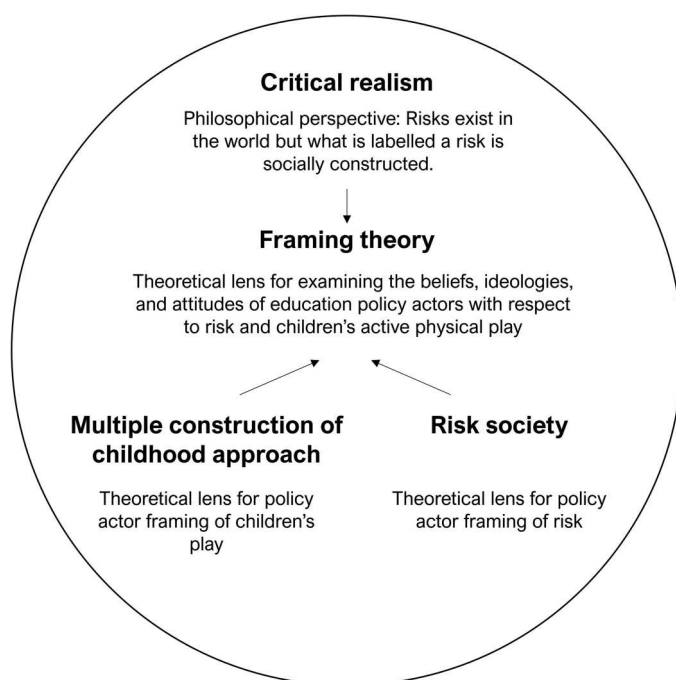
Figure 1. Theoretical framework for this research. Figure illustrates the philosophical perspective and theoretical framework underpinning this research.

Materials and methods

Design and setting

This study adopts a multi-method qualitative case study design. Consistent with Yin (2009, p. 18), we have conceptualised our case study as '*an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context*'. The phenomena of interest were education policy actor perspectives on risk and children's physically active play, and the context is the Australian primary school setting. Case studies are well suited to capturing information on explanatory 'how' and 'why' questions, which aligns with the aims of this study (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2009). The case study was located in the state of Victoria, in the Southeast of the Australian continent, with a population of 6.5 million, representing approximately 25% of Australia's population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). First Nations people make up 1% of the population, and 35% were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In Victoria, there are three school sectors, with approximately 67% of children attending government schools, 22% Catholic schools, and 11% independent schools (Department of Education and Training, 2022).

A broad understanding of policy was adopted: '*Activities of state institutions and other agencies and professions involved in maintaining social order*' (Bacchi, 2016, p. 18), including laws, regulations, standards, policy directives, guidelines, or strategies. We have defined active physical play above and stated our interest in the role of risk in play, however, for simplicity we use the term 'play' interchangeably in this paper to denote children's freely chosen and self-directed behaviour during recess/breaktime. The Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) have guided the reporting of the study (O'Brien et al., 2014) to enhance trustworthiness (see Supplementary File 1). Low-risk ethics approval was granted from the Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group – Health (HEAG-H 128_2021).

Reflexivity

It is important to acknowledge the role of our own subjectivity and positionality in the research process, specifically that all authors perceive children's active physical play to be important and something to be prioritised in schools (Walt et al., 2008). With respect to methodological reflexivity, we acknowledge the influence our critical realist perspective has had on our methodological choices (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), including the development of the theoretical framework, and data collection and analysis methods, and therefore, we also participated in framing of the topic to a certain degree (Hennink et al., 2020). To address our underlying theoretical assumptions and how these shaped the research, we strove to keep an open mind through paraphrasing participant responses during interviews and revisiting our analysis during group meetings (Byrne, 2022; Hennink et al., 2020). Critical friend discussions provided an opportunity for reflexive acknowledgement of multiple truths, perspectives, and results in the research process (Smith & McGannon, 2018). We also considered interpersonal reflexivity and examined how interviewer rapport influenced the data that were generated (Hennink et al., 2020). We attempted to not be leading in our questioning but acknowledge this was not always possible.

Participants and procedure

We aimed to obtain a broad representation of sectors with an interest in policy relevant to children's play in schools, both inside the school system (schools and government departments directly responsible for schools) and outside. We recruited participants through purposive, snowball and random sampling in several stages. First, we identified key organisations or individuals in the education sector. Using the Victorian government website, we identified the education department divisions with relevant policy oversight in schools. For school principals (head teachers), we obtained a publicly available list of schools registered in the state of Victoria, split the list by school sector and then randomly selected schools using a random number generator, aiming for representation from each sector. For non-government organisations, academics, and industry, we contacted high profile organisations in the education, play and injury prevention sectors. Several participants recommended other policy actors with expertise in the area, which helped to achieve a wider sample. All participants were contacted via email and provided with a copy of the plain language statement and consent form prior to agreeing to participate. A final sample of 30 participants was obtained (inside school system, n = 12; outside, n = 18). Characteristics of the sample are described in Table 1 (sector and organisation/role) and Table 2 (demographic characteristics). Most participants were female (60%) and half had post-graduate qualifications (50%). Ages varied from below 35 to 65 + years. Several participants had experience across multiple stakeholder categories (e.g. education policy managers or NGO actors that were previously teachers/principals).

Semi-structured interviews

We selected semi-structured in-depth interviews, a flexible method that enabled us to follow lines of enquiry as they emerged in conversations and probe where required (Hennink et al., 2020). This method also allows for frank discussions and the disclosure of perspectives without fear of disapproval from employers or peers (Hennink et al., 2020). During interviews we sought to build rapport with participants and ask questions in an open empathetic way (Hennink et al., 2020). The first author conducted all interviews online via zoom, which ranged between 30 and 90 min in length. Following receipt of written consent, interviews commenced with a short series of demographic questions. For the remainder of the interview, a semi-structured interview guide was used, adapted according to participant's role. For example, education policy managers were interviewed about specific policies they had oversight of, whereas participants from industry and NGOs engaged with several policies in the course of their work, and school principals had oversight of many policies that touched on children's play, including playground rules. All participants were asked about their

Table 1. Participants by sector and organisation or role.

		Participant ID (#)			
Sector	Organisation/Role	Interview and photo-elicitation	Interview only	Title in Findings	Total number
Inside the school system (schools and government departments directly responsible for schools)					
School	Principal (Government)	26, 27		Principal	2
Administration	Principal (Catholic, Independent)	29, 30		Principal	2
Government	Education policy manager	17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24		Policy manager	8
Outside the school system					
Government	Health promotion policy manager	28		Policy manager	1
NGO	Professional learning association	15, 16, 25	14	NGO actor	4
	Play promotion	1	2, 3	NGO actor	3
	Injury prevention	12, 13		NGO actor	2
Industry	Landscape architect	6		Industry actor	1
	Visual artist, playground designer		7	Industry actor	1
	Playground safety inspector, risk assessor	11		Industry actor	1
Academia	Child development and play	4, 5		Academic	2
	Injury prevention and risk management	8	9, 10	Academic	3
				Total	30

Abbreviations: NGO: non-governmental organisation.

perspectives on risk and the role of physically active play in children's lives, its place in schools, and the key policy issues schools faced in terms of supporting this behaviour.

Photo-elicitation

Photo-elicitation was integrated in the interviews to generate richer interview transcripts by providing concrete talking points, prompting memory, and stimulating participant engagement (Caldeborg, 2022; Stevenson et al., 2022). Participants were shown several photos of children engaging in active physical play at school. Photos were obtained by the first author[1] and represented Sandseter's 'risky play' categories, including 'play at great heights', and 'play at high speeds' (Sandseter, 2007). Other photos represented types of physically active play identified in the literature as popular among children but commonly restricted in schools, including body play (cartwheels, trampoline play), loose parts play, nature play (cubby building), and wet weather play (Jerebine et al., 2022a). Photo-elicitation is a visual research method which can enhance the richness of interview data by evoking deep emotions, memories, and ideas, that may not be discoverable through verbal methods alone (Glaw et al., 2017; Stevenson et al., 2022). Photos can also be used to break down

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Characteristic	n	%
Gender identity		
Female	18	60
Male	12	40
Age (years)		
<35	4	13
35–44	9	30
45–54	6	20
55–64	8	27
65+	3	10
Education		
Technical trades	2	7
Advanced diploma/diploma	3	10
Bachelor degree	10	33
Post-graduate certificate or higher	15	50

social barriers and lead to open discussions about the issue of interest (Caldeborg, 2022). Integration of visual methods can contribute to rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research, enabling triangulation between different information sources (Glaw et al., 2017; Noble & Heale, 2019). Due to time constraints only 80% (24/30) of participants participated in the photo-elicitation: 12 of these participants were from inside the school system and 12 from outside the school system (see Table 1).

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded with participant permission and transcribed by the first author. We used reflexive thematic analysis (TA), supported by QSR NVivo 2.0 software, to analyse the data. Reflexive TA is a theoretically flexible method suitable for research that investigates understanding and representation of beliefs and values, and for analysis of data collected through both interviews and visual methods (Braun et al., 2019). We utilised Braun and Clarke's recursive six-phase approach, led by the first author, which began with (a) familiarisation and becoming immersed in the data. This was followed by (b) initial coding, guided by the theoretical framework, which allowed for a structured and theory-driven exploration of the data. This approach facilitated the co-coding of four transcripts and subsequent critical friend discussions between authors (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The aim of this process was not to achieve 'accurate' or 'reliable' coding, but to augment the analysis conducted by the first author (Byrne, 2022). Next, (c) we generated themes by grouping codes together to reflect patterns of shared meaning, then (d) reviewed and developed themes (which became 'frames') and subthemes (features of the frames) guided by the theoretical framework. Because the study was concerned with understanding participants attitudes and beliefs, both literal or semantic meanings in the data were examined as well as considering implicit or latent meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Therefore, consistent with our critical realist perspective, our analysis sought to both '*reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality*' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). During the final phases, we (e) defined, refined and named the frames and subthemes and developed a thematic map, and (f) revisited the research questions and made connections with the literature, to produce the paper (Braun & Clarke, 2019). All authors met regularly to discuss how the frames and subthemes fit together and how they related to the research questions.

Findings

Four overarching frames of children's active physical play in schools were generated through our analysis. As depicted in Figure 2, each frame represents a policy construction of childhood and risk, with several subthemes, which illustrate features of the frame. Two frames were 'risk averse' (*protection; productivity*) and two were 'risk tolerant' (*development; flourishing*). Each frame and corresponding subthemes are described below and summarised in Table 3.

Risk averse frames

Frame of protection

The frame of *protection* corresponded with the 'child at risk' construction of childhood in policy and was dominant in schools. The underlying beliefs in this frame were oriented around the potential for things to go wrong and the imperative to avoid this happening. These beliefs were expressed through three subthemes: 'Lack of trust in children', 'Injuries should be prevented', and 'Safe spaces'. The *protection* frame was prevalent among participants inside the school system, and some actors outside the school system, notably for 'safe spaces'. Risk was constructed negatively in this frame, which could lead to adverse outcomes for children.
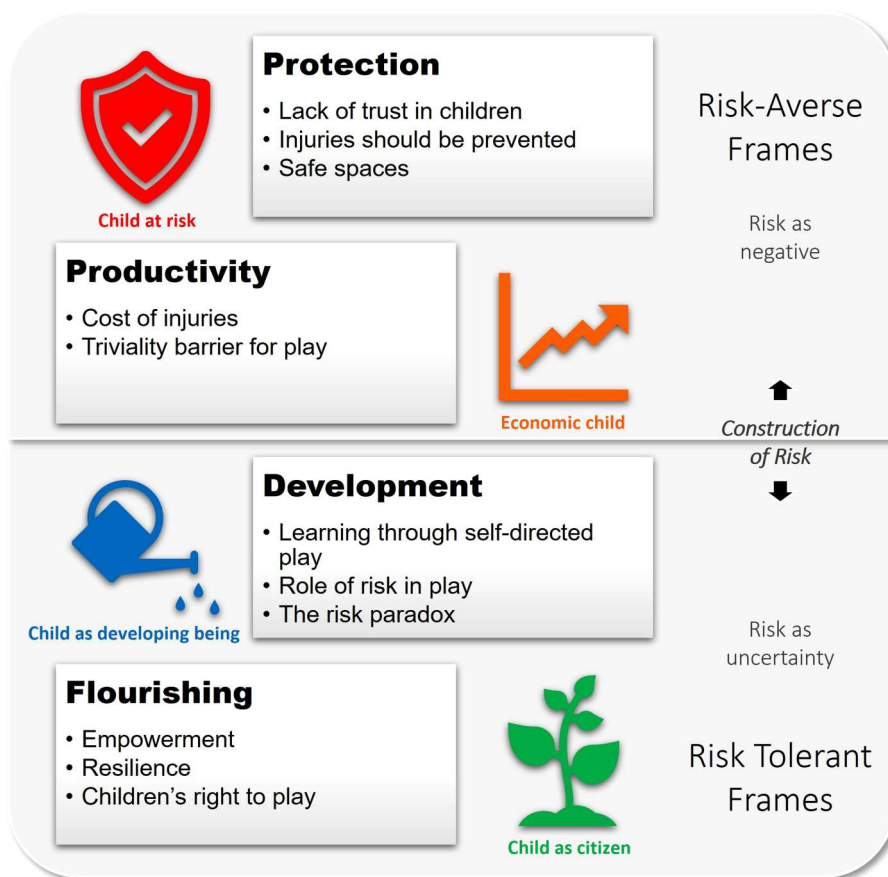
Figure 2. Frames of physically active play in schools. Figure illustrates four education policy actor frames of active physical play, the subthemes that characterise each frame, and the corresponding constructions of risk and of childhood (MacDougall & Darby-shire, 2017).

Lack of trust in children

Policy actors with a *protection* frame questioned children's ability to manage their own play and keep themselves and other children safe. Other participants had observed this frame in schools they had worked with. There was an emphasis on the potential for things to go wrong, and the need, therefore, for adults to intervene to control or restrict activities and/or equipment. For example, play-fighting or playing with sticks, would lead to real fighting or children getting injured. Three of the four principals framed play in this way but differed on which types of play they thought would be problematic. For example, one principal (#29) explained: '*No, we've avoided that one* [basket swing in photograph] … *the risk of the student walking past there, getting hit with it, the risk of students falling off, the risk of students just testing their strength, and just testing it too far. No, we don't go for that sort of equipment*'. These beliefs were also expressed as a justification for controlled environments in schools, for example, close supervision, prohibited games, or structured activities led by adults in place of self-directed play. Several industry actors, NGO's and academics challenged these beliefs: '*Kids are really good at working out their own problems if you let them. So, I think it's just attitudes, not letting kids manage their own play would be a big one*' (academic, #5).

Injuries should be prevented

Alongside a lack of trust in children was a strong belief among some participants that injuries should always be prevented during play. An industry actor (#11) who worked with schools described this

Table 3. Education policy actor frames of physically active play with corresponding construction of childhood and risk.

	Subtheme (Features of frame)	Construction of childhood	Construction of risk
Protection	— Lack of trust in children — Injuries should be prevented — Safe spaces	Child at risk	Negative/Risk averse — Leads to adverse outcomes for child. — Schools hold responsibility to remove/reduce the risk of physical/emotional injury to children.
Productivity	— Cost of injuries — Triviality barrier for play	Economic child	Negative/Risk averse — Leads to adverse outcomes for school/staff/other institutions. — Schools hold responsibility to remove/reduce economic risks to the school system.
Development	— Learning through self-directed play — Role of risk in play — The risk paradox	Child as developing being	Uncertainty/Risk tolerant — Contributes to child development. — Schools hold responsibility to accept risk to support children's holistic development
Flourishing	— Empowerment — Resilience — Children's right to play	Child as citizen	Uncertainty/Risk tolerant — Contributes to human flourishing. — Schools hold responsibility to accept risk to support children's agency and life mastery.

attitude as '*let's eliminate accidents at any point*'. The sentiment was strong among participants who held responsibility in schools, such as principals and education policy managers. As one policy manager (#22) described, '*the complexities of children getting injured on our watch …* ' made injury prevention paramount. This was offered as a clear reason to avoid or restrict some types of play. An academic (#4) who had worked with schools for many years summed it up: '*So I think it is this approach that, you know, we need to make sure that the children don't hurt themselves, hurt each other, by whatever means, and if that means that we have a whole stack of rules and we don't let children do things, then so be it*'.

Safe spaces

A third feature of the *protection* frame was the belief that schools should be 'very safe': '*You've got to be able to say, 'This is a safe place for you to play. Go off and play'. Not that you've got to watch out for kids on bikes*' (policy manager, #24, in response to children riding bikes in photograph). This frame was reinforced through the number of 'mandatory' school policies participants described, from 'child safe standards' designed to protect children from physical and emotional harm to UV policies designed to prevent sunburn. Some participants expressed frustration with this, including an independent school principal (#30): '*We have lots and lots of policies which conform to government expectations and requirements, but that's just one of the meaningless aspects of running a school nowadays …* '

The notion of 'safe spaces' was also expressed through a concern for children's psychological safety. For some children, certain games or activities could be emotionally upsetting (e.g. rough and tumble 'human target games' like dodgeball), and that would be a reason for all children to be prevented from playing them. Several participants described how many children enjoyed these games, and explained ways they could be modified to make them safer (i.e. soft balls thrown at lower leg rather than body). The main issue appeared to be how much choice children had in if, and how, they participated i.e. their agency in playing. Other participants expressed

concern with the 'safe spaces' policy discourse in schools, observing this created a tension that needed to be balanced with other equally important values or objectives, as illustrated by an industry actor (#7):

> We have these competing things, of how do we make things more accessible, more inclusive … That's one requirement. And there's this other requirement that almost has the exact opposite metrics, then, how do you do both? And I think it's talking around this tension and educating people that we have a need for both … There is a real need to protect. But then, that's not the only high ground.

Frame of productivity

The frame of *productivity* aligned with the 'economic child' construction of childhood in policy. The underlying beliefs in this frame were centred around views on the core business of schools, the reputation of schools, and the economic implications of injuries, which were perceived to be more important than opportunities for freely chosen play. The *productivity* frame was perceived to have a strong influence on decision making for play in schools, which all participants believed took place within the context of competing priorities, limited resources, and a crowded curriculum. This frame was expressed through two subthemes: 'Cost of injuries' and 'Triviality barrier for play'. The *productivity* frame was more prevalent among education policy managers and participants who worked in the injury prevention sectors. Within this frame, risk was constructed as negative, which could lead to adverse outcomes for schools or other institutions.

Costs of injuries

Among policyactors with a *productivity* framing of play, there was a focus on the cost (financial and otherwise, e.g. stress) of injuries in terms of administrative time, potential litigation, reputation, and the burden on the hospital system. For administration, costs related to the time and energy required to deal with parents, insurers, WorkSafe (workplace regulator and insurer in Victoria), complete paperwork and reports, and participate in investigations when injuries occurred. The potential for litigation, and the time and energy required for a court case, together with the potential for reputation damage, were also key: '*I think there's always that fear of litigation, which is probably the one thing that people worry about. And, you know, having to do the paperwork, and having to show up in court and tell people why you have got a playground that wasn't maintained*' (NGO actor, #13). There was disagreement between participants about actual risk of litigation (e.g. whether many parents pursued legal damages for play injuries) and the likelihood of a successful case being brought against a school/staff member (except in the most extreme cases of negligence, i.e. intoxicated at work). An experienced policy manager (#23) explained that there had been ' … *seminal cases over the years, involving students in playground injuries, Australia wide, that have shaped the understanding of what duty of care looks like in a school context* … [yet] *there is often a misunderstanding of this duty of care, and the fact that it is not a duty to wrap children up in cotton wool and prevent any harm or anything ever happening to a child*'. Several participants also raised the issue of the cost of injuries to the hospital system, which they perceived was high, necessitating a strong focus on injury prevention schools.

Triviality barrier for play

The other side of the *productivity* frame was the perception that play was less important than classroom time because academic achievement was the core business of schools: '*The triviality barrier has to do with play, and it's people's attitude that play is not as important as other things, like work, study*' (academic, #5). An NGO actor (#1) perceived this reflected a wider social climate: *It's a whole society issue in the west, it's so competitive, and everyone's fearful of missing out, and not getting on the train*'.

Among education policy managers there was a general agreement that play was important for children but that it was discretionary in schools, and there was no need for policy to stipulate time requirements for play. All education policy managers rejected the idea of a policy for play,

some citing the sheer number of policies schools were already required to have: '*Just the burden of having 40 local policies is hard enough, because locally, they* [schools] *need to update those, they need to get, you know, go to school council and consult on those. It is almost unmanageable as it is*' (#22). Another (#23) highlighted policy was reserved for obligatory matters: '*I think talking about policy is triggering, because policy tends to associate itself with requirement, burden, compliance, 'you must' … it's not surprising that there's more policies that reflect legal obligations because there is no discretionary element in that*'.

Risk tolerant frames

Frame of development

The frame of *development* corresponded with the 'child as developing being' construction of childhood. This frame emphasised the instrumental value of play for children, with core beliefs centred around the benefits of self-directed play and the role of risk, which needed to be balanced against the potential negative outcomes identified in the *protection* and *productivity* frames. These beliefs were expressed through three subthemes: 'learning through self-directed play', 'role of risk in play and 'the risk paradox'. The *development* frame was more prevalent among policy actors outside the school system. Within this frame, risk was constructed as uncertainty, which supported children's holistic development and learning through play.

Learning through self-directed play

Policy actors with a *development* frame highlighted the role of self-directed play in learning and development, arguing that valuable outcomes for children are derived when adults interfere less. This was summed up by a principal (#30):

> As they play, they learn about relationships, and about restrictions and limits, and they also develop the imagination … So, if adults don't interfere too much in those games – and in recent decades, they have been interfering far too much, I think – then kids will learn the secrets of a successful life … and their ability of problem-solving, and conflict resolution, are likely to improve spectacularly.

Participants suggested that school staff who understood play had a more tolerant approach, which led to ' *… a more relaxed and harmonious playground, less issues, less factors for the staff to deal with, and in the long run, it has better learning outcomes for the kids*' (academic, #5). Other participants expressed frustration at the lack of recognition of play in the education system, that despite evidence for benefits ' *… that still hasn't translated to practice*' (NGO actor, #16).

Role of risk in play

The role of risk in play was a key feature of the *development* frame. As an academic (#5) explained, risk-taking allows ' *… the child to grow in themselves, and manage themselves, and find out about what they can do*'. Participants emphasised the importance of children having the opportunity to learn to manage risk through experience, and that sometimes this involved injuries because making mistakes and learning from those mistakes was part of growing up: ' *… in play, be it in school or in a public open space, the learning experiences that come out of engaging in risky behavior, which might involve yard injury, that might involve some time, you know, at home or in bed, that outweighs the risk*' (industry actor, #11). Participants made a distinction here between injuries that are a normal part of play and 'serious' injuries that schools should seek to prevent. Notably, some participants working in injury prevention sectors had a higher tolerance of injury than other participants: '*So if somebody has fallen off* [monkey bar in photograph] *and broken an arm, they're* [parents] *up in arms, because, you know, this has happened to my child. I'm like, 'Well, is their head ok?' And they're like, 'Yeah'. And I'm like, 'Well, you know, they'll get over the broken arm*'' (NGO actor, #13). An academic (#4) described the role of risk in terms of ' *… children operating within their zone of proximal development*', whereby taking a risk represented the next step in a child's development; they might succeed,

they might fail, but it is a necessary step. Moreover, benefits accrue through a child's *perception* of risk: play should feel risky to the child, but that doesn't mean it has to be unsafe. Here there was a distinction between a risk and a hazard: '*A risk is something that the children can control themselves. They're in charge of it. They decide whether they want to do it or not … A hazard is something that can be prevented, that's in the way, that can harm them, and they can't do anything about it*' (academic, #5).

The risk paradox

Several policy actors with expertise in risk management and injury prevention described a paradox, whereby making things safer could encourage people to take greater risks, particularly over the longer term, where there is the potential for greater harm.

> *Wouldn't you rather your five year old learned that when you're crossing from one surface, a hard surface, onto a loose surface, that you have to change the way you move* [and] *as a five year old maybe* [they] *lost some skin on the knee, than wait until they're 17 and you give them their first car, and they leave a* [sealed road] *onto a gravel road for the first time* (industry actor, #11).

An academic (#8) explained how learning to manage risk occurs through incremental steps: '*And I call it the paradox of risk. It's these incremental steps of exposing them to managed risk – like if they don't learn the road rules on the bike at school, then again, it's the keys to the four-wheel drive* [where they take risks on the road] *and they're going to kill themselves*'. This participant highlighted a key challenge for schools in supporting this form of learning: '*But benefit* [of risk] *is difficult to measure – how do you measure benefit? We can measure the injuries fairly easily. But measuring the benefits is tricky*'.

Frame of flourishing

The frame of *flourishing* aligned with the 'child as citizen' construction of childhood. This frame emphasised a human rights perspective, with core beliefs centred around the intrinsic value of risk and freedom in play for children's wellbeing and flourishing. These beliefs were expressed through three subthemes: 'empowerment, 'resilience' and 'children's right to play'. The *flourishing* frame was more prevalent among policy actors outside the school system, including some working in the injury prevention sectors. Within this frame, risk was constructed as uncertainty, which supports children's agency and life mastery.

Empowerment

Within the *flourishing* frame of play, policy actors believed free play offered children an opportunity to develop self-knowledge and self-confidence. Several participants described how the constraints put on children in contemporary societies stifles their opportunity to flourish: '*We are forever imposing rules, particularly on our younger children … there's very little opportunity for kids to understand themselves and their own frailties, as well, their capacities and their strengths*'. (NGO actor, #1), and '*if everything is about a high fence and … like you can't have this around there, and everything's about a 'can't' and 'you shouldn't', it really starts to shut people down, and that's a real problem, because we need freedom to flourish*' (industry actor, #7). In contrast, giving children more agency in play was perceived to empower them to be better. In response to photographs of children climbing trees, riding bikes, and playfighting, the independent school principal (#30) explained that there were very few restrictions on how children played, but '*… at the same time, we expect people to behave courteously and in a friendly and inclusive manner, and the golden rule of the school is 'no excluding'.*'

Resilience

Resilience was another feature of the *flourishing* frame, which policy actors discussed in terms of how children had 'survived' injuries in the past or do so today in other cultures: '*One of them* [school council member] *said, 'You know, I fell off it* [monkey bar in photograph] *when I was a kid, and I*

broke my arm in three places'. And I said, 'Well, did you play on it again?' He said, 'Yeah, I learned … I just held on bloody tight.' (NGO actor, #13). Resilience was discussed in the context of suggesting schools could bear in the mind what children gain through taking risks, as well as what they potentially lose when injuries occur. '*We need to have risk in order to flourish … And how do we prepare for the future? The things that build resilience aren't the same things that are associated with, necessarily, safety*' (industry actor, #7).

Children's right to play

Some participants discussed children's right (and need) to play freely, with its risks, believing this should be acknowledged more strongly in schools: '*I think that's how kids should play, and we're doing a disservice by not allowing them to have something that's a bit more challenging and risky to play on*' (NGO actor, #13). When discussing policies that influenced how people worked with schools on play projects, one industry actor (#6) described a lack of attention to the UN-CRC: '*There's the overall Article 31 of the Child's Right to Play, so we're a signatory to that in Australia, not that most people would know it, but that is something you know about. But does it actually* [come up] *No*'.

Discussion

Through a multi-layered theory-driven design, this study elicits new insight into how education policy actors frame risk in children's active physical play. We uniquely collated insights from multiple key stakeholders in the education system, which has rarely been the case in prior literature. A key finding was that two risk averse frames (*protection*; *productivity*) were dominant in schools, and were primarily expressed by policy actors inside the school system. These frames represented a negative construction of risk and were portrayed in ways that appeared to reinforce each other. For example, legislation that requires a duty of care towards children was used to explain policies that prioritised injury prevention over free play (*protection*). While the *productivity* focus on academic achievement in schools, where play was perceived as 'discretionary', helped rationalise a policy focus on injury prevention and safety. The perceived cost of injuries to schools (*productivity*) also reinforced the need for protective policies. While there were some 'real world' examples of risk tolerant frames (*development*; *flourishing*), wherein risk was constructed as uncertainty (and could lead to positive or negative outcomes in play), more commonly these frames were expressed in the context of how things should or could be, rather than how they were. Risk tolerant frames were more frequently expressed by policy actors outside the school system, including the injury prevention sectors, and may provide the basis for an alternative policy response to managing risk in children's play in schools. We discuss the findings below and consider the implications for policy development in schools.

Risk benefit trade-off

The impact of the *protection* and *productivity* frames on children's play in schools can be interpreted as a risk-benefit trade-off [i.e. the inadvertent substitution of one risk over another (Ball & Ball-King, 2021)] between safety and other goals. At one level, this is consistent with societal expectations; physical and emotional safety is an important goal, no one wants to see a child injured, and it follows a school would want to avoid the costs associated with injuries (Ardelean et al., 2021). However, framing theorists argue an important feature of frames is what they omit: By their nature, frames select and call attention to particular aspects of a situation, which '*… logically means that frames simultaneously direct attention away from other aspects*' (Entman, 1993, p. 54). As Ball (2004) argued two decades ago, a narrow focus on safety may come at the expense of other fundamental objectives or values not immediately apparent. In the context of the current study, these would include the right to play and the need for play that is self-directed, fun, and supports children to learn about risk (Ball et al., 2019; Gray, 2011). As illustrated by the *development* and

flourishing frames there is as much for children to gain from play as there is for them (and schools) to lose through potential injuries.

The measurement gap

Several factors underline the risk-benefit trade-off in schools. First, the ease with which injury data can be (and is) recorded, analysed and reported in schools, hospitals and other institutions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023), and the relatively difficult task of measuring the benefits of play and risk, particularly proving causal relationships (Ardelean et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2023). Second, injury tolerance appears to be low in schools, even for injuries children recover from (e.g. sprains, bone fractures), which may be consistent with contemporary societal expectations (Gill, 2018; Jerebine et al., 2024; Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023). Third, injury outcomes are experienced immediately. Although free play/risky play, may have immediate outcomes such as social engagement, physical activity and pleasure, many benefits develop over the longer term and contribute to children's development and wellbeing in complex ways (Brussoni et al., 2015; Yogman et al., 2018). Evolutionary theorists argue play has a fundamental role in human development and learning, however to study play deprivation would be unacceptable ethically (Gray, 2011). Likewise, studying the effects of risk-taking on children's development has ethical challenges (Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023). The lack of causal evidence for the benefits of free play/risky play, and challenges collecting reportable data on benefits, may mean they are easily dismissed by policy makers, who are accountable for student outcomes (either negative i.e. injuries, or positive, i.e. academic achievement). This may represent an example of 'McNamara's fallacy', which is the tendency to make what is measurable important and disregard that which cannot be measured easily, presuming, if it cannot be measured it is not important (O'Mahony, 2017).

'Important' risks are culturally defined

In the context of a risk society perspective, the dominance of risk averse frames of play in schools are indicative of wider societal trends that reflect an increasing awareness of, and engagement with, risk over the last 50 years (Beck, 1992). For Giddens (1999, p. 3), the world risk society is not necessarily more dangerous, rather, ' … *it is a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and with safety), which generates the notion of risk*'. As a recognisable feature of risk society, injury prevention has emerged as a public health priority, producing formal and informal codes of practice, standards, management systems and regulations that govern institutions such as schools (Ball & Ball-King, 2021; Lupton, 2013). In the context of the *protection* frame, this has had the effect of elevating some risks above less visible and immediate ones, such as the consequences for children of play restriction (Lupton, 2013), which has been identified as a wider trend in the context of children's independent activity (Gray et al., 2023) and public recreation outdoors (Ball & Ball-King, 2021). As Ball and Ball-King (2021, p. 1) argue, the ' … *emphasis on harm* [has] *shifted attention away from what causes health*'.

Central to this is the notion of which risks are singled out as important. Risk society theorists argue these are culturally defined, and in the context of the *productivity* frame, are inextricably linked with the objectives of the education system itself (Beck, 1992; Lupton, 2013). Influenced by the global education reform movement, education policy in several countries, including Australia, has driven a narrowing of focus in schools. Reinforced though standardised testing and performance measures (Reid, 2020; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019), there is an emphasis on evidence-based practice that generates demonstrable outcomes (e.g. test scores), and favours academic achievement (e.g. literacy and numeracy) over less readily measurable skills that might be acquired through either physically active play during recess/breaktime or 'learning through play' indoor/outdoor classroom environments (Jachyra & Fusco, 2016; Parker et al., 2022). The perception of play as discretionary by policy actors in the school system illustrates this issue, indicating a broadening of the goals

that underpin the education system in Australia is needed, to encompass healthy child development, wellbeing, *and* learning (Sahlberg & Goldfeld, 2023).

Strengths and limitations

This study provides unique insights into policy framing of risk and children's active physical play in schools. Without these insights, policy leaders are prone to make decisions affecting children that are not based on evidence from key actors in the education sector. A strength in the design of this study was the integration of photo-elicitation in the semi-structured interviews to ground discussions about risk and children's play in concrete examples, which enabled methodological triangulation (Noble & Heale, 2019). This approach revealed the complexity of the issue and a range of perceptions, sometimes contradictory, of what constitutes acceptable risk in play. For example, one participant (a principal) was positive about the benefits of risk-taking in play, and believed it was important for children to have opportunities for this play in school. However, when discussing the photos of children playing, the same participant believed most activities depicted, such as bike riding, scootering, playing on a basket swing or tree climbing, were too 'dangerous' for school.

Several limitations should be noted. Although we attempted to gather a broad range of perspectives and represent them accurately, we acknowledge we bring our own subjective lens to the research as explained under *Reflexivity* above. Given this was a case study within a limited jurisdiction, we cannot attest to its generalisability. Although we sought to obtain a broad representation of sectors with an interest in policy relevant to children's play in schools, it is possible we may have missed some voices on the topic. Notably, children's perspectives would have provided deeper insight, given they too have a 'stake' in school policy, but we were unable to obtain approval to recruit children from schools, due to the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

We support the calls of education leaders for a re-envisioning of the purposes of education to foster whole child development, wellbeing and learning, with attention to the siloing between education and health in government policy (Reid, 2020; Sahlberg et al., 2023). It would be valuable to comprehensively examine the forces contributing to risk averse frames, which may help elucidate what is required for schools to adopt risk tolerant approaches to play. Work with policy leaders is recommended to explore feasibility of a balanced approach that includes opportunities for child *development* and *flourishing* through play and investigates the impact on student behaviour, wellbeing and learning outcomes. A starting point for policy could involve application of the newly developed international standard for recreational activities (including play), which specifies methods for a benefit-risk assessment that includes examples for injury thresholds (International Standards Organisation, 2023). Additionally, as indicated in the *flourishing* frame, there is a need for participatory policy making with children, grounded in a rights-based perspective that acknowledges children's right to be involved in decisions that shape their play. Finally, future work should explore societal (particularly, parental) expectations for injury prevention and seek to contribute evidence for the benefits of risk-taking in childhood.

Authors' contributions

AJ: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Resources, Investigation, Data Curation and Formal Analysis, Visualisation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. EE: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Methodology, Resources, Data Curation and Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing. NL: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Methodology, Resources, Data Curation and Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing. MD: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing. LB: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Resources, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing. All

authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and agree with the order of presentation of authors.

Note

1. Photos used in the photo-elicitation were obtained from publicly available websites depicting children playing at school. Permission to re-publish the photos was sought, but not obtained. Website details can be obtained from the corresponding author on written request.

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