

How and Why Did Outdoor Play Become a Central Focus of Scottish Early Learning and Care Policy

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Abstract

Based on a government document review, 25 stakeholder interviews, and 7 site visits, we examined how and why outdoor play became a focus of Scottish policy for early learning and care programs; we also documented opportunities and barriers to policy implementation. The outdoor play emphasis began as a bottom-up initiative, with a few early adopters serving as model programs. Perceptions that outdoor play programs were of higher quality than traditional indoor nursery programs helped alleviate concerns about children's well-being, and elicited support from key policy actors promoting the policy. An innovative licensing body that shifted from a risk assessment to a risk/benefit approach was key in developing this policy. A number of barriers to implementation, such as parent and educator attitudes, were identified. Solutions to these barriers and the implications of our findings are discussed.

Resumé

Comment et pourquoi le jeu en plein air est-il devenu un élément central de la politique écossaise encadrant les programmes de garde et d'apprentissage des jeunes enfants? Nous avons examiné cette question en analysant des documents gouvernementaux et en réalisant 25 entrevues auprès de parties prenantes, ainsi que 7 visites dans différents établissements. Ce faisant, nous avons aussi relevé les incitatifs et obstacles à l'implantation d'une politique de ce type. Cette importance accordée au jeu en plein air est une initiative qui vient de la base et les premiers adeptes de cette approche ont servi de programmes modèles. Les programmes de jeu en plein air sont perçus comme étant de meilleure qualité que les programmes habituels de garderie à l'intérieur, ce qui aide à lever les inquiétudes quant au bien-être des enfants et a permis de bénéficier du soutien des principaux acteurs politiques. Un organisme d'attribution des permis a décidé d'innover et de passer d'une simple évaluation des risques à une évaluation à la fois des risques et des avantages; son rôle a été essentiel dans l'élaboration de la politique. Différents obstacles à la mise en œuvre, notamment l'attitude des parents et des éducateurs, ont été relevés. L'article présente des solutions pour surmonter ces obstacles, ainsi que les implications des résultats obtenus.

Keywords: outdoor play, forest kindergarten, early learning and care, outdoor play programs, early adopters of outdoor play

Mots clés : jeu en plein air, maternelle en forêt, garde et apprentissage des jeunes enfants, programmes de jeu en plein air, premiers adeptes du jeu en plein air

How and Why Did Outdoor Play Become a Central Focus of Scottish Early Learning and Care Policy?

In 2016, the Scottish government made the policy decision to increase the number of free hours of early learning and care (ELC) services for 3- and 4-year-olds from 620 to 1,140 hours annually by 2020. The goal was to provide further support for working parents and to enhance ELC experiences for young children. An increased emphasis on early learning and outdoor play was a critical element of this policy. There is a long tradition of outdoor play programs (OPPs) in Northern Europe, which are associated with positive outcomes for children in terms of their physical health and activity, social development, and interest in nature (e.g., Brussoni et al., 2015; Fjørtoft, 2001; Lerstrup & van den Bosch, 2017).

In Scotland, the first OPP was licensed in 2008 by the Care Inspectorate, who are responsible for licensing programs. This marked the beginning of a movement to create high quality opportunities for children to explore the natural world, referred to as Outdoor Nurseries in Scotland. The purpose of the current case study was to investigate how and why outdoor play in the form of Outdoor Nurseries became a focus of Scottish policy for ELC programs, as well as to examine the perceived advantages and barriers to the implementation of this policy. In keeping with work by Passy, Bentsen, Gary, and Ho (2019), we examine whether the policy development followed a bottom-up or top-down approach. Our paper includes a review of government policy documents, information gathered during site visits of OPPs in Scotland, and interviews with key stakeholders.

Places for Children Versus Children's Spaces: A Rationale for Outdoor Play

In the past decade or so, educators have become increasingly interested in the kind of learning that may occur outside of the school classroom, a movement that is sometimes called place-based education. Waite (2013) discusses how children come to understand these outdoor spaces and how these spaces afford opportunities for learning that may or may not align with educational curriculum and pedagogy. In this vein, Rasmussen (2004) distinguishes between spaces *for* children designed by adults, such as typical early childhood settings (e.g., child care centres or nurseries), and *children's spaces*. The latter are informal spaces that enable children to establish a deep connection to the specific environment where the program is located—to use it as they wish so as to meet their own learning and exploration needs (Änggård, 2010; Brown & Kaye, 2017; Waite, 2013). Children ascribe meaning to the spaces that they define through significant social experiences with other children. OPPs are play-based programs that allow youngsters to explore and define their own experiences with the natural environment alongside other children and educators. Educators are responsible for integrating the curriculum into the natural environment through additional

materials (e.g., songs, games, books, tools), while children also engage as young scientists to learn about the natural world. Elliot and Krusekopf (2017) articulate five pedagogical principles for developing OPPs: (1) making deep connections with nature, (2) recognizing the environment is another teacher, (3) including collaborative learning as part of a community, (4) promoting mental and physical well-being, and (5) emphasizing local and traditional knowledge. The benefits of implementing these curriculum-based OPPs are highlighted in numerous studies, which report that outdoor learning contributes positively to children's quality of life (Malone & Waite, 2016), social development, and attitudes towards academic pursuits (Scrutton, 2014). These studies further suggest that a lack of access to outdoor learning stifles children's quality of life, well-being, creativity, and physical health (Malone & Waite, 2016). Taken together, these findings indicate that OPPs hold promise as children's spaces, rather than as spaces for children.

Outdoor Play Programs (OPPs)

Forest kindergartens/schools first appeared in Northern Europe in the 1950s and 1960s; the movement spread to the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Änggård, 2010; Borge, Nordhagen, & Lie, 2003; Brown & Kaye, 2017; MacEachren, 2013; O'Brien & Murray, 2007). Forest kindergarten/nursery programs focus on the early years, whereas forest schools are designed for school-aged children. These programs typically follow a socio-constructivist philosophy (e.g., MacEachren, 2013) and facilitate children's meaningful physical actions and social interactions to enhance their development (Brussoni et al., 2015; Lerstrup & van den Bosch, 2017). In Scotland, Outdoor Nurseries operate in conjunction with local forestry/parklands agencies, third-sector agencies/charities, local authorities, or national organizations (Care Inspectorate, 2016).

In the Scandinavian tradition, forest kindergartens/schools are organized for children to spend significant amounts of time outside (e.g., two hours daily to full days), year-round, and regardless of weather (Änggård, 2010). Some programs have access to an indoor facility (e.g., tent, yurt) for quieter activities and to escape extreme weather conditions (Änggård, 2010; Elliott & Chancellor, 2014). OPPs are situated in woodlands, parks, beaches, botanical gardens, or fields where children are free to explore, investigate the flora and fauna, play, and create their own structures for social or more solitary engagement (Schäffer & Kistemann, 2012). Through analyses of the interviews, on-site visits, and review of government documents, we explored how closely the existing Scottish OPPs follow a play-based curriculum.

Research on the Benefits and Risks of OPPs

A number of benefits are ascribed to OPPs that may enhance children's physical, motor, social, cognitive, and scientific skills. Compared to children enrolled

in traditional preschool programs, research supports the positive benefits of forest kindergartens/schools. In particular, a number of studies highlight the positive benefits of enhancing physical health, such as increased activity level and reduced illness (Brussoni et al., 2015; Fjørtoft, 2001; Söderström et al., 2013). Participation in OPPs also facilitates physical and motor skills, such as coordination (Fjørtoft, 2001; Schäffer & Kistemann, 2012; Tandon, Saelens, Zhou, & Christakis, 2018). Other studies indicate that children attending OPPs develop stronger connections to the natural environment, while their social skills, such as self-confidence, increase (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014; Melhuus, 2012).

Outdoor play is sometimes labelled “risky play” (Brussoni et al., 2015; Sandseter & Sando, 2016). Brussoni et al. (2015) define risky play as a situation where the child can recognize and assess an action and decide what to do. In addition, Brussoni et al. (2015) differentiate between “risk” from “danger”. From the child’s point of view, risky play is “thrilling and exciting” but it may involve physical injury. OPPs present challenges associated with children’s desires to climb heights (e.g., trees), move quickly and hide in dense environments, use tools (e.g., saws), and play near dangerous elements (e.g., water) (Coe, 2017). To manage these risks, educators establish rules for safe engagement with the environment and address potential hazards—which trees are strong enough and how high to climb, for example (Sandseter & Sando, 2016). Brussoni et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review and concluded that there were greater physical health benefits when children could engage in risky play compared to when risky environments were avoided.

Yet, concerns about children’s safety and risk-taking is a prominent societal theme (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012). The issue can be framed as risk assessment, that is, documenting the degree of risk and taking overly protective measures to eliminate risk. Or, the issue can be framed as risk/benefit analyses, namely identifying potential risks and the degree of safety measures required to avoid excessive harm (Brussoni et al., 2015). Helping children determine the level of risk and engage in safe behaviours involving some degree of risk is fundamental to the risk/benefit approach (Brussoni et al., 2012). This allows children to learn how to assess risk and their own willingness to approach new challenges. This approach to risky play is one of the foundational elements of OPPs and the adventure playground movement (Brussoni et al., 2012); thus, we addressed risk issues in the key stakeholder interviews.

Scottish Context for Promoting Early Learning and Care and OPPs

The Scottish national government’s concerns about obesity rates and the increasing amount of time children are inactive indoors (leading to what they refer to as a nature deficit) led the government to rethink the importance of the outdoor ELC environment (Mathias, 2018). Mathias reported that 14% of Scottish children were obese or overweight compared to the European Union

average of 5% of children; further, Scottish children topped the list for hours of screen time in a World Health Survey. An additional concern was closing the educational attainment gap between children from disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds (*A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland*, 2017). Together, these factors led the National government to propose a radical shift in its priorities: to promote ELC with an emphasis on outdoor play.

The Present Study

The present study is a case study in which we address two questions. First, how and why did outdoor play in the form of Outdoor Nurseries become a focus of Scottish policy for ELC programs? Second, what are the perceived opportunities and barriers to the implementation of this policy? To answer these questions, we conducted a review of government documents, visited seven outdoor nursery programs, and interviewed key stakeholders, including individuals from local authorities, national and municipal governments, Scottish Forestry, advocates, and nursery educators.

Method

Participants

With scheduling assistance from Inspiring Scotland (a registered charity for improving young people's futures), semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first two authors at 16 locations, with 25 key stakeholders involved in developing and delivering ELC programs and policy. Nine interviewees were from the government (municipal, local authorities, and national departments), 12 were educators and program supervisors from 7 OPPs, and 4 were key influencers/advocates from foundations and training institutions. All study protocols were approved by the Research Ethics Boards at the University of Toronto and Concordia University.

Document Review

Internet searches of Scottish government websites identified key policy documents. Advocacy groups and key informants also identified relevant documents.

Site Visits

The first two authors visited seven outdoor play programs (three rural, four urban) across Scotland, serving a range of children from middle- and low-income families. Rural programs were located in woodlands and fields, while the

urban programs were in city parks and playgrounds. To document and describe the OPPs, the researchers photographed the physical environment, took extensive notes, and collected printed/website materials provided by the programs that described their curriculum. We also asked the educators questions about how they used space to deliver the program. Information about the different programs was also collected from the Care Inspectorate/licensing information on their website.

Interviews with Key Stakeholders and Thematic Coding

The semi-structured interviews focussed on understanding the rationale for the adoption of outdoor play as a component of the national ELC policy and identifying potential concerns surrounding implementation, barriers, and opportunities. The audio-taped interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes. One Research Assistant (RA) transcribed the audio-tape verbatim, while the second RA verified the transcription. Discrepancies were discussed until reaching a consensus. Based on the literature review and feedback from the researchers, we developed a preliminary theme-based coding system. Transcripts were analyzed using this preliminary coding system, and refinements were developed with the two first authors. This iterative process was repeated until no new themes/codes emerged. The final coding system identified seven key themes (See Table 1 for themes and frequencies). Transcripts were subsequently coded independently by the two RAs for the seven key themes. Coding discrepancies were resolved through group discussion until reaching consensus.

Theme	Times mentioned	Number of speakers
Heterogeneity	70	22
Policy	33	17
Quality	34	11
Risk	38	17
Role of educators	38	14
Barriers	85	23
Why now?	24	13

Table 1. *Frequencies for Key Themes*

Results

Document Review

Key Scottish government policy documents that outline national expectations for education and play opened the door to OPPs, such as the *Curriculum for Excellence 3* (Scottish Government, 2008), the *National Care Standards: Early Education and Care up to the Age of 16* (Scottish Government, 2008), and the *Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision* (Scottish Government, 2013). For example, in keeping with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children, the *Play Strategy* document advocated that all children require daily, stimulating, high-quality outdoor play in natural environments. Other important documents available on the Care Inspectorate website include *Scotland's Play Ranger Toolkit* (Inspiring Scotland, 2014); *The Play Return: A Review of the Wider Impact of Play Initiatives* (Gill, 2014); *Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide* (Ball, Gill, & Spiegel, 2012); and the *Scottish Regulators' Strategic Code of Practice* (Scottish Government, 2015).

In 2016, the National government decided to invest heavily in ELC (Scottish Government, 2017). All 3- and 4-year-olds as well as 2-year-olds from disadvantaged families would be eligible to receive 1,140 hours of free care annually by 2020, nearly doubling the current 620 hours. This mandate for ELC was guided by four principles: quality, flexibility, accessibility, and affordability. In a series of Action Plans, the National government set out to ensure high-quality services, support delivery partners (e.g., public, private, third sector), develop the ELC workforce, create a service model to enhance capacity, funding, and infrastructure, and emphasize outdoor play in natural environments.

In line with the expansion to support the outdoor play movement, the Care Inspectorate published *My World Outdoors* (Care Inspectorate, 2016), a colourful, reader-friendly resource guide highlighting vignettes from existing OPPs. The guide highlights innovative practices, settings (city parks, beaches, woodlands), and principles, using the lens of the SHANARRI philosophy. SHANARRI stands for safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, and included. *My World Outdoors* outlines Care Inspectorate expectations, statements on risky play, best practices, programs, and further resources. More recently, *Space to Grow* was released by the Scottish government (2017) to showcase services that allow the free movement of children from indoors to outdoors. *Out to Play* (Scottish Government, 2018) provides practical advice for developing OPPs. These documents track the evaluation of the Scottish government's growing shift away from risk aversion and toward requiring greater opportunities for outdoor play for children. For example, the document, *My World Outdoors*, states that the Care Commission (forerunner of the Care Inspectorate) came "to appreciate that the benefits [of outdoor play] outweighed the risks and delivered positive outcomes for children attending" OPPs (Care Inspectorate, 2016, p. 9). Together, these

documents reveal an evolution over this period toward curricula that embrace an enriched, flexible, and coherent approach that supports outdoor play.

OPP Characteristics	Frequency (%)
Location	
Urban	4 (57.14)
Rural	3 (42.86)
Auspice	
Private sector	1 (14.29)
Public sector	0 (0.00)
Third sector	5 (71.43)
Other	1 (14.29)
Number of children	
0–19	0 (0.00)
20–29	3 (42.86)
30–39	2 (28.57)
More than 40	1 (14.29)
N/A	1 (14.29)

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Outdoor Play Programs (N = 7)*

Site Visits

The site visits revealed heterogeneity in the OPPs’ physical characteristics (see Table 2). One rural site consisted of a very large, flat, fenced space that essentially functioned like a large outdoor classroom with various “centres,” such as a mud kitchen and reading area. It also had an adjacent, wilder natural area that children and educators could access. By contrast, one urban site was a fenced, “risky” playground where children could climb, build using adult tools, and engage in water play. This site also provided nearby nurseries with trained educators to support children’s outdoor play experiences. In a third model, children either walked or were bussed from their nursery program to a nearby urban park. This public space required children and educators to learn how to manage various risks, such as off-leash dogs and strangers. In another urban OPP, educators conducted a park sweep to remove broken bottles, garbage, and other risky materials before taking children out for the day. The models that involved transporting children to a public space required educators to bring

materials with them, such as portable toilets. This heterogeneity has important implications for the kinds of experiences children have and the work required of educators to make the program function.

Interviews – Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Heterogeneity of programs. Four subthemes emerged regarding the diversity of OPPs.

1a. Number of days per week children attend OPPs. Some programs (and parents) enrol children for one or two days a week, whereas children are enrolled in other care programs for two to four days per week. Interviewees reported that full-week OPPs exist, but very few children are enrolled for five days: “*nobody . . . [was] going 5 days a week outdoors. It was too much. Most children, were going for maybe a couple of days, some were going for three*” (Government/Advocate 1). The most commonly reported outdoor play structure was a blend, where parents send their children to an OPP for two days a week and either keep them at home or enrol them in a traditional nursery program for the remainder of the week.

1b. Structure of the day. Interviewees mentioned different models of time per day allocated for outdoor play, ranging from full-day (typical of OPPs running one to two days per week) to half-day programs. One potential model described by Government/Advocate 2 suggested that children would be dropped off in the outdoor space (e.g., park) and “*will spend a half day or a full day at the forest.*”

1c. Location. Local and city parks were often cited as OPP spaces; participants highlighted the importance of using these freely available, public spaces to promote continued use of the natural environment for families on an ongoing basis. As one participant noted:

We do 6–12 weeks in a particular school with a particular class and we take them out once a week into a green space that is close to the school, we try to make it close to the school so that it’s walkable and sustainable so hopefully you show the school how they can use the little bit of woodland that’s on their doorstep that they’ve never been to. (Educator 1)

Fields and dedicated woodlands were also discussed, while other nurseries had on-site outdoor spaces: “*We’re lucky that we’ve got a dedicated site here that we can use, we have a long-term lease of the woodland from this estate so that is for us to use for our activities*” (Educator 1).

1d. Transportation to site. Walking was often mentioned as ideal because it is sustainable and promotes use of local spaces, whereas other models involve parents dropping children off directly at the park entrance. Bussing children from the nursery to an outdoor space appeared to be a somewhat controversial but nevertheless realistic option for some programs. Although this method of transportation allows for greater flexibility in the amount of time spent outdoors, concerns were raised about its long-term cost and environmental sustainability:

They chose a very nice park and then they went to the nurseries schools and bussed them in. I think year 1 saw a £60,000 bill in hired charges for coaches and buses. And that's not sustainable and it's not environmentally sustainable. You need kids to understand their local community, be able to walk and access things rather than being bussed. (Government/Advocate 3)

As noted in the subthemes, OPPs function in a variety of ways in terms of location and access, hours of operation, and child attendance. This diversity is advocated in government documents promoting the adoption of OPPs as part of Scotland's ELC policy, such as *My World Outdoors* (Care Inspectorate, 2016).

Theme 2: Policy. This theme focussed on factors influencing the development of the Scottish ELC policy and how it facilitated a greater emphasis on outdoor play. Four subthemes emerged.

2a. Importance of leadership roles. Several interviewees mentioned that it was critical to have people in leadership roles who were interested in outdoor play. Government/Advocate 3 noted, *"When John Swinney got his role as the Education Minister, he created what was classed as the International Advisors to Education... and a couple of them...completely defer to the Scandinavian model of using the natural environment to support health or being an educational attainment."*

2b. Importance of international and local models. The role of international models was highlighted, even while participants also noted that Scottish models were important to show different stakeholders what was possible. Government/Advocate 4 expressed this view: *"We're scaling out something that pre-exists. This is a much, much stronger position because if you were trying to do something that was completely new, it's a harder road to travel."*

2c. Play and the curriculum. The importance of embedding outdoor play in the national curriculum was raised by Educator 1: *"In the Curriculum for Excellence, which is the current curriculum in Scotland, there's definitely very much encouragement to use the outdoors... There are guidance documents from Education Scotland on using the curriculum in the outdoors, so it's definitely being encouraged."*

2d. Emphasis on child health and well-being. Scotland faces a number of serious concerns about children's physical and mental health. As Government/Advocate 5 commented, *"our role was basically to demonstrate how...forests and the outdoors can also deliver on health and education."*

Thus, in sum, policy makers, policy documents, and the emergence of early adopters of OPPs were key in shaping the emphasis on outdoor play in Scotland's overall ELC policy.

Theme 3: Quality of children's experiences. Program quality issues were coded into three subthemes.

3a. Ensuring quality of children's experiences as part of expansion. There was recognition that quality is a central criterion in the expansion of services. This is illustrated by the following quote: *"So that's a challenge...because the main criteria for the expansion is quality"* (Government/Advocate 6).

3b. Outdoor programs provide children with better quality experiences.

Some interviewees argued that OPPs are better quality than indoor nurseries: “when we started looking at quality as part of the ELC expansion and the focus on looking at quality as the main policy driver for the expansion, then outdoor learning experience... as part of that pedagogical approach came across as a very strong focus” (Government/Advocate 7).

3c. Being outdoors does not guarantee that children will have good experiences. Other participants were more cautious in their assessment of OPP quality: “You can take kids outside but it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re getting a good experience. They’ll be playing, they’ll be learning through play maybe but it could be enhanced and so that’s what forest school hopefully provides, that additional level of learning and enjoyment and everything that comes of it” (Educator 1).

Together, the comments in the subthemes illustrate concerns about the quality of children’s experiences as Scotland’s ELC system undergoes this major change, with the role of outdoor play being somewhat unclear in terms of the types of experiences offered to children.

Theme 4: Risk. Risks for children, risk assessment, and risk/benefit analysis were raised in three subthemes.

4a. Shift from risk analysis to a risk/benefit analysis. The presence of this shift by government, educators, and children, is illustrated by this comment: “One of the lessons that came...was about the risk benefit analysis, about shifting towards a risk benefit analysis rather than just a risk analysis” (Government/Advocate 5).

4b. Exposure to risk is helpful to children. Participants argued that it was beneficial to allow children to experience and assess risk: “The problem with [minimizing risk] then is that they don’t know how to manage their own risk” (Educator 1). Government/Advocate 8 argued: “There was this massive risk averse society that we were in... in the early days of forest schools, ministers [were] just loving the fact that kids were learning about risk in a positive way...because ... they’re falling, they’re learning how to fall, all this sort of thing.”

4c. Insurance issues. Difficulties in obtaining insurance and how this constrains activities were raised. Educator 2 stated: “We have a few [rules]; they are not allowed to climb higher than 6 feet, that’s in our insurance.”

In sum, discussion of risk is clearly important as Scotland increases the amount of outdoor play that is part of its ELC services, a theme also noted in the literature (Brussoni et al., 2015).

Theme 5: Role of the educator – “Children at the centre.” The play-based and child-directed view of outdoor ELC emerged in four subthemes.

5a. Child-led. As clearly explained by Educator 3: “The important thing is that since it’s child-led and child-directed just starting from where the child is now, not where you want or expect them to be, you plan in the moment... It’s very much about the child’s pace, the child’s own time.”

Other educators talked about providing materials to provoke children's learning by asking questions, considering options, and experimenting:

For example, we made a tinfoil river so we brought up tinfoil and everything we do, we have lots of discussion around it so, do you think we would be able to put water into this tinfoil and you're getting the kids thinking about that, "maybe, I'm not sure". Well how could we make it so sturdy that it would take water. We then made several layers and we made a river. They were involved in building that river, then we added water, and then we said to them, what can we do with this? Well you can float things, you can sink things. Then we had a discussion about what would float and what would sink. (Educator 4).

By contrast, other educators assumed more of an observer role. As Educator 3 described: *"Have you heard of SOUL? Stand back, observe, understand, listen. It's the kind of practice that is encouraged by practitioners in the outdoor program."* These educators allowed the children to engage freely with one another and the environment, but they may have missed opportunities for enhancing children's learning.

5b. Play-based curriculum. Following the *Curriculum for Excellence*, the programs' philosophies were play-based and cross-curricular, as articulated by Government/Advocate 9:

It fits perfectly with our model for our pedagogical approach in Scotland, which is child-led, play-based learning, so the outdoors gives children much more space to... explore, go and experience it, and to get creative.

Some educators engaged in minimal, flexible, and moment-to-moment planning of activities, and they provided some materials, such as books, magnifying glasses, chalk, and natural items (e.g., story stones with letters or numbers). Educator 5 spoke about some items (e.g., diggers and wheelbarrows) as "bridging" the indoors and outdoors in drawing children into the natural environment.

5c. Role of the natural environment. Educators imbued the natural environment with positive attributes and perceived it as a source of creativity and imagination, as well a free space for making decisions:

Children are "captivated" by outdoors and need less adult attention outside (Educator 6). We just let nature be. It's got everything that they need. Their surroundings have everything to challenge them, to fuel their imaginative play (Educator 2).

5d. Outdoor play is different than indoor play. A common subtheme was that outdoor learning and play differ from what happens indoors:

A different environment and different way of teaching...there's science experiences and outcomes...each activity is a cross curricular thing...it doesn't have to be "now we're doing an exercise in literacy." There's lots of story telling and by the fire we can make up stories. (Educator 1)

This view was echoed by Government/Advocate 9: *“So, it seems to lend itself, actually, even better than an indoor environment to the children learning and finding something that captures their imagination.”*

In sum, the role of educators was key in creating play-based, child-led experiences in natural, outdoor environments when implementing the national *Curriculum for Excellence*. In addition, the notion that the outdoors afforded different kinds of learning opportunities than the indoors was raised by a number of stakeholders.

Theme 6: Barriers. The issue of barriers and ways to address barriers was raised frequently; six subthemes emerged.

6a. Parents. A variety of issues were raised, including parents’ attitudes and concerns about the weather (i.e., cold, rain), dirt, sickness, clothing, and risk. The lack of experience of the current generation of parents with outdoor play was exemplified by the following comment: *“They [parents] had no experience of play outdoors the way I had as a child. So they were all like, but they’ll get dirty, they might hurt themselves”* (Government/Advocate 1). As Educator 7 noted, one way to address this barrier is *“selling”* the benefits of the outdoor experience to families as a normal part of life. Some programs supported by city councils or charities have received funding to purchase suitable outdoor clothing and boots for the children and staff, which has alleviated some parental concerns and helped children to *“become comfortable”* with the outdoors (Educator 4).

6b. Children. Educators discussed children’s personal preferences about outdoor play and the natural environment. For example, Educator 4 said: *“I think some children don’t particularly like being outdoors, they don’t like the rough and tumble, being out and some children prefer an indoor learning environment.”* However, other participants indicated that, with experience, children generally develop positive attitudes about OPPs.

6c. Educators. Educators play a crucial role and must be mentally fit, resilient, and willing to work outdoors in all kinds of weather, year-round, in this physically demanding job. Most programs have access to a shelter to escape inclement weather and for rest periods. Educator attitudes and training for developing a stimulating, play-based curriculum was identified as an issue. For example, Government/Advocate 10 stated: *“the existing staff members who were traditionally trained, they found it quite hard to engage...and having ...this unstructured [environment] really hard to place themselves within.”* Lack of knowledge about the natural environment can be a barrier for attracting staff because of the *“the fear factor coming from the lack of knowledge of what the natural world is”* (Government/Advocate 3). One way to address this barrier will be for college educator training programs to enhance their offerings to support the new ELC agenda.

6d. Weather. Scotland has a long, wet, chilly winter and short summers, so proper clothing and equipment are mandatory in addition to being one way to deal with the weather. The weather brings other challenges. For example:

We get a lot of rain and...little insects called midges, which...can make it absolutely awful... I think it's about having the right equipment to be able to get outdoors and be comfortable, and not only for the children but for the practitioners. (Government/Advocate 11).

6e. Systemic issues. Participants identified the following as systemic issues: barriers associated with the workforce, funding, the expansion of the number of hours of free care for families to 1,140, the lack of sufficient childcare spaces and infrastructure, maintaining program quality, and the bureaucracy of the Care Inspectorate. As one participant identified:

The Scottish government has made its commitment to start paying everybody a living wage. It's a real problem for the expansion. The commitment to go to 1,140 by 2020, it will be dependent on expanding the workforce, expanding the places, building more nurseries. (Government/Advocate 2)

The inequity between salaries and funding available for public (local authorities, city councils), private, and third-sector agencies/charities programs was also highlighted. Public programs pay higher wages, and thus the private and third-sector programs have trouble attracting and keeping staff. Further, infrastructure needs for more buildings with appropriate outdoor spaces—even in city centres—was a challenge:

architects and property people here are historically used to not investing in outdoor space, first thing they get to cut when the budget runs out, so it's just tarmac, so getting them to the point, this is a registered space and is actually as valuable as indoor space. (Government/Advocate 4)

The shift in culture of the Care Inspectorate as discussed in the Document Review was mentioned, although it was noted that some inspectors are still not very comfortable with outdoor nurseries.

6f. Social class issues. Participants explained that OPPs are viewed as “middle class” (Educator 6) and that the “families least likely to take up the service are those most disadvantaged families who could actually benefit the greatest” (Government/Advocate 1). Further, participants exhibited a desire for OPPs to be “considered the norm so everyone benefits from it. Otherwise, there’s a risk that it actually opens up the outcome gap a little bit” (Government/Advocate 9). Social class issues cut both ways: for disadvantaged children, “coming home in dirty clothes, which sounds silly but for families whose kids wear the same clothes every single day, it’s a real consideration.” By comparison, middle class parents who buy expensive clothing do not want children “coming home in their nice car in dirty nice clothes” (Government/Advocate 7).

Thus, a number of barriers to the successful implementation of Scotland’s outdoor play policy were identified, specifically related to parental concerns, child preferences, educator training and resilience, the weather, and systemic and social class issues. Some issues can be resolved more easily than others, as discussed later.

Theme 7: Why Now? The final theme that emerged from participants' reflections on the timing and reasons for the change in social policy included three subthemes.

7a. Societal concerns. Obesity, mental health, physical activity, the attainment gap, screen time, a lack of outdoor play, and connection to the natural environment were commonly mentioned. Given the large rural population of Scotland, the loss of connection to the natural environment was highlighted by Government/Advocate 11:

There's a genuine concern around young people's mental health and well-being.... there's an understanding there that the environment is hugely important to support health and well-being.... to be connected to the natural world, you know there's that grounding for you there, how it does make you feel better.

Finally, the National government's concerns with the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children was voiced by several interviewees: *"a strong push on attainment and closing the attainment gap which is deprivation so that the current administration is, in a range of ways, not just around this, (but) looking at how"* (Government/Advocate 12).

7b. Research. Research on the benefits of unstructured outdoor play and physical activity conducted in Scandinavia, Britain generally, and Scotland specifically, were important as a driving force for the social policy agenda. As one participant noted:

Scottish government have got a commitment, an ambition that Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up. There was a gentleman called Sir Harry Barnes, that was 10 years ago, he was Chief Medical Officer, and he had done research that showed the impact of your early childhood experience had on your longer life chances....Following that, there was research from the "Growing up in Scotland" report which said the quality of your Early Learning and Childcare placement based on the Care Inspectorate's grade, had a relevance to how you performed in school...the government wants to put money in at the earliest point in order to support those children when they go to school and then through life. (Government/Advocate 6)

7c. New opportunities. Participants stated that the ELC agenda and focus on outdoor play provided new opportunities to build stronger families and communities. As Educator 8, working in an inner-city, low-income neighbourhood service commented, the *"new emphasis on early learning and care and outdoor play is a way to build better communities."* This view was echoed by an educator working in a rural program who said: *"It's very much about Scottish people feeling connected with their place and their place in Scotland and nature, essentially"* (Educator 5).

Many participants raised the issue of the lack of sufficient infrastructure to house the expected increase in numbers of children and number of hours of annual free care. Expanding OPPs was seen as one solution to this problem, as Government/Advocate 10 stated: *"It's less costly to have outdoor provision*

because you don't have the build to consider. We're lucky in [city] we have many parks, lots of green space." Also, the expansion of OPPs afford opportunities for a range of professionals (e.g., architects, health) and government agencies, such as Scottish Forestry, to rethink existing spaces and take advantage of urban parks, woodlands, and spaces in rural communities.

In sum, participants' comments regarding theme 7 highlighted concerns about the health and well-being of the Scottish population. They also underscored that the move toward expanding OPPs was based on empirical research evidence and that this move opened up new opportunities for families, communities, and professionals.

Discussion

The current focus on ELC and outdoor play is a prominent agenda of the Scottish National government and is seen as one solution for concerns about child well-being and alleviating physical space constraints. The National government is pushing a coherent agenda, which is set in the context of other government mandates, such as the *Curriculum for Excellence*. Initially, the OPP movement was a front-line initiative of the early adopters of OPPs. These demonstration sites have been central in promoting the new agenda because people from different walks of life, including politicians, can see a high-quality OPP in operation and can understand how OPPs may be excellent sites for promoting children's early learning and care. Thus, the commitment to OPPs in Scotland began as a grassroots, bottom-up process. The documents reviewed as part of this study revealed a movement toward flexible, child-centred programs that opened the door to the growth of OPPs. In fact, several educators referred to the *Curriculum for Excellence* and showed us documentation books regarding how they addressed the learning expectations and outcomes for their children. This illustrated the dovetailing of changes in policy and the practices of the early adopters that together set the stage for the central role played by OPPs in Scotland's ELC policy.

Data on program quality presented in a Care Inspectorate report (Mathais, 2018) showed that the quality ratings of 18 early adopters were higher than the average for the rest of the country. This finding was central in advancing the goal of increasing outdoor play programs in Scotland. Consistent with this, several interviewees argued that OPPs provide children with better learning opportunities, as noted, for example, in theme 5d. This perception seems to have been instrumental in the uptake in interest in outdoor play shown by the Scottish government, suggesting that what began as a bottom-up movement was met, at least partway, by a top-down, government-led policy agenda. This is in keeping with recommendations for positive implementation of OPPs outlined by Passy et al. (2019). However, it is worth noting that as of 2018, using Care Inspectorate ratings (Care Inspectorate, 2015), early adopters had similar

scores to those of the general population of programs in Scotland. The lack of difference in ratings suggests that OPPs are now comparable to the general population of providers in Scotland, based on the criteria currently used by the Care Inspectorate.

While there was cautious excitement about the national ELC agenda, interviewees raised a number of challenges to be addressed in the short, mid-, and long term. They argued that there has to be flexibility in how outdoor play programs are delivered. The programs we visited were indicative of a number of possible delivery models; they were designed to meet the needs of the local communities as recommended by Waite (2013). Full-time OPPs are not attractive for most children, parents, and educators, but they are desirable on a part-time basis, in conjunction with other child care arrangements. Nevertheless, our interviewees argued that while the flexible delivery of a variety of different types of programs is a positive aspect of the new agenda, OPPs cannot alone solve the physical space issue that is looming due to the increased number of hours of free care that will be available for families.

Other challenges that were discussed included funding/cost issues related to creating new buildings/spaces and salary inequities across different programs. Lack of trained educators was a major issue for staffing OPPs and for the training colleges who must ramp up their curriculum. Further, not all trained educators have the desire, skills, or experience to work in OPPs; thus, attracting staff was raised as a key issue.

Maintaining and enhancing the quality of children's experiences within these programs was raised as a concern, especially given the speed of the expansion of free hours of care. Discussion of quality was used to argue for the move to OPPs because they were thought to be of better quality by some stakeholders. The issue of quality was also raised to demonstrate a concern about moving towards OPPs (will they be of high enough quality?). There may be lessons to be learned from the Quebec expansion to \$5/day care, where the risk of trading access for quality was documented (Japel, Tremblay, & Côté, 2005; Lefebvre, 2004).

Risk was a major issue raised in many interviews. In keeping with work by Brussoni et al. (2015), it appears that there was a willingness by many of the participants in our study to shift from a risk analysis to a risk/benefit analysis. The extent to which parents are ready to make this transition is less clear. Nonetheless, in Scotland, it appears that many practitioners, insurance companies, and the Care Inspectorate have made this shift. These findings point to a number of key policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

- This policy analysis suggests that Scotland can serve as an example of how an ELC licensing body can show flexibility and tolerance to risk if it is perceived to be in the best interests of children and families. It also illustrates

the value of government meeting a bottom-up process partway in an effort to alleviate concerns about the well-being of its population.

- Consistent with findings by Passy et al. (2019), our results highlight the need to ensure that adequate resources in terms of both time and money are provided to train educators about how to deliver outdoor play programs.
- Flexibility is required in how OPPs are developed with attention to the needs of the local communities and the ways to employ the different types of spaces so as to afford children and families a deeper connection to the natural environment. These programs should be attuned to the aims of the *Curriculum for Excellence*, while ensuring that the aims complement and not negate the experiences of children, as outlined by Waite (2013).
- Given the many barriers that were raised in this study and the fact that children generally do not attend existing programs on a full-time basis, designing a variety of OPP options that enable part-time engagement with these programs is likely to be key to the success of Scotland's outdoor play policy.
- Helping parents understand the benefits of outdoor play and a risk/benefit approach to OPPs will bring parents on-board. The cooperation of public, private, and third-sector agencies/charities in this matter will be essential.

Limitations and Conclusion

Our case study has several limitations, including a qualitative analysis of a limited number of interviews. The voices of educators not working in an OPP are not represented, nor are the voices of parents and children. Despite these limitations, this study sheds some light on how and why OPPs became a focus of Scottish policy for ELC programs as well as on the perceived advantages and barriers to the implementation of this policy. In conclusion, OPPs alone cannot achieve the worthy goals of Scotland's ELC agenda, but are best viewed as one critical component. Nevertheless, the case study provides an interesting picture of how one small country can create a rich, research-based national agenda with the ultimate goal of addressing some pressing social, health, and educational problems. Despite all the complexities associated with Scotland's initiative, it is clearly a fascinating naturalistic experiment that warrants further attention from researchers and policy makers around the globe.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by a grant from the Lawson Foundation to the first and second authors, the Concordia University Research Chair in Early Childhood Development and Education to the second author, and a Fonds de Recherche du Québec - Société et Culture Master's fellowship to the third author. We thank Rachel Cowper and Lynn Henni from Inspiring Scotland who arranged our visit,

stakeholders we interviewed who were exceptionally generous in sharing their time and insights, and Julia Renauld and Nadina Mahadeo for their research assistance. Please address correspondence to Dr. Michal Perlman, Dept. of Human Development and Applied Psychology, OISE-University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6, Canada; michal.perlman@utoronto.ca; 415-978-0927.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The authors have no competing financial and/or non-financial conflicts of interest.

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