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"I think that we should, but I don't think that we can": What school staff think about adventurous play at schools in England

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ABSTRACT

Adventurous play is increasingly recognised as important for children's health and development. Schools act as gatekeepers for children's opportunities for regular, outdoor, adventurous play during breaktimes (recess). In this study, we interviewed 13 school staff working in England to find out what they thought about adventurous play happening during breaktimes in schools. Our aim was to describe the core barriers and facilitators of adventurous play in English schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of school staff across a range of school roles. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were developed: *Risk, Valuing and supporting play, Resources and School policy and practices*. We also noted that culture existed as an important backdrop to all of these themes. Findings are discussed in relation to school and societal level change that is needed for all children to have opportunities to engage in adventurous play in school, overcoming inequalities in access outside of school.

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Breaktime; schools; adventurous play; risky play

It is widely recognised that play is critical for healthy childhood development. It is associated with increased physical activity (Janssen, 2014; Sallis et al., 2000; Veitch et al., 2008) decreased sedentary behaviour (Aggio et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2015) and reduced risk for childhood obesity (Ansari et al., 2015; Gray et al., 2015). It has also been shown to support children's cognitive development more broadly through supporting children's decision making and problem solving skills (Ramstetter et al., 2010) and, more specifically, their learning behaviours (Barros et al., 2009). Moreover, through play, children learn to regulate their emotions, control their impulses, resolve conflicts, negotiate and share (Gray, 2011). Outdoor play in particular has been associated with a range of benefits for health, behaviour and development (Brussoni et al., 2015; Bundy et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2011). Outdoor play also affords children the opportunity to engage in adventurous play (Dodd et al., 2021).

Adventurous play, synonymous with risky play, has been defined as child-led play that is exciting and thrilling (Dodd & Lester, 2021) and where there is a risk of physical injury (Sandseter, 2007). This type of play often occurs in the context of age-appropriate risk-taking (Dodd & Lester, 2021). Eight categories have been observed and include (1) play at great height (e.g. climbing) (2) play with high speed (e.g. running at high speed), (3) play with dangerous tools (e.g. play with ropes, saws), (4) play near dangerous elements (e.g. play near water, fire), (5) rough and tumble play (e.g. play fighting), (6) play where children can get lost (e.g. play out of sight of adults), (7) play with impact (e.g. crashing

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trolleys) and (8) vicarious play (e.g. children's observation of risk taking in others play) (Kleppe et al., 2017; Sandseter, 2009). A growing body of empirical research highlights the beneficial relationship between children's adventurous play and a range of health outcomes; specifically, their physical health, social interactions, creativity and resilience (Brussoni et al., 2015). Importantly, engagement in adventurous play has been hypothesised to reduce children's risk for anxiety over time (Dodd & Lester, 2021). Indeed, there is evidence for small but significant negative associations between the amount of time children spend playing adventurously and their internalizing symptoms; children who spend more time playing adventurously show fewer internalizing symptoms (Dodd et al., 2022).

Despite growing recognition of the benefits that adventurous play may have for children's health, behaviour and development, opportunities for outdoor and adventurous play have declined in recent generations (Clements, 2004; Gundersen et al., 2016; Jelleyman et al., 2019; Larson et al., 2011). For example, a survey from England Marketing found that only 10% of children's play is happening in natural spaces compared to parents report of around 40% of play in natural spaces as children (England Marketing, 2009) and children in Britain today are not allowed out alone until they are almost two years older than their parents were (Dodd et al., 2021). These trends are not exclusive to the UK; large surveys conducted in the USA (Clements, 2004), New Zealand (Jelleyman et al., 2019) and Australia (Cleland et al., 2010) show similar downward trends in children's independent mobility, outdoor play and adventurous play. For example, Clements (2004) found that whilst 60% of mothers surveyed in the USA reported playing in adventurous way as children only 22% of their children play in this way.

An increasing number of studies describe the barriers parents face in providing their children with opportunities for outdoor, adventurous play (Oliver et al., 2022, 2023). Research highlights inequalities in access to play exist because opportunities may depend on where children live, parent availability, neighbourhood safety and parents' resources (Oliver et al., 2022). Schools can act as gatekeepers for children's play and play an important role in reducing inequalities in children's access by providing children with opportunities for regular adventurous play. Play in schools usually takes place in defined periods throughout the day, typically a morning break and lunch break (before or after lunch is eaten). Despite the known benefits of children's play, breaktimes in UK schools have declined significantly over recent decades (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). Declines in breaktimes are believed, in part, to be the consequence of increased curriculum demands placed on schools (Baines & Blatchford, 2019).

Several school-based interventions for increasing children's opportunities for adventurous play have been introduced and evaluated. Adventurous play in schools may include tree climbing, chasing games, play fighting, den building and water play (Jerebine et al., 2022a). Typically, interventions to increase adventurous play consist of introducing loose parts (materials with no prescribed purpose, e.g. tyres, ropes, sticks) to the playground, reducing rules (e.g. surrounding use of space and type of play; climbing, rough and tumble) and addressing barriers around risk aversion. These programmes often challenge attitudes towards risk and promote schools to adopt a risk-benefit approach to playtimes (Lester et al., 2011). Findings show benefits of adventurous play include increases in children's physical activity, decreases in disruption behaviour, and benefits to children's social development, learning, creativity, resilience and happiness in school (Bundy et al., 2009; Farmer et al., 2017; Lester et al., 2011). To ensure that these programmes are designed and implemented optimally, it is important to have a good evidence base to inform programme development and refinement. Specifically, programmes must consider that factors that may help or hinder schools in offering adventurous play opportunities.

A recent qualitative systematic review identified several factors that helped and hindered schools in offering adventurous play opportunities (Nesbit et al., 2021). The review of eleven studies highlighted that uncertainty and anxiety surrounding adventurous play acted as barriers for schools. It describes how schools fear external judgement and the perceived consequences of failing in duty of care. The findings emphasised the need for training and parent support for adventurous play. Examples of staff intervening and directing children's play negatively impacted children's

opportunities, alongside adults' perceptions of children as unable to judge risk and initiate play. The review illustrated that positive beliefs and commitment to adventurous play were critical for adventurous play in schools. Further, the review highlights that interventions must require a whole-school approach and that training and education around adventurous play is vital (Nesbit et al., 2021).

Whilst Nesbit et al. (2021) review gives us a grounded understanding of the factors that might make it hard for schools to offer adventurous play, most of the studies included in the review examined barriers and facilitators within the context of an intervention evaluation. The authors conclude that there is little empirical work qualitatively examining the barriers and facilitators of school adventurous play that exists to inform interventions. It is therefore unclear whether these are generalizable to a wider school-based population.

The aims of this research are to understand what school staff working in England think about adventurous play happening during breaktime in schools, and what they perceive as the barriers and facilitators of adventurous play in schools. A qualitative approach is taken as qualitative methods provide a way to gain a depth of understanding that cannot be achieved using quantitative methods. One-to-one interviews were adopted to reduce the potential hierarchy and power imbalance likely across individuals with different roles in a school (Kitzinger, 1995).

Method

This research received a favourable recommendation of conduct from the Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Reading (2020–020-HD) and the COREQ checklist for reporting qualitative data was used (Tong et al., 2007). The study is a sister study to Nesbit et al. (2023) which focussed on parents' views of adventurous play using identical methodology.

The study adopted an essentialist/realist epistemological position, where we assume that reality is subjective and can be understood through the meaning that participants attach to their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The researchers considered how their own assumptions affected and shaped the study design and findings. Authors RN and HD are both researchers focused on children's play and links with mental health; both consider adventurous play is positive for children. KH brought expertise in qualitative research and does not conduct research focusing on adventurous play. HD and KH have children of their own.

Recruitment

School staff were recruited via social media, word of mouth and through leaflets advertising *The Children's Outdoor Play Project* that were distributed to partner organisations (Nesbit et al., 2023). Information provided to school staff explained that we were interested in how school staff view outdoor play, what affects decisions about play activities, and why schools differ from one another in the activities on offer during breaktime. Our recruitment materials deliberately did not reference adventurous play, to avoid attracting staff who were particularly supportive of adventurous play.

To facilitate purposive sampling, those interested in participating were invited to complete an expression of interest form (hosted on Survey Monkey) and provide information about characteristics on which we aimed to seek diversity, namely school role, school experience (time in role and current school) and geographical location. Diversity was sought with the aim of obtaining a variety of views towards play, given that previous research has found diversity in views for many of these characteristics (e.g. school role (Wright, 2016), school experience (Lester et al., 2011)). Participants also provided their sex and ethnicity (Office for National Statistics, 2022) and whether they were a parent of a primary-school aged child. This was deemed important because being a parent may impact views about the value or play and risk in play (Fisher et al., 2008) and gender differences have been found in attitudes towards

children's play (Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005). All respondents gave permission to be contacted for participation in a one-to-one interview about children's play. This data created a pool of potential participants and enabled us to recruit a diverse group of school staff including (but not limited to) teachers, headteachers and lunchtime supervisors, who had a range of experience (time in school), worked in different geographical locations and varied as to whether they were parents.

Sample

Fifty-five school staff completed the expression of interest form (5 headteachers, 31 teachers or TA's, 18 supervisors of play and one school performance director). The majority of those who expressed an interest were female (80%) and White British (83.6%), around a third were parents of primary school-aged children (34.5%). Staff had a range of experience in schools (6 months – ~12 years).

School staff were selected for interview on the basis of their characteristics with the aim of obtaining a diverse sample. Those selected were emailed detailed information about the study and a link to book an interview. To facilitate participation, the researcher offered evening interviews. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021b), sample size was guided by Malterud et al. (2016) concept of information power whereby the more information relevant to the study aim that a sample holds, the fewer participants are needed. The research team engaged in appraisal of information power following each interview. Given the focused nature of the research question and the strength of the dialogue during the interviews, the research team stopped recruiting once thirteen participants who were diverse on a range of characteristics had been interviewed (see Table 1 for a full list of participant characteristics). This decision was made as it was deemed that adequate power had been achieved to develop new knowledge and address the aims of the research study.

Procedure

Written informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants prior to the interview, and verbal consent was obtained at start of the interview. A topic guide informed by the research team's expertise in adventurous play and the study research questions was piloted with one teacher (Participant 1) and revised. The final topic guide was used flexibly, with prompts used to obtain richer data. The topic guide included closed and open questions about children's play both in and out of school, including questions on breaktime in school, school staffs' general views and experience of adventurous play, and what they thought might make it easier or harder for schools to offer adventurous play opportunities. As with the parent study (Nesbit et al. (2023), photo elicitation was used. Two pictures depicting traditional school playgrounds in Britain were shown together followed by two pictures depicting adventurous school playground (see Nesbit et al., 2023 for full details).

Each member of school staff was interviewed on one occasion. All interviews were conducted by RN who is a female researcher with a Doctorate in Psychology. RN is trained in qualitative methods, including in qualitative interviewing and data analysis. Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. For all interviews, only the researcher and participant were present.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher introduced herself, discussed the aims of the project and invited any questions prior to the recording commencing. The interviewer had no prior relationship to the school staff who participated. Interviews were video-recorded and lasted an average of 50 minutes (range 25–81 mins). At the end of each interview the researcher spent time reflecting on the interview and noting down parents' key ideas and perspectives. The MS Team auto-transcription file was edited, and the audio file transcribed by a professional transcriber. RN ensured the removal of all identifying information, for example, locations and names. All participants were assigned an identifier. Participants received a £20 e-gift card.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Participant	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Role	Time in role	Time in current school	School information *(Gender of entry, phase of education, school type, OFSTED[1] rating)*	Parent[2]
1	F	23	White British	Teacher	2:4	2:4	Co-educational; Primary; Community School; Outstanding	No
2	F	49	White British	Teaching Assistant	11:3	11:3	Co-educational; Primary; Academy; Good	No
3	F	37	White British	Headteacher	1:3	0:4	Co-educational; Primary; Academy; Good	No
4	F	42	White British	Headteacher	7:10	4:10	Co-educational; Primary; Voluntary controlled school; Good	No
5	F	49	White British	Midday assistant	2:10	2:10	Co-educational; Primary; Academy; Outstanding	Yes
6	F	43	Mixed Ethnicity	Learning assistant	5:0	5:0	Co-educational; Primary; Academy; Outstanding,	Yes
7	F	27	Asian or Asian British (Bangladeshi origin)	Teacher	4:2	4:2	Co-educational; Junior; Voluntary controlled school; Good	No
8	F	45	White British	Lunchtime supervisor	0:4	0:4	Co-educational; Primary; Academy; Good	Yes
9	F	51	White British	Headteacher	11:11	11:11	Co-educational; Primary; Foundation School; Outstanding	No
10	M	17	White British	PE Apprentice	1:3	1:3	Co-educational; Primary; Community school; Good	No
11	M	54	White British	Play Leader	3:3	3:3	Co-educational; Primary; Academy, Good	Yes
12	M	26	White British	Teacher	3:2	1:2	Co-educational; Primary; Academy; Good	No
13	M	36	White British	School performance director	2:3	s	s	Yes

F = Female, *M* = Male. [2] Parent of primary school-aged children aged 5–11 years. s School performance director oversees many schools. Primary school accommodates children aged 4—11 years, Junior school accommodates children aged 7—11 years. Co-educational: all children learn together regardless of gender. Community school = Schools maintained fully by the local council. Academy = independent from local council, funded directly by Central government. Voluntary controlled school = management is shared between the local council and the Church of England. Foundation school =State funded schools supported by a charitable trust.

Data analysis

NVivo for Mac was used for the analysis (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020). The data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Anonymised transcripts are available on the UK Data Service [https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2024.2403173]. Through analysis and interpretation, this approach enables patterns of meaning to be developed while being informed by researchers' expertise and acknowledging their role in shaping the data. Braun and Clark's six-stage approach to reflective thematic analysis was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

(1) **Data familiarisation**. Data familiarisation began following transcription, RN re-listened to the recordings and re-read the transcripts, referring to contemporaneous summaries and notes.
(2) **Data coding**. RN analysed each transcript using line-by-line coding. Whilst a primarily inductive approach was used, only data pertaining to adventurous play broadly or within the school context was coded for analysis. The coding was therefore shaped by the research questions, but RN remained open-minded about the relevance of material and erred towards inclusivity when choosing whether to code data. Discussions during coding between the primary coder RN and a second coder KH ensured transparency at this stage.

(3) **Initial theme generation**. Once all transcripts were coded, RN organised the codes into initial clusters that reflected similarities in meaning. A coding meeting was held between (RN, KH and HD) to discuss the findings and credibility.
(4) **Theme development and reviewing**. RN spent time further developing and reviewing the themes. A second coding meetings were held between (RN, KH and HD) to discuss and resolve uncertainties and to check the credibility of the findings.
(5) **Refining, defining, and naming themes**. RN spent time on the theme development and a final coding meeting was held to refine, define, and name themes.
(6) **Writing up the manuscript**. RN led on the writing of the manuscript.

Results

The analysis examined school staffs' perceptions of adventurous play in the school context and aimed to identify barriers and facilitators for adventurous play at school. Four themes were developed (see Figure 1); *Risk, Valuing and supporting play, Resources and School policy and practices*. In addition, an overarching theme of culture was generated.

Overarching theme: Culture

The role of culture in children's opportunities for adventurous play was apparent across interviews and was described as impacting the value of and support for play, the investment in play (resources) and beliefs about risk. School staff described how a changing culture, specifically, a perceived litigious environment, and changing parental attitudes may contribute to children's opportunities for adventurous play and the value placed on play:

> I suppose it's . . . it's almost a culture change, isn't it, that we do want to say we do want to give our children some risk and we do. They probably . . . you know, 30 years ago children probably were allowed to have had more risk and do more adventurous things. And . . . and then people have got more wrapping them all in cotton wool and not wanting to do stuff (Participant 5; Midday assistant)

> We live in a . . . because of the suing culture, liable culture that seems to have come in over the last 20 years, but I just think that the world seems a more dangerous place now (Participant 3; Headteacher)

> I think it's parenting styles, I think it's societal shifts, I think the way that . . . the way that children play now and the way that the way that the current generation of parents grew up is affecting how they . . . how they parent their children . . . And I think the expectations of . . . of parents and the way that they choose to parent their children are really, really different (Participant 13; School performance director)

Theme 1: Risk

> *More adventure is more risk; more risk, less safe; less safe, more problems for the school* (Participant 6)

School staff readily considered the topic of risk in relation to adventurous play (see Figure 1), often describing adventurous play as risk (see 1.1), the perceived consequences of adventurous play (see 1.2) and the need for mitigation of risk (see 1.3).

1.1. Adventurous play as risk

During the interviews, staff described their perception of adventurous play as '*risky*'. Some considered it unsafe and an unacceptable amount of responsibility, which meant that schools would be reluctant to offer adventurous play opportunities (see 1.2. for perceived consequences of adventurous play). Staff often described their fear and anxiety surrounding adventurous play happening in schools.

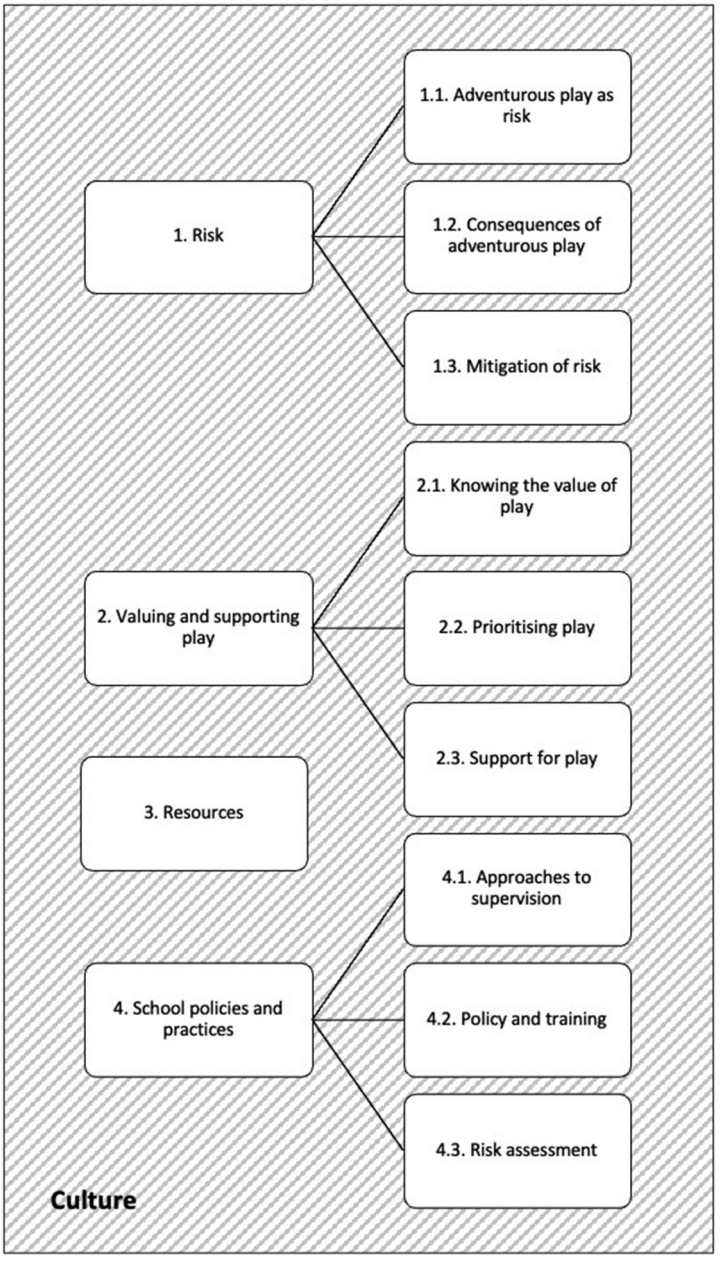

Figure 1. Thematic map illustrating themes and subthemes, situated within the overarching theme of culture.

Ultimately, safety of the children because we're talking about activities that are, by their very nature, more risky, more dangerous. So, you know, running around on a field with your friend, of course accidents can happen there, but that is safer than climbing to the top of a climbing frame or climbing a tree or playing near the pond or whatever (Participant 13; School performance director)

I know I keep saying it, but it's probably the risks; I think it does come down to that. I think schools are probably scared health and safety wise (Participant 7; Teacher)

I think that you know within the family environment, if a parent deems that OK, then that's OK, but certainly not with my teacher hat on with 30 children under my care (Participant 1; Teacher)

> I think some schools as well will be a lot more reluctant to [offer] adventurous play because of the risk of it, and they really just don't want to put the children in that situation where they can be put in a bit of danger, and they can get hurt (Participant 10; PE Apprentice)

1.2. Consequences of adventurous play

> They worry about the consequences of what might happen (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

Participants described possible negative consequences due to the risks that many felt were inherent in adventurous play. All participants expressed concerns about risk of injury from adventurous play and the repercussions in the event of a child injury, particularly in relation to the school's reputation and litigation. Some school staff highlighted concerns about mess as well as behavioural concerns arising from adventurous play.

Risk of injury and associated repercussions

School staff often highlighted the risk of injury as a main concern for adventurous play happening in schools. Alongside this, staff described concerns about the potential repercussions resulting from a child becoming injured during adventurous play, including parent complaints, damaged reputation, and external investigations. For some staff, the potential from repercussions was believed to deter schools from offering adventurous play opportunities to begin with.

> I think some school staff would be concerned. They'd be worried about injuries and other things (Participant 11; Play Leader)

> The risk that parents are going to complain or, you know, there's going to be repercussions if … if somebody does get hurt (Participant 5; Midday assistant)

> I think they might worry about … if a parent complained to the school, I think they'd worry about then the parents talking to other parents and then it becoming an issue, and then the school getting a reputation for a child being hurt … [for] not safeguarding [later in interview] and then the knock-on effect would then OFSTED would be involved, and they'd get inspected because it's a safeguarding issue (Participant 8; Lunchtime supervisor)

> The ramifications of a child getting hurt at school can be long-winded, can be arduous, you know, there can be all sorts of reporting that's … that's involved. You can have … it can instigate lots of parent complaints, justified or otherwise, and those are things that are particularly trying to school leaders to manage. So from a perspective of being able to run your school and focus on the things that you need to focus on, if you've got, you know, a type of play going on or a piece of equipment in place that you know is going to generate parental complaint and concerns and therefore all sorts of communication and time and effort needed around that, then it's … frankly, it's better to not have it than have to deal with all of that (Participant 13; School performance director)

Behavioural concerns

Some staff described how adventurous play might increase the risk for poor behaviour:

> In some cases maybe some schools might be reluctant because they would be concerned about how children would use some of that … those opportunities. You know, would it … would it actually descend into … to poor behaviour, for example (Participant 13; School performance director)

1.3. Mitigation of risk

During the interviews, staff described the need to mitigate risk of adventurous play. The majority of staff believed strategies could be put in place to mitigate risk whilst also providing these opportunities, but for some, mitigating risk meant denying opportunities for adventurous play altogether.

Staff described mitigating risk meant having conditions in place to reduce risk during adventurous play, specifically, adequate supervision and clear boundaries. Teaching children to be safe and having parents on board were also described as strategies to mitigate the risk of injury and

repercussions. Parental consent was a strategy that some staff proposed but not all believed it would work in practice.

> You'd have to just think about, 'How can we prevent some of the risks from happening?' (Participant 7; Teacher)

> You need the right structure and boundaries and supervision in place for it to happen effectively and for it to happen safely (Participant 13; School performance director)

> Perhaps, like a consent form or something like that, like I suppose, permission to withdraw their child from adventurous activities. So if they felt like a par*ticular activity, you know they didn't deem appropriate, they could keep child out of that* (Participant 1; Teacher)

> You could have consent forms for certain areas and … and things like that, but again, I still … I'm not sure how … how that would work really (Participant 3; Headteacher)

> I think it would make them feel more confident about it, I think quite often in the back of peoples' minds is that worry about, 'Is this little boy going to hurt himself, is mum going to come into school and not be very happy?' If parents are coming along on board and saying, 'Yeah, I'd really like it and I'm happy for him or her to try this,' I think it would be really good (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

> And where … for example, you know, where there's some equipment involved, again, well, as with everything else we have to explicitly teach the children, 'This is … this is how this is used safely. This is how you can do it. This is … these are the things you can't do on it.' I think it's … it's really important that children have … have that structure, and I know it sounds less adventurous when there's been teaching involved and when … when you've been shown how to do it, but I think within reason you should give them some parameters to work within with their play so that they know how to keep themselves safe and so that schools do … you know, fulfilling its duty in that regard (Participant 13; School performance director)

> I think that we should, but I don't think that we can (Participant 3; Headteacher)

Theme 2: Valuing and supporting play

Participants described the importance of valuing and supporting adventurous play (see Figure 1). Specifically, staff discussed the importance of (2.1) knowing the value of play, (2.2) prioritising play and (2.3) support for play.

Although valuing and supporting play can be separated (valuing does not always lead to supporting), often a lack of support was attributed to adventurous play not being valued or prioritised at both a school and a societal level.

2.1. Knowing the value of play

> Something inside you and an understanding of why things are important (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

Participants described the importance of knowing the value of play for children, many recognised its benefits for children's confidence, self-esteem and education.

> So through things like adventurous play, we can allow the children to develop that self-esteem, to develop that self-belief, to try new things and to be at … you know, if you're adventurous in your play then you can be adventurous in other aspects of your life as well going forward (Participant 13; School performance director)

> If children are engaging in something that is … because adventurous play, yes, it is that risk taking. Like, those sorts of things are so far removed, but applicable to the classroom. You know, if you can take risks physically then you're … you're more likely to take risks with your learning. So I do think it's something that would be brilliant in schools (Participant 3; Headteacher)

Staff described that for some, there was lack of knowledge and understanding of the value of adventurous play and recognised the need for wider education on the value of play and specifically adventurous play for children. It was acknowledged that different opinions on adventurous play meant changing views on adventurous play could be challenging.

> It is about education of adults as well as children. A lot of adults don't realise why things are important . . . I think it really depends on the members of staff. [later in the interview] To change people's opinions about things is really difficult (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

2.2. Prioritising play

School staff described how play was often not prioritised in schools. Many staff referenced external pressures for educational attainment taking priority over play. Staff also recognised that play was often not valued or prioritised as children grew older. Some staff believed that older at primary school children would not want to engage in adventurous play.

> The pressure for teachers to make sure children are learning Maths and English in particular and not falling behind, playtime . . . it's kind of not important, it doesn't feel like it's important, but actually it is, everybody needs a break and space to just do something else and have a bit of a brain break (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

> There's a big emphasis on outdoor play more in like EYFS [Early Years Foundation Stage, birth – 5 years]] and year R [first year of primary school, aged 4–5 years] because there's always, I don't know if it's like this in every school, but most schools have like outdoor area for the children, so there in and out enabled to play outside . . . they've got like their wellies and coats for all weathers and you know their learning that way and yeah, I do think that schools have a role for outdoors, but I think unfortunately that kind of slips off a little bit as the children get older. You know, kid of by year six, they spend less time playing outdoors, which is a shame (Participant 1; Teacher)

> I suppose with the children's interests., I'm in 5 and 6 at the moment [Year 5 and 6, children aged 9–11], and I can't imagine my children would be interested as such with anything like that, my class is more sports, things like that . . . . It just seems that that maybe be more suitable to early years (Participant 12; Teacher)

2.3. Support for play

Staff described the need for support for adventurous play. Specifically, the need for internal support, external support and validation and parent support.

Internal support

> Well, obviously having staff on board. That. . . that definitely helps (Participant 6; Learning assistant)

During the interviews staff discussed the importance of leadership support for adventurous play. Specifically, leadership support was described as dictating the offering and level of internal support. Some expressed their perceived lack of power to influence change in the absence of leadership support.

> I know that a head teacher at a local school here is very passionate about outside, and the sorts of things the children do compared to what they're allowed to do at our school . . . it depends on the school that you go to as to how the head and the leadership team feel about what is an offer (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

> I see it as fundamentally the most important thing, because it's the only reason it carries on at my school. My staff are enthused, but I know without the leadership, there wouldn't. . . it wouldn't have the dedicated time. It wouldn't have the training, it wouldn't have the resources, it wouldn't have the applications to grants. So you need your leadership team, ultimately your Head, to be that way inclined (Participant 4; Headteacher)

> I struggle at my school because I keep getting told that, 'You're just a teaching assistant so your views don't really count, even though you feel passionate about stuff' (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

External support

During the interviews, staff described the need for external support and validation for adventurous play. Staff described how external policies around play mean that schools would feel more supported and resourced to offer adventurous play. Staff also described having parents on board as giving permission for this type of play to take place in schools.

> If someone maybe came in and told them, 'Actually, no, this is fine,' or, 'This wouldn't be fine.' Maybe someone could out . . . kind of, like, an outdoor agency can come in and explain, 'Actually, look, this is what we could do. This is what we could offer you,' and that might make it simpler if someone's there to do it for the school instead of having schools to think about it (Participant 7; Teacher)

> A government policy would put that into . . . for the curriculum, so then teachers have the backing and schools have the backing and the budget, and the time and the training to incorporate that (Participant 8; Lunchtime supervisor)

> If it was like a section on the Ofsted inspection, then I think it would encourage more schools to put in more things (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

> If the parents weren't backing it, then it'd almost feel like you were getting the support to offer it (Participant 11; Play Leader)

Theme 3: Resources

School staff discussed schools needs for resources to support adventurous play. Specifically, staff described the need for space, adequate staffing, equipment and appropriate clothing and footwear. Most staff discussed the need for additional funding to ensure sufficient resources for adventurous play. Indeed, a lack of funding was seen as a barrier for adventurous play opportunities in schools. Staff also recognised time as a limited resource for schools; specifically, describing adventurous play and changing play as taking time, and the limited time during the school day for this type of play to happen:

> Staffing, because you only get a budget for so many staff, so many midday supervisors, and there's that worry that, you know, there's just too many children and that will just add to the things you've got to do (Participant 8; Lunchtime supervisor)

> I think it depends on kind of what the school has to offer in terms of budget and the materials and like resources and things that children have to play with and who there is in school to support them and watch them (Participant 1; Teacher)

> Funding, because quite often a lot of these opportunities bring with them the need for specific equipment and to make some of those things safe and . . . and possibly there's quite often a lot of work involved with that that's costly . . . that's definitely a barrier for schools. But, yeah, I think that would help them if they had . . . had good funding (Participant 13; School performance director)

> I think it's more financial constraints. I mean, all schools have now . . . like are really stuck for money at the moment, and that's probably not high up on the priority list (Participant 12; Teacher)

> I think they're tied a lot, schools. I think they are constrained a lot by . . . by what they can do timewise (Participant 8; Lunchtime supervisor)

> Within a 15 minute break time, I just don't know where they would be time for it in school. You know this, the children have 10 minutes to run around and then they kind of come back in, within lunch time where there's that longer slot (Participant 1; Teacher)

Theme 4: School policy and practices

School staff described how school policies and practices impacted adventurous play opportunities in school (see Figure 1). Specifically, staff mentioned the impact of staff *approaches to supervision* (4.1), the importance of *policy and training* for staff (4.2) and how *risk assessments* meant adventurous play was often seen as a challenge for schools (4.3).

4.1. Approaches to supervision

Staff described how approaches to supervision makes it difficult for children to engage in adventurous play during school. Staff described how children's opportunities are dependent on the individual member of staff on duty and how inconsistencies in approaches to supervision can make it difficult for children. Staff described that a lack of policy, training or guidance on playtimes often led to play opportunities being dependent on characteristics of the supervisor:

> It depends who you're working with, so if whoever you're working with has the same feeling and opinion as you, what the children allowed to do changes [later in interview] it makes it complicated for the children because one minute they can, one minute they can't, so they're not really sure where they are or what they're able to do or not allowed to do (Participant 2; Teaching assistant)

> There isn't really, like, specific rules of the dos and don'ts? And it pretty much depends on how maybe. . . maybe confident or maybe comfortable the adults feel (Participant 6; Learning assistant)

4.2. Policy and training

School staff described lack of knowledge of adventurous play and how to supervise it in schools. For many, the need for training and guidance on supervising adventurous play was described as necessary. Embedding adventurous play guidance within school policies was highlighted as a way to promote adventurous play in schools.

> I think they need to understand what it is and what that means to . . . because what it might mean to one person could be very different from the next. So, on . . . on a very basic level, a really clear common . . . common understanding, a common language within the school around what adventurous play is. And what things fall into that category, what type of playtime activities fall into that category and within those, which ones we allow in our school and where and when and which children. And then beyond that what the . . . you know, what the supervision needs to look like, what the rules are, what the boundaries are for those. So that's . . . that's quite a big piece of work that would involve everybody from SLT to teacher, to support assistants, to MDSA's [Midday Supervisory Assistant], all of those staff members that are going to be involved with children's play (Participant 13; School performance director)

> Well, if it's within the school policies, and. . . and then obviously if it's promoted, and even if it's been seen as an asset for the school, that the school allows these sort of play and the reasons for it, and maybe they have it in their policies (Participant 6; Learning assistant)

4.3. Risk assessment

> Yeah, I mean, I think it's hard for a school to be able to do some of those things because of the number of risk assessments (Participant 9; Headteacher)

Risk assessments were widely described by staff as making adventurous play challenging for schools or in some cases, impossible. For one member of staff, however, having risk assessments in place aided schools in offering these opportunities as it meant the risks had been assessed and the activity deemed safe.

> I think we're quite restricted in school what we can and can't do because of health and safety guidelines (Participant 12; Teacher)

> You have to risk assess everything and I . . . so I think it's . . . it's a shame that it's not something that can be done (Participant 3; Headteacher)

> So I think schools . . . you know, because we have risk assessments and we have inspections of our equipment and all that type of thing, I think it's schools setting up play from reception all the way through, we can set situations up or allow children to do things that they will learn from (Participant 9; Headteacher)

Discussion

The aims of this study were to examine school staffs' thoughts and feelings about adventurous play happening during break and lunchtime in schools. Reflective thematic analysis of staff responses during one-to-one interviews led to the development of four themes: *Risk, Valuing and supporting play, Resources, and School policy and practices*. Culture existed as an overarching theme, providing an important backdrop to the other four themes. Below, we draw upon the key findings to discuss the factors that staff identified as helping or hindering schools in offering adventurous play opportunities for children. Further, we highlight the need for school and societal level change if all children are to have opportunities for adventurous play in school.

A central finding from this study is that societal shifts towards a culture of litigation and blame may be contributing to children's lack of opportunities for adventurous play in schools. This was captured through the overarching theme of *Culture*. Indeed, culture was often referenced as impacting perceived risks, one of the main four themes. Staff expressed safety concerns about adventurous play and, in particular, the consequences and potential repercussions with regards to child injury. Whilst school staff did not want to see children hurt, much of their concern related to the broader blame and litigation culture. For some staff, these perceived risks of adventurous play meant that it was not possible, or that they felt anxious and uncomfortable about offering it at school. These findings align with the systematic reviews by Nesbit et al. (2021) and Jerebine et al. (2022b), which demonstrated school staff concerns about accountability, fear of external judgement and duty of care often act as barriers to adventurous play opportunities in schools. Notably, shifts toward risk mitigation are increasingly the norm in many Western cultures where there is a growing aversion towards children's risk taking and an increased focus on managing risk and safety (Jerebine et al., 2024). Findings are unlikely to be specific to the school context or adventurous play, and can be seen in other contexts; for example, children's reductions in independent mobility (Dodd et al., 2021) and parental concerns about children's adventurous play outside of school (Oliver et al., 2022).

To overcome the perceived risks of adventurous play, staff described a variety of strategies that they felt could be employed to mitigate risk and make adventurous play possible in schools. These included setting boundaries on play, teaching children to be safe and the need for adequate or increased levels of supervision. Some strategies were described as necessary for increasing safety and reducing the risk of injury (e.g. supervision, teaching children to be safe), whereas other strategies were a way to reassure staff against repercussions (e.g. parent consent). These findings closely align with the view of British parents that certain conditions need to be put into place for adventurous play to be possible in schools (Nesbit et al., 2023). These findings are likely to reflect wider cultural and societal concerns surrounding the need to mitigate the risks and in an increasingly risk-adverse society (Keown et al., 2011; Schepers, 2017).

Importantly, whilst staff described a variety of strategies that could be implemented to mitigate the risks of adventurous play in school, these risks may well be expected or perceived risks rather than actual risks. Notably, it is not clear whether actual risk is necessary for risky play to offer benefits or whether perceived risk is sufficient. Staff in our study described the need for increased supervision to overcome anticipated poor behaviour during adventurous play and the assumed increased risk of child injury. Research has shown, however, that behaviour during playtimes improves when schools implement programmes to increase challenge and risk during playtime (Lester et al., 2011) and no association between play at height and injuries on playground equipment has been found (Rubie-Davies & Townsend, 2007). A central component of play programmes to increase challenge and risk during playtime therefore consists of challenging views and assumptions around risk, and risk mitigation, for example,the need for surplus supervision (Bundy et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2011). So called 'risk-reframing' interventions have proven successful in increasing tolerance of risk during play in both educators (Brussoni et al., 2022; Farmer et al., 2017; Niehues et al., 2013) and parents (Brussoni et al., 2021; Niehues et al., 2013). This misperception about adventurous play was

recognised by the Health and Safety Executive in 2012 who released a statement whereby they recognised common misunderstandings on adventurous play in schools. The statement acknowledges the benefits for children to have challenging play opportunities, describing that 'when planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but weigh up the risks and benefits' (HSE, 2012). This can be achieved through the adoption of Risk Benefit Assessments (RBA), incorporating a balanced approach to risk management in children's play instead of adopting a risk deficit model to play (Dodd et al., 2024). Staff in our study perceived that current guidance, including risk assessments, meant that adventurous play was not possible or was hard for schools. These findings show that there may be a gap between formal guidelines and knowledge and practice, at least in English schools and corroborates the need for external support, awareness and validation for adventurous play in schools.

A central theme of the study captured the need for adventurous play to be valued and supported. Specifically, the findings highlight the need for external validation, investment, and support for play in schools. Staff discussed how external pressures for schools specifically regarding educational attainment may lead to lack of prioritisation of play in schools. This lack of prioritisation is at odds with growing evidence regarding the benefits of outdoor and adventurous play for children's health and development (Brussoni et al., 2015). Further, a lack of funding and resources, captured through the theme *Resources*, was cited as a core barrier for adventurous play in schools and has been recognised by parents and staff in other research studies (Nesbit et al., 2021, 2023). This finding reiterates the need for external investment and resourcing for play in schools and suggests that further work is needed to better understand what affects policy-makers decisions about prioritisation of and funding for play in schools.

A core finding from this research is that staff expressed a need for education and knowledge on adventurous play to support implementation of adventurous play in school. Specifically, staff described the need for clear guidance from regulatory bodies about how to provide opportunities for adventurous play, how to safely supervise adventurous play and on what types of adventurous play are suitable in schools. This guidance may help to address school fears surrounding safety and repercussions in the event of child injury and provide schools with the knowledge, reassurance and confidence to offer adventurous play opportunities for the children in their care. Some aspects of this guidance can be (and is) provided via play programme interventions for schools, which include training for staff (Brussoni et al., 2022; Bundy et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2011), but policy-level guidance from organisations like OFSTED, who inspect schools in England, and the Department for Education would bolster and add credibility to this. Some practical advice for implementing adventurous play in schools is already available (Ball et al., 2008; Dodd et al., 2024) and highlights the need for developing a shared vision and values, writing a school play policy, working with parents and school staff and actively making, monitoring and reviewing changes to the school environment (both physical and social).

The current study shows that individual school policies and practices are believed to support or undermine children's adventurous play opportunities and often lead to inconsistencies in staff approaches to supervision. Staff often attributed variations in children's affordances during playtime to a lack of training, policy and consistent guidance on playtimes and recognised the need for school-level policy as a way to protect and plan for playtimes. These findings align with a recent systematic review on children's perspectives highlighting how inconsistencies in supervision practicesoften lead to confusion, frustration, and reduced freedom and agency, constraining children's play on the playground (Jerebine et al., 2022a Stanley et al. (2012); Thomson (2014)). In addition to school-level policy and guidance, staff recognised the need for school leadership to support, value and be committed to adventurous play. Indeed, they described that without leadership buy-in, adventurous play would not be possible in schools. These findings align with other work, suggesting that without leadership and whole-school buy-in, investing and transforming playtimes are not possible, regardless of individual member of staff's positive views of play (Nesbit et al., 2021, 2023). Taken together, these findings shed light on school-level practices that may act as enablers for

children's adventurous play opportunities in school and highlight the need for concrete internal changes that can support children's opportunities for adventurous play in schools.

Limitations

Our recruitment material was focussed on children's outdoor play. It is plausible that those who took part had more interest and held more positive views on children's outdoor play. Despite this, the recruitment material did not explicitly mention adventurous play, and positive attitudes towards children's outdoor play may not translate to positive attitudes towards children's risk in play.

Further, we did not purposively sample based on attitudes towards adventurous play (e.g. through assessing perceptions or tolerance of risk in play), but instead sampled based on geographical location, Ofsted rating, staff role and staff experience. It is therefore plausible that whilst we spoke to a relatively diverse sample on these metrics, the whole spectrum of views on this topic may not have been captured (e.g. those with less interest in children's outdoor play, those with varied profiles of tolerance and perceptions of risk). A further consideration is that whilst we attempted to recruit staff based on the Ofsted rating of the school they worked in, the staff interviewed in this study were all from schools with a Good or Outstanding rating. Whilst 90% of schools in England's are rated as Good or Outstanding, it is possible that the play experiences and beliefs about adventurous play in schools may differ than the 10% of schools in England rated as requires improvement or inadequate, where there are likely to be differing priorities and pressures that exist within these settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aims of this study were to examine what school staff perceived about adventurous play happening in schools. Our findings highlight a range of factors that staff feel may help or hinder schools in offering these opportunities for children. The findings highlight the need for school and societal-level support for adventurous play. Within schools, the findings stress the need for clear play policy, education, guidance, and training for all staff who supervise play. Further, the research evidences the need for external policy, validation and support for play in schools, so that all children can reap the benefits that adventurous play has to offer. The findings have implications beyond the specific context of adventurous play in schools to adventure education more broadly and outdoor learning, where some of the same issues may arise.

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Ethics statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of University of Reading School of Psychology and Clinical Language Science (Protocol code 2020–020-HD).

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