

Moving away from
traditional education:
Outdoor education
and learning

Student Number: 1351571

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Element 1 – Essay – Compare and contrast the scope and approach to outdoor provision in two types of setting e.g. early years, primary, secondary, PRU, ALN units etc

Outdoor education [is] a means of approaching educational objectives through guided, direct experience in the environment using its resources as learning materials (Institute for Learning, 2022). Outdoor learning is a key component for learning and has many benefits for the learners. It is a key part of the planning process in creating and designing lessons that are engaging and purposeful for the learners of all abilities. Outdoor education has been defined as a pedagogical approach (Kelly, O., Whelan, J & Coulter, M., 2026). There is significant research on outdoor learning and its impact on learners and their progression. It is the foundation it could be argued of teaching approaches one that allows practitioners to change, adapt and experiment but also to create engagement, inclusion and motivation for all learners. This essay examines the scope and approach of outdoor learning in Early Years and Primary School settings, exploring how each context uses outdoor spaces to support learning, wellbeing and curriculum development.

Early years education in Wales has outdoor learning at its core to develop, engage and inspire younger learners with an ethos so ‘learning through play’ and being allowed to experiment and develop those motor skills and core skills. Outdoor learning is described as “at the heart of [the] vision” of the Curriculum for Wales, supporting experiential, active and authentic learning across all Areas of Learning and Experience (Muddy Puddle Teacher, 2022). The pedagogical approach within early years is development play to build core skills and develop emerging skills. Activities that are play based develop these skills as does the pedagogical approach of learning outdoors which creates more opportunities for learners to experiment and try new skills and develop existing skills to the next levels and building upon their individual schemas. This approach coupled with outdoor learning provides a rich and engaging experiences for learners in the early years’ settings.

Early years education has significantly changed in Wales over the last decade and with the introduction of the new curriculum for Wales which specifies outdoor learning as pedagogical approach and supported the core areas of learning. The focus on areas of learning such as communication and language, physical development, well-being and emotional development are all supported through the pedagogical approach and link to outdoor learning. There are opportunities to encourage sensory exploration and build gross motor skills through movement. This approach promotes inclusive practice and access to the curriculum for all learners with different learning needs including those with additional learning needs. Many practitioners recognised the value of providing authentic, meaningful experiences within play-based pedagogy, including the rich opportunities offered through outdoor learning (Welsh Government, 2026). This reinforces the argument that early

Years learning and practice coupled with outdoor learning is a key and integral part of the curriculum and completely embedded in the foundation phase philosophy for learning.

Outdoor provision in primary schools is dependent on training and resources. Despite the fact that the Welsh government specify outdoor learning as a pedagogical approach it is clear that this approach is still not consistent across Wales. Outdoor learning is a viable and effective pedagogy rather than an enrichment activity... a coherent strategy and budget allocation are required to support schools (Welsh Government, 2023). Outdoor learning provision is provided in parts dependent on the planning and nature of the learning as well as the funding and training opportunities that exist within the primary setting. It could be argued that outdoor learning in the Early years provision is embedded and integrated as part of the learning and outcomes of progression in line with the Curriculum for Wales. In addition, most early year practitioners now have completed training and development on outdoor learning to incorporate as part of all areas of the lessons. This approach is somewhat sporadic when moving across to Key Stage two. The Foundation Phase approach is governed by 'learning through play' and therefore it could be argued that the pedagogy is more developed than across the primary setting. Outdoor learning was well established in the Foundation Phase, but its use was far more variable in key stage 2 ((Marchant et al., 2019).

There are clear examples of excellent outdoor learning practices in some schools, but not all... particularly within the older primary year groups and this needs to be addressed moving forward (Ellis, C. et al., 2023). Outdoor provision it could be argued is less embedded as learners move through the year groups in a primary setting, However, that is not to say that opportunities for outdoor learning are not incorporated into lessons but the pedagogy it could be argued is not as embedded as it is in the Early Years setting. Research suggests that Foundation Phase pedagogy is embedded, consistent and well-developed compared to Key Stage two pedagogy which could be described as variable, inconsistent, under-developed and lacking recognition and training. Therefore, this illustrates that even though the Welsh government have designed, implemented and to some extent embedded a new curriculum for Wales with outdoor learning at its core for pedagogy there is an apparent disconnect with embedding these approaches into Key Stage Two within a primary setting (Welsh Government, 2022). It could be argued that training, resources and lack of time could be factors as to why there is a lack of success with this approach in Key Stage Two. However, the research fundamentally demonstrates how effective and integral this approach is to learners mental and emotional well-being, developing new skills and experiences and being allowed to assess and determine risks as well as promoting communication, social interaction and problems solving skills.

Educational theory also demonstrates how outdoor learning provision is key to learners and their overall learning. Froebel (2022) emphasised the importance of play, nature and firsthand experience as the foundation of learning. This theory aligns with the Foundation phase philosophy and pedagogy of

child led learning. In contrast within Key Stage two settings in primary Froebelian principles are relevant but not consistently applied with practitioners it could be argued opting for a more formal paedology and not a play-based strategy for teaching their learners. Tinney (2023) argues that the enabling learning approach within early years provision “has provided a strong focus on the benefits of outdoor learning, promoting children’s curiosity, exploration and holistic learning”. This highlights how outdoor environments are positioned as central to early years pedagogy in Wales, supporting child-led, experiential learning that aligns with the Curriculum for Wales.

Educational theory clearly supports and provides a framework for aligning with the curriculum and outdoor provision both elements are key for learner to be successful and be engaged, motivated and inspired but more importantly to develop and practice those skills within an environment that promotes independence supports and challenges. Piaget’s theory that children learn through active exploration aligns strongly with the Foundation Phase, where outdoor environments are used to promote sensory, physical and cognitive development (Piaget, 1951). As Tinney (2023) notes, that the enabling learning approach has provided a strong focus on the benefits of outdoor learning, promoting children’s curiosity, exploration and holistic learning. Outdoor learning is also a daily routine in early years, with the Welsh Government guidance stating that “children should have daily access to the outdoor environment” (Welsh Government, 2015). In contrast, while Piagetian inquiry can be supported through outdoor science, numeracy and problem-solving in Key Stage 2, national research shows that practice is inconsistent. Outdoor learning is well established in Foundation Phase, but far more inconsistent in key stage 2 (French et al., 2023), meaning that experiential, inquiry-based pedagogy is not embedded across the primary phase.

It is clear that from the evidence and research Early Years settings are in a much stronger position when it comes to embedding using outdoor provision across the curriculum compared to key stage two where there is inconsistent application it could be argued of outdoor provision being used across the curriculum as a whole. It is important to consider that the evidence is overwhelming in support the impact that outdoor provision has on the learner so it is important and vital that training and development is invested in and practitioners in key stage two are given the opportunity to up skill and develop their knowledge and use of outdoor provision across the curriculum to enhance and benefit their learners.

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Element 2 - Flyer

Come and join us for fun outdoors

WELLY WEDNESDAY

JOIN US ON AN ADVENTURE IN NATURE EVERY WEDNESDAY

 **Llanelli WWT Wetland Centre**

THE WETLANDS CENTRE, LLANELLI
10-1PM

Benefits of Outdoor Learning

- **Physical development** (motor skills, health activity)
- **Cognitive development** (problem-solving, creativity, STEM foundations)
- **Social and emotional wellbeing** (resilience, confidence, collaboration)
- **Holistic development** (integrated growth across domains)
- **Engagement and motivation**
- **Nature connection and environmental awareness**

(Welsh Government, 2023)



(WWT, 2026)

Play and experience nature in energy, sound and colour (Froebel Trust, 2002)

Key Information

- Every Wednesday
- Bring your Wellies and waterproofs
- Free bird seed
- Lunch provided in café area
- Sessions are FREE funded by the Gower Society
- Free coffee & cake for parents/carers

Early Years Children aged between 3-6 years old

Adult to Child Ratio 1:10 (Welsh Government, 2023)

Activities designed to link to Literacy Numeracy and Humanities (Tinney, 2023)

Promotes Independence

Learning through play

Practical activities

Welly Wednesday Activities

- ❖ Meeting and feeding ducks and flamingos
- ❖ Wildlife walk
- ❖ Puddle jumping
- ❖ Making potions
- ❖ Building a Minibeast house

Booking Sessions

Email – MundayS1@hwbcymru.net
Mobile – 07561 788125
Places are limited to 10 per session



(WWT, 2026)



(WWT, 2026)

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Element 3 – Risk Benefit Analysis

RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Location / Activity:	Coed Knelston – School Grounds Forest School Activity – KS2 Year Groups 3,4,5 & 6 44 children in total and 7 adults	Date:	25/04/2026
Assessor:	Stef Blakemore	Review date:	25/05/2026

The boxes in the table below will expand as you type into them; pre-entered text is simply for illustration. You should delete irrelevant items and replace with text relevant to your circumstances.

Your overall risk rating – Low, medium or high – is based on your judgement about whether the BENEFITS of the activity or opportunity outweigh the RISKS.

ACTIVITY	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Possible hazards	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to
DEN BUILDING	The woodland area in the school grounds offers the materials and space for the dens to be built.	Slips, trips and falls. Cuts, grazes and abrasions.	Young people; adults	- Banks shallow and planted to - No access to banks for young - Check area for den building i that would need to be remov - Ensure there is a 'in-line' of s are aware of. - Brief all young people of the natural resources from the fo
CAMPFIRE	The woodland area in Coed Knelston has a fire circle and fire pit as well as all resources needed to use for the fire.	Slips, trips and falls. Cuts, grazes and abrasions Burns.	Young people; adults	- All young people and adults the session to ensure they ev do if they need help. - No access in the fire circle fo of the fire circle to move aro - Perimeter kept clear – no ba obstruct the walkways aroun 3-4 children at a time around at all times.
BUSHCRAFT	The woodland area provides a shelter and hut which has benches and tables for activities. This activity will be whittling a stick for marshmallows.	Slips, trips and falls. Cuts, grazes and abrasions	Young people; adults	- All young people and adults the session to ensure they ev knives for bushcraft, and all v activity before starting. - No one is to use a knife witho method being shown. - Perimeter kept clear – no ba obstruct the walkways. - This activity is 1 to 1 in small - Knives just be kept in their s session. Adult in charge wil been returned.

Element 4 – Literature Review ‘The role of Outdoor Education’

The role of Outdoor Education is vast and from research it is clear that there are still many different meanings and understandings of Outdoor Education and its role within a school setting. In Wales the Curriculum defines outdoor education as a core pedagogical principle that is integrated into all aspects of learning across the curriculum to ensure that all learners have the experiences that promote the core skills as defined in the curriculum. Time spent outdoors supports children’s physical, mental and emotional well-being. (Welsh Government, 2021). There is significant evidence to draw upon when providing the benefits of outdoor education which is why it is integral to the curriculum and must be embedded in all learning, training and development to ensure that all learners have the opportunities to experiment, develop and progress. Outdoor learning has become integral in particular after the pandemic in promoting health and wellbeing amongst learners. This literature review combines theoretical, policy and empirical research to examine the role of outdoor education, with particular attention to the Welsh context.

Theoretical foundations of outdoor education

The role of outdoor education is strongly underpinned by constructivist and socio-cultural theories. Piaget’s developmental theory emphasises that children construct knowledge through active, hands-on exploration, arguing that “knowledge is acquired through action; children learn by doing” (Piaget, 1951). Outdoor environments naturally support this process by offering rich opportunities for sensory, physical and cognitive engagement. Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory further positions outdoor learning as a space for collaborative meaning-making, where language, social interaction and shared problem-solving scaffold development within the zone of proximal development. Froebelian principles provide a particularly strong philosophical foundation for outdoor education. Froebel argued that children should experience nature “in all its aspects – form, energy, substance, sound and colour” (Froebel Trust, 2022), emphasising the interconnectedness of play, nature and holistic development. Contemporary Froebelian scholars highlight that outdoor play fosters curiosity, imagination and ecological understanding, enabling children to develop a sense of belonging and responsibility towards the natural world (d’Ascoli & Hunter, 2022). The theory suggests and strongly supports the foundations of the Welsh curriculum and is linked to outdoor provision they are two elements that are inextricably linked together in order to achieve the best for the learner.

Outdoor education in Welsh policy and curriculum

The Curriculum for Wales (2022) explicitly recognises the outdoors as a significant learning environment, stating that learners should experience “authentic learning opportunities both indoors and outdoors”. This reflects a long-standing commitment within Welsh early years policy. The Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015) states that “children should have daily access to the outdoor environment as part of their learning and development”, embedding outdoor

learning as a core entitlement for children aged 3–7. Tinney’s (2023) analysis of the Curriculum for Wales highlights the centrality of outdoor learning within the enabling learning approach, noting that it “has provided a strong focus on the benefits of outdoor learning, promoting children’s curiosity, exploration and holistic learning”. Outdoor learning is positioned as a means of supporting the curriculum’s Four Purposes, particularly in developing healthy, confident individuals and ethical, informed citizens. Further work and policy changes need to be made by the Welsh government to ensure the provision is enhanced and put in place for all learners and not just the few including those with additional learning needs.

Outdoor education in the early years: a well-established pedagogy

Research consistently shows that outdoor learning is well embedded in early years settings in Wales. The Evaluating the Foundation Phase report (Taylor et al., 2015) found that outdoor learning was a prominent feature of nursery and reception provision, with observations demonstrating a “strong relationship between children being able to access outdoor environments and them being physically active and participating in practical and explorative activities”. Capital funding enabled many settings to develop outdoor spaces, and practitioners widely recognised the value of outdoor environments for supporting play, exploration and holistic development.

Tinney (2023) highlights that early years guidance emphasises “enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments”, with outdoor learning central to all three. The visual prominence of outdoor images in the non-maintained nursery curriculum further reinforces the cultural and pedagogical significance of outdoor learning in early years settings.

The alignment between early years outdoor learning and developmental theory is also clear. Piagetian active exploration, Vygotskian collaboration, and Froebelian nature-based play are all strongly reflected in early years practice. Outdoor environments support the developmental pathways of belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and well-being (Welsh Government, 2022), making outdoor learning a natural fit for early years pedagogy.

Outdoor education in primary settings: variability and inconsistency

In contrast to the early years, outdoor learning in Key Stage 2 is far less consistently embedded. Welsh Government’s national outdoor learning study found that while outdoor learning was “well established in the Foundation Phase”, its use was “far more variable in key stage 2” (French et al., 2023). This variability is echoed in Ellis et al.’s (2023) analysis of primary outdoor learning, which notes “clear examples of excellent outdoor learning practices in some schools, but not all... particularly within the older primary year groups”.

Several factors contribute to this inconsistency. Firstly, teacher confidence and training are uneven across the primary sector. While early years practitioners often receive training in play-based and

outdoor pedagogy, KS2 teachers may have limited professional development in outdoor learning, leading to uncertainty about how to integrate it into subject-specific teaching. Secondly, accountability pressures and curriculum demands can lead KS2 teachers to prioritise indoor, desk-based learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Marchant et al. (2019) found that while outdoor learning for pupils aged 9–11 enhanced engagement, behaviour and enjoyment, teachers reported challenges in aligning outdoor activities with assessment expectations and curriculum coverage. Thirdly, environmental constraints and resources affect provision. Schools with limited outdoor space, particularly in urban or older buildings, may struggle to provide regular outdoor learning opportunities. While Forest School has been promoted as a model of high-quality outdoor learning, Tinney (2023) cautions that it is not interchangeable with outdoor learning more broadly, and that its resource-intensive nature may create inequities in access. This again reiterates that outdoor provision is different to forest school and it has to be a pedagogical approach.

Benefits of outdoor education

Across the literature, outdoor education is associated with a wide range of benefits for all learners:

Holistic development

Outdoor learning supports physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. Welsh Government guidance emphasises that being outdoors “supports social, emotional, spiritual and physical development” and provides opportunities for imagination, creativity and curiosity (Welsh Government, 2022).

Engagement and behaviour

Marchant et al. (2019) found that outdoor learning improved engagement, behaviour and motivation among KS2 pupils, with teachers reporting enhanced relationships and enjoyment.

Well-being

Outdoor environments promote well-being through physical activity, connection to nature and reduced stress. Tinney (2023) highlights the role of outdoor learning in supporting children’s sense of belonging and emotional regulation.

Environmental understanding

Froebelian and place-based theories emphasise the role of outdoor learning in fostering ecological awareness and responsibility. Outdoor experiences help children understand “the interrelationship of all living things” (Froebel Trust, 2022), supporting the Curriculum for Wales’ focus on ethical citizenship.

Cross-curricular learning

Outdoor environments provide authentic contexts for applying skills across the Areas of Learning and Experience, including numeracy, literacy, science, humanities and expressive arts.

Barriers to effective outdoor education

Despite its benefits, several barriers limit the consistent implementation of outdoor learning:

- Practitioner confidence and training (Davies & Hamilton, 2016)
- Perceptions of risk and safety (Gill, 2022)
- Environmental constraints and inequity of access (Tinney, 2023)
- Weather and seasonal challenges (Taylor et al., 2015)
- Misconceptions about outdoor learning vs Forest School
- Assessment pressures and curriculum demand

These barriers highlight the need for systemic support, professional development and leadership to embed outdoor learning across all phases.

Conclusion

The literature review demonstrates that outdoor education plays a vital role in supporting holistic development, engagement, well-being and cross-curricular learning. In Wales, outdoor learning is strongly embedded in early years policy and practice, reflecting developmental theory and the enabling learning approach. However, its implementation in primary settings remains inconsistent, with significant variances across schools and year groups. This can be seen when you compare early years and key stage two outdoor learning provision and the evidence suggest that it is not as embedded or consistent. Therefore, in order to progress and develop the outdoor provision for all learner the Welsh government must invest in training and leadership for all practitioners to ensure that outdoor learning becomes a core pedagogy across the school settings as well as embedding programmes in teacher and support staff training.

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