

Portfolio

ECEY5010 – Research for learning

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I acknowledge the use of Grammarly on 25th May 2025 to check my spelling, grammar and in some sentences offer alternative synonyms.

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Part 1: Literature Review

Outdoor play in UK primary schools: Is it enough to support children's mental health and wellbeing?

For the purposes of this paper, outdoor play and outdoor learning will be recognised together as outdoor play, as Piaget (1962) says play naturally leads to learning. Tina Bruce (2011) agrees that play runs deeper than simply enjoying an activity; it leads to creative thinking and holistic development that, when supported by adults and educators, continues to prepare children for life into adulthood.

Outdoor play is a fundamental part of young children's holistic development. The necessity of children having quality access to the outdoor environment has been promoted for centuries (Frost and Sutterby, 2017). Fredrick Frobel a German educator and theorist, is recognised as the founder of the kindergarten. A kindergarten is essentially a garden for children. During Frobel's career, he advocated for children's right to explore and discover the natural world around them, all while learning and growing (Louis and Powell, 2020). Even with a history of recognising the significance the outdoor play, plays in enhancing children's mental health and wellbeing, the question still arises: are children spending enough time outside in UK primary schools to support their mental health and wellbeing? In recent years, it has become increasingly urgent that children's time outside is prioritised, as concerns over physical and mental health have soared across the United Kingdom. this is especially prominent following the global pandemic as a result of covid 19 (Ashikalli, Carroll, and Johnson, 2020). With reports of increased rates of anxiety, obesity and attention-related disorders being recorded and continuing to rise, there is a real sense of urgency to tackle this ongoing crisis (Public Health Wales, 2022; NHS England 2023). Extensive research has been conducted into what factors contribute to managing and maintaining positive mental health and wellbeing in early childhood, among these factors is outdoor play (Mann, 2025; Play Wales, 2025; Grant, 2025). This literature review will investigate articles, published books and public health policies relating to outdoor play and highlight the benefits outdoor play has, in helping to eradicate mental health suffering and how spending time outdoors contributes to overall wellbeing in young children. It will also

explore the limitations and challenges, as well as, questioning UK primary school practices around outdoor play and the effects it has on children's mental health and wellbeing.

What is outdoor play and why is it important for mental health and wellbeing?

Outdoor play is described as an unstructured activity occurring in the outside environment, promoting natural physical activity (Watts, 2020). Playing outdoors encompasses holistic development and learning. It is also a natural remedy for promoting healthy bodies and minds (Rekers and Waters-Davies, 2021; Birth to 5 matters, 2020). Restricted access to playing outside has a knock on effect into adulthood, a study by Mann (2025) shows how children are at risk of carrying poor mental health and well-being into adulthood if not cured in childhood, these poor habits are also likely to be passed on through generations showing the real impact restriction of natural environments has on people's lives.

Limitations and challenges

Despite overwhelming evidence to support the benefits of outdoor play, schools still continue to restrict the time children spend outside (Ouvry, and Furtado, 2020). Welsh curriculum guidance suggests using both indoors and outdoors for learning (Welsh Government, 2023), this is because being outside can present itself with more opportunities for collaboration which in turn strengthens relationships, allowing educators and their students to achieve more together whether they are in or out of the classroom (Kiviranta *et al.*, 2023; Barfod and Daugbjerg, 2018). On the contrary, some educators report that if there has been a disagreement or upset outside at playtime, the negative effect as a result of the falling out can overspill into the classroom, which then has adverse impacts on behaviours in the classroom (Ardelean, Smith and Russell, 2021).

Furthermore, in a lot of schools, students are still only feeling the fresh air during break times, often referred to as playtime, but as mentioned at the start of this literature review, play equals learning and so why should play outside be confined to just a few short breaks throughout the day? (Ardelean, Smith and Russel, 2021; Patchen, 2022). Department for Education recommends at least two hours per week dedicated to physical education, but Meredith (2022) points out that for some children, that is the only time during the week they will get to spend outside. Meaning

children experience more structure during their school day than play (Gray, *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, Welsh Government (2023) recognises the value in sharing time between inside and outside the classroom, but this is purely a recommendation and is not statutory, meaning schools can choose and limit the time students spend outside (Play Wales, 2025).

Lodewyk, McNamara and Walker (2020) identified that the enjoyment of playtime produced endorphins, which were closely related to children having a sense of belonging. Maslow (1943) emphasised the importance of belonging in his model hierarchy of needs, he believed that satisfying the psychological needs was essential to achieving self-actualisation, which is the highest level of people's growth and fulfilment in his model.

Educators have reported that they feel pressure to deliver academic results, children who become confined to learning in the classroom because educators have out of date views believing more learning is done inside the classroom and some have a lack of training and or confidence (Nadeau-Tremblay, *et al.*, 2023; Dodd and Fester 2021; Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Some educators seem to place their focus on pushing students' academic learning forward ready for the next phase of their education (Ouvry and Furtado, 2020) but Barrable (2022) argues that the effects of outdoor play are crucial to mental health and contributes to increased attention when inside the classroom, demonstrating the academic benefits of outdoor play. When children are denied sufficient time outside, they often become frustrated, which then leads to children struggling to regulate their emotions. When their behaviour becomes unacceptable to educators, the consequences of their actions can be punished, usually removing their much needed playtime outside (Ouvry and Furtado, 2020). Ardelean, Smith and Russell (2021) say that if educators find any challenges regarding outdoor play, it would be best to implement interventions to improve children's play as opposed to reducing or taking playtime away. For those children who struggle to regulate their emotions and may have been diagnosed with attention deficit (ADHD), removing their playtime can be detrimental to their well-being. In fact, playtime outside has been shown to improve behaviour (Ouvry and Furtado, 2020). As the natural environment can become a calming space, it benefits children by improving focus and engagement, thus decreasing challenging behaviour (Smith, 2025; Glazzard, 2018; Estyn, 2012). Reports show that the amount of medication

prescribed to children to control symptoms of ADHD have doubled in the past 10 years (Cox, 2023), however Children Society (2022) believe their behaviour is being misdiagnosed, as there are a lack of opportunities to go outside and use up their natural energy, children particularly boys become irritable and find it difficult to stay still and focus leading to assumptions of behavioural problems when in fact it is just a lack of maturity due to age (Ford-Jones, 2015).

Some educators acknowledge the value of outdoor play in theory but, in practice, find it challenging to find time during the school day to get outside, especially as the number of children in classes increases while the number of staff members declines (Patchen, 2022). Some educators also feel that parents are fearful of the risk of injury to their children and so restrict outside time (Nadeau-Tremblay, *et al.* 2023; Woods, 2017), but positive effects on mental and physical health outweigh the negatives, such as risk of injury (Dodd and Lester, 2021). Rekers and Waters-Davies (2021) say that risky play can also be described as play that is “out of control” or “too wild.” A muddy puddle activity was observed and children appeared excited, water was splashing excessively, resulting in children getting wet. The activity exhibited children learning social skills and allowed for self-regulation, however, the teacher seemed to disapprove of the wet play, believing that they could enjoy themselves without getting too wet, therefore overlooking the learning opportunities and displaying her disapproval and expected their behaviours to conform to those used inside the classroom. The children recognised their educator's disapproval and so the play came to an end. This type of practice risks children from behaving authentically, resulting in a loss of interest and learning. This practice shows risk aversion rather than risk management, to allow the play to continue.

UK Parliament (2025) is currently reviewing an “outdoor education” bill that, if passed, will ensure every child is offered at least one outdoor education experience during primary school years. While it is clear to see the recognition for outdoor play is being given some attention and supported by the UK government, is offering the bare minimum still enough to support children's mental health and wellbeing?

International approaches

Scandinavian countries have embraced outdoor play as a daily fundamental part of their curriculum for some time now, this includes integrating with the outdoors all year round (Hadland, 2020).

Reggio Emilia approach places a strong emphasis on outdoor play being an essential part of children's development, the environment is often referred to as the third teacher. this approach sees that outdoor play is not a break from learning, but it is learning. The outdoors is a space where children can develop self-esteem and wellbeing (Nido Early School, 2021).

The UK weather is unpredictable to say the least (Early Years Careers, no date). However, Hadland (2020) recognises that outdoor play, no matter what the weather, is important for children's physical and emotional development and that weather should not restrict the use of outdoor play, it is only recommended that appropriate clothing is used in more adverse weather to avoid removing outdoor play.

Part 2: Methodology Proposal

As discussed, the benefits of outdoor play are widely recognised as an essential contribution to positive mental health and physical and emotional wellbeing Dodd and Lester (2021). This methodology aims to investigate whether UK primary schools are providing children with sufficient time to play outside to support their holistic development. It also aims to identify recurring themes, such as educator attitudes and beliefs. Particular attention will be given to identifying whether current practices within UK primary schools align with recommendations from policy and curriculum regarding outdoor play and its benefits for children's mental health and wellbeing. Research will also be conducted with the children to gauge their emotions before, during and after outdoor play. In conducting this research, it is hoped that the results will contribute to the expanding knowledge of research on children's exposure to outdoor playtime and not just replicate that of publications that are already available.

Research method

A mixed-methods approach is believed to be best suited for researching whether the amount of time children typically spend playing outside in UK primary schools is enough to promote their mental health and wellbeing, as it enables a comprehensive

investigation between lived experiences and measurable patterns. A mixed-methods approach combines quantitative and qualitative methods of research.

Quantitative is measured by an amount of something (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011). In this instance, observations will be used to measure the quantitative data showing the amount of time children are spending outside playing during the school day. Qualitative refers to gathering literature and or verbal data, often obtained using surveys or interviews. This method can provide detailed context, such as staff challenges, individual school policies (Newby, 2014).

Data collection methods, including examples of reliability/validity.

The following data methods will include examples of reliability/validity and the possible limitations of the method.

The proposal method of research is firstly Action research, this approach allows educators to consider their practice concerning outdoor play and reflect on their provision, it will help to establish what is good practice and identify any gaps or inconsistencies in practice that could be enhanced. The limitations of action research are that it can take up a lot of time to conduct, as observations will need to be carried out; it would usually work best if the researcher worked within the setting already (Mukherji and Albon, 2023).

Conducting questionnaires would also be a beneficial research method.

Questionnaires can give examples of how many people agree or disagree with each other regarding their attitudes and beliefs on the benefits of outdoor play. For questionnaires to be reliable, it is pivotal to plan out questions that, when answered by educators, will produce data that is relevant to the research question. It is necessary to condense questions being asked to only what is relevant to avoid unnecessary time on sorting through data and also risk low response rates, as people can often ignore questionnaires that appear too lengthy (Palaiologou, Needham, Male, 2016). The limitations of questionnaires can be linked to the halo effect, which is when people manipulate their answers to the questions to make themselves look or their practice look better; essentially, there is a risk of bias involved (Liao, 2021).

Furthermore, observations are another method suggested to conduct this research. Observations are beneficial in twofold, firstly, the use of a narrative observation will capture the appearance of the children's emotional state before, during and after their playtime. And then a time sample observation could be used to record how long the children get to spend outside, this will show firstly if children are spending enough time according to policies outside playing and if so, how much time (Care Learning, 2024). Limitations of observations could be linked to the Hawthorne effect, which is when people modify their behaviour when they are aware of being watched or observed by others (Hammond, 2021; McCambridge, Witton and Elbourne, 2014).

Additionally, the Leuven scale could be used as a measurement for emotional awareness, how does being outside appear to impact the mental health and wellbeing of the children (Mukherji and Albon, 2023)

Lastly, so that an holistic approach can be achieved the mosaic method would be a beneficial method to conduct as it offers data collection from the child's perspective (Clark, 2023), this supports the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) article 12 "child's right to express their views and have them taken seriously" (UNICEF, 1989) It will be used in the way of observation where the researcher can listen to the children while outside to gauge their preferences and individual opinion on outdoor play (The Open University, 2025).

Triangulation is a word referring to method used to enhance the credibility and validity of the research, it strengthens data by having more than one collection method, by using multiple methods to collect data supporting the research, and being aware of factors such as the halo and Hawthorne effect, this can suggest the findings will more likely be valid (Walker and Solvason, 2014).

Sampling

Deciding on an appropriate sample size is essential to ensure the responses to the research question are reliable and manageable (Althubaiti, 2023). As the research being conducted considers UK primary schools, it would be helpful if a sample from a primary school in each part of the UK were used; however, logistically, this might not be possible to conduct therefore it is recommended that a larger sample of schools located across different regions of Wales are evaluated. Using the same number of people for each data collection method in each school would allow

findings to be collected fairly. The proposal is for 15 children and 2 educators will be used for the research.

Unused methods

Although the benefits of outdoor play and the benefits it has on relationships has been discussed, the focus of the research question does not seek to find out about relationships between peers and teachers, therefore a method such as a sociogram would not be beneficial, compared to the above mentioned methods (Care Learning, 2024).

Part 3: Ethics

Conducting research, especially when young children are involved, requires a solid ethical foundation, because children are vulnerable and impressionable, the educators and adults involved have a duty of care to safeguard the children they are responsible for (Department for Education, 2023).

Informed consent and assent

The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) emphasises the importance of obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring that everyone taking part is fully aware of their involvement so that they can make informed decisions about the extent of their participation. It is essential that full disclosure of their rights as participants is made clear, including their right to withdraw from the research at any time without having to explain and without prejudice. Similarly, some children's ability to consent may be restricted, this may be lack of maturity, understanding or even a disability and so educators and researchers can often assess whether a child is comfortable and willing to participate by their expressions that show approval, this is referred to assent, in addition to this consent from parent, carer or gate keeper (head teacher) should also be requested (NSPCC, 2023, Palaiologou, Needham and Male, 2016).

Mitigating and minimising risk

Before research goes ahead, one must take time to conduct a risk assessment to evaluate potential dangers and or barriers in carrying out the research fairly, safely

and ethically. It must be carefully planned to avoid possible physical and/or emotional harm (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2022).

A brief history of ethics

The history of research has demonstrated unethical practices in the past. An example of poor practice is a well-known study called the Bobo Doll Experiment conducted by Albert Bandura in the early 1960s. In this study, young children observed adults being aggressive towards an inflatable toy known as Bobo Doll. The adults physically and verbally abused the toy by hitting, kicking and shouting at it. Then the children were placed in the same room as the doll and replicated the aggressive behaviours they witnessed by the adults. While the study provided the researchers with evidence of social learning, it raised ethical concerns over the children's exposure to aggressive behaviour (Galanaki and Malafantis, 2022). This is an example of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a theory introduced by Vygotsky (1978), where children learn from observing adults around them. This is demonstrated in the Bobo doll experiment and shows how the influence of adults has an adverse effect on children.

Children's rights

Around the 1960s and 1970s it became apparent there was a need for research involving human subjects to be protected, thus the birth of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was born. Their central responsibility is to ensure that research on human participants is conducted morally, safely and respectfully with human rights at the forefront of every analysis (IRB, 2015; Capili and Anastasi, 2024). Another institution committed to the safeguarding of ethical research is the Independent Research Ethics Committee (IREC). The IREC (2023) insists that all research involving children must undergo review and approval before it is conducted, to ensure that the study meets the seven principles of care. Applicants are required to exemplify their understanding of these principles in their submission. Any research conducted should be equally beneficial to both the researcher and the participants, meaning that the research must not take advantage of the children involved but rather aim to contribute positively to their well-being and development, while providing meaningful outcomes for the researcher.

Due to children's maturing skills and dependence on adults, the UNCRC has created legally binding articles that outline rights that underpin everything relating to protecting children. It is therefore the responsibility of the researcher to preserve these rights so that children are not harmed or manipulated during research (UNICEF, 1989).

Not only does physiological risk need assessing, but also the protection of personal data should be considered and upheld. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legally binds researchers to protect and store people's personal data securely by following the GDPR guidelines, which can ensure appropriate measures are in place to avoid error. According to GOV.CO.UK (2018), the Data Protection Act 2018, the confidentiality of personal data is significant because it ensures people's privacy is protected and respected by those who handle the sensitive data. Moreover, researchers should only ask for relevant information to support this research and avoid collecting unnecessary data. This is particularly important regarding research, especially research involving children, because participants are expected to share personal or sensitive information, and so safeguarding the data protects the welfare of children involved (NSPCC, 2023). Similarly, anonymity refers to the nondisclosure of a person's identity and is equally important to protect as part of data collection (BERA, 2018).

If ethical guidelines and data protection are misused or ignored, this raises significant ethical concerns and could pose a reputational risk to the researchers and the university (University of Oxford, 2022). In conclusion to ethics, following ethical guidelines helps safeguard participants, the researchers and institutions involved, and it also strengthens the reliability of the research results.

Analysis

This research proposal examines whether outdoor play in UK primary schools is sufficient to support children's mental health and wellbeing. While research and theory consistently highlight the developmental and emotional benefits of outdoor play, some schools within the UK still limit time spent outside, often reduced to short break times. Pre and post-pandemic concerns over children's rising anxiety and behavioural issues has raised the need for consideration of quality time spent

playing outdoors. However, pressures on academic outcomes, staff shortages and dated views on modern practice restrict outdoor play opportunities.

The proposed mixed-methods research, including observations, child feedback and educator perspectives, aims to evaluate whether the current provision aligns with best practice and policy recommendations. Ethical considerations, including child consent and data protection, are fundamental to this research.

In conclusion, while the value of outdoor play is well established, current provision in UK primary schools may be insufficient to meet children's mental health and well-being needs.

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