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ECIE6001

Moving away from the traditional classroom; Outdoor
Education and Learning.

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This essay examines the scope and approach of outdoor provision in Early Years and Primary School settings in Wales. Critically exploring how each context utilises outdoor spaces to support learning, wellbeing, physical activity and curriculum development. The discussion considers key principles of the Curriculum for Wales (2022), the Foundation Phase Framework (2015) and Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Additionally, evaluating how outdoor provision is applied differently across Early Years and Primary contexts.

Outdoor learning and play are essential elements of education, supporting children's communication & language, physical development, and personal/social and emotional development. It provides opportunities for exploration, play, and engagement within the natural environment, which cannot be replicated inside a formal classroom, thereby supporting children's holistic development (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). Engaging children with open-ended, outdoor resources promotes the development of confidence, autonomy and risk assessment skills. These skills support the 'Four Purposes' of the Welsh Curriculum (2022) (School A, 2024; The Muddy Puddle, Teacher, 2025, Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). According to Froebel (1840), embedding regular outdoor learning within school life enables a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to children's physical and cognitive development. Froebel (1840) advocates that:

Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul.

(Para 3, as cited in Froebel Trust, 2020).

This is relevant to outdoor learning as Friedrich Froebel (1840) believed children learn best through meaningful, child-centred activities that promote social, emotional, and physical development (Froebel, 1840; Froebel Trust, 2023, School A, 2024; 2025; Welsh Government,

2009; 2015; 2015a; 2022; 2025). Furthermore, several Welsh education policies highlight the importance of outdoor learning, including the Curriculum for Wales (2022) and the Foundation Phase Framework (2015), both of which emphasise play-based learning, wellbeing, and learning through real-life experiences. Additionally, all children have a fundamental right to “play, rest, leisure and engage in cultural activities” under Article 31 of the UNCRC (1989) (United Nations, 1989, Education Endowment Foundation, 2026).

Early Years experiential learning support the development of children's interpersonal skills, which are key aspects of the Early Years Framework (2015) and Welsh curriculum (2022). Through a wide range of outdoor activities to enhance children's gross motor skills in a safe, outdoor environment (UNICEF, 2025; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Welsh Assembly Government/Learning Through Landscapes Cymru, 2008, Welsh Government, 2022, The Muddy Puddle Teacher, 2025). This allows educators to observe children whilst engrossed in an outdoor activity to enable them to identify and monitor any learning gaps to ensure children reach their full potential. If implemented consistently, outdoor learning can improve physical fitness, contributing to healthier lifestyles and enhancing autonomy (PlayWales, 2012). Additionally, outdoor learning cultivates and encourage creativity, support emotional well-being, and strengthen children's social skills (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Welsh Government, 2022). Conversely, Rickinson *et al.*'s Review (2004) argued that many educators lack the confidence to educate outside the formal classroom (*as cited in* Dymant, 2005).

In Early Years, the best practice approach is to provide continuous access to well-organised outdoor provision, not just at “playtime” and to regularly rotate resources to keep the environment stimulating and engaging. Outdoor learning offers valuable, unstructured learning, enabling children a hands-on, meaningful lesson that supports their understanding

of ecological awareness. This reflects the idea of Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development (1978) as Vygotsky suggests Social Interaction guided by a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) emphasising the importance of social interaction in learning. Furthermore, his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights how children can achieve higher levels of understanding through supported learning experiences (*as cited in* Cherry, 2025). Additionally, these experiential, outdoor activities reflect the emphasis of experiential learning promoted within the Welsh curriculum (2022) and the Future Generations Act (2015), (Welsh Government, 2015; 2022, School A, 2024; 2025). Conversely, the effectiveness of such activities may be weather dependent and staffing availability (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016), which can further hinder outdoor learning. Furthermore, children may become more distracted by their surroundings or move further away from direct supervision and ignore boundaries (Dyment, 2005). However, with clear rules, well-organised activities and resources, mandatory risk-benefit assessments, teachers can maintain safety whilst allowing children to explore freely (School A, 2024; 2025, Welsh Government, 2022, UNICEF, 2025).

In contrast, outdoor education at School A Primary level, outdoor learning is generally more structured, curriculum based and episodic. For example, following on from a measuring lesson in Numeracy, teacher A incorporates measuring into the outside environment, allowing children to venture outside to measure real life objects with a tape measure independently. Experiential learning promotes engagement and motivation across the curriculum by connecting learning into real-life contexts, strengthening teamwork, communication and collaborative learning (Froebel Trust, 2023, Oladele, 2024). However, time constraints and curriculum pressures are significant barriers to maximising the implementation of outdoor learning within the rural Welsh Primary School (French *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, educators ensure inclusive practice as educators differentiate tasks and activities for children's different

abilities, needs and interests (School A, 2024; 2025; Welsh Government, 2015; 2022, United Nations, 1989). These principles align with John Dewey's philosophy of Experiential Learning Theory (1938), as Dewey's emphasis on social interaction in education. Outdoor learning supports holistic development and demonstrates the principles of learning through doing as envisioned by Dewey (Dewey, 1938). Further evidence indicates that consistent experiences in nature foster the skills, mindset, and behaviours children need to thrive in the 21st century, including creativity, problem-solving, and perseverance (Kuo *et al.*, 2019, Welsh Government, 2022).

In the Primary Setting of School A, best practice would be to integrate outdoor learning regularly, not only for special events or one-off lessons. Embedding risk benefit assessments as part of learning and not adding obstacles to it. The outdoor activities should ensure inclusive access, adapting tasks for different abilities, needs and interests (Montessori Partnership, 2023, School A, 2024; 2025, Welsh Assembly Government, 2009, Welsh Government, 2015; 2022). Outdoor learning enables practitioners to assess individual progress and identify gaps in learning more effectively. Moreover, it helps build resilience, independence, and positive attitudes toward challenge. It offers alternative approaches for pupils who may find traditional indoor learning environments difficult, which Dewey (1938) argues is central to authentic, meaningful learning (Dewey, 1938, School A, 2024; 2025, Welsh Assembly Government, 2009).

To conclude, outdoor learning in Wales is a crucial component of both Early Years and Primary education, supporting physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Early Years provision tends to be continuous, unstructured, and play-based, fostering exploration, creativity, and social interaction. While Early Years outdoor provision emphasises continuous

access, primary settings often restrict outdoor learning due to curriculum pressures, which may limit opportunities for autonomy. Furthermore, primary provision is often structured as one-off lessons, reinforcing classroom learning and promoting skill development.

Adaptations such as differentiated tasks and inclusive practices are essential to ensure equity and participation. Both approaches align with Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory, Froebel's philosophies, Vygotsky's sociocultural principles, and Welsh educational frameworks, demonstrating the value of outdoor learning in supporting the holistic growth of children. Despite differences in scope and approach, outdoor learning remains an essential, inclusive, and effective educational strategy in both Early Years and Primary settings.

However, policy expectations vary across the two, with outdoor learning being a statutory requirement for Early Years but not compulsory at the primary level.

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RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Location / Activity:	Forest A: School A staff lead activities and tasks with children in a public woodland area.	Date:	24. March. 2026
Assessor:	Katie Williams	Review date:	September 2026

ACTIVITY	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Possible hazards	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to reduce the risk of injury	Overall risk RATING: L/M/H
General gardening – digging, clearing plants and trees, adding compost, planting shrubs, trees and plants. Small scale work such as	Fresh air, relaxation, physical, mental and social health and wellbeing improvements. Enhanced knowledge of subject which forms the focus of the session; the location the group is in and a stimulus for creativity and problem solving.	Poor fitness, hunger, or tiredness may cause irritation. This can lead to frustration or aggressive behaviour. Poor behaviour and low self-regulation may lead to disagreements or arguments. This may result in harm	Participating children, School A staff Partner staff/volunteers (if applicable) members of the public	- School A Staff consider individual needs and circumstances. Activities and timing are adapted when needed. Positive relationships are encouraged. - Staff are aware of safeguarding procedures. They recognise disclosures and unusual behaviour. Activities are planned with this in mind. - School staff can adapt activities as needed. Changes can be made in response to behaviour. A “Plan B” is available if required.	Low

wooden garden edges, small, raised beds, wooden posts and sign installing. Use of spades, forks, trowels etc.	Communication and social interaction between adults and children. Connection with nature / the natural world. Using local woodland environment to support learning. Builds knowledge of plants, soil, composting, and ecosystems. Develops responsibility and care for living things and the environment. Enjoyment and fun with peers.	or distress to staff, participants, or the public. Risk of children or vulnerable persons running away or hiding, especially in open or unsecured sites. Cuts, scrapes, and punctures from hand tools (spades, forks, trowels) or sharp objects in the soil. Trips, slips, and falls due to uneven ground, loose soil, roots, or wet surfaces. Muscle strain or injury from lifting heavy soil, compost bags, or plants.		• Make sure everyone is wearing the appropriate PPE. Including gloves. • The site is checked before use. A daily safety check is completed on arrival. Ongoing risk assessment is carried out. • Staff aware of procedures and approach to be taken should a child or person abscond or hide. • Children will be briefed and shown how to use any tools safely and correctly. • All staff hold valid DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) certification. • A first aid kit is carried. Staff are trained in basic first aid. At least one member of staff should hold current first aid at work qualification. Emergency access routes and support are known. • Adequate supervisory ratios suitable for the location. • Gather all tools in at the end of the session. • Be aware of the public.	
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		Allergic reactions to plants, pollen, or insect bites/stings. Eye injuries from branches, twigs, or flying debris during digging or planting. Falling objects from tools, stakes, posts, or garden structures being installed. Ingestion of harmful substances (e.g., soil, compost, plants, berries). Environmental hazards such as stinging nettles, thorns, or animal droppings. Weather-related risks including sunburn, heat exhaustion, hypothermia, or		• Always keep the worksite clear as possible with tools safely stored off any paths. • A fully charged mobile phone and contact numbers to parents/carers of children involved in activity/trip	
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		slippery conditions in rain. Interaction with the public or animals if in an open or shared space.			
Planting trees, hedges or plants in local woodlands.	Fresh air, relaxation, physical, mental and social health and wellbeing improvements. Supports physical health through digging, lifting, and outdoor activity. Improves mental wellbeing by spending time in nature and reducing stress. Builds a connection with the natural environment and encourages care for nature. Develops knowledge of plants, habitats, and ecosystems.	Slips, trips, and falls may occur, especially on uneven terrain. Risk of injury from contact with objects such as rocks, tree trunks, branches, or sharp man-made items. Risk of dog attacks. Dangerous litter may cause injury if touched, stepped on, or fallen on. Risk of becoming lost, running away, or becoming	School A staff, participating children members of the public	- Overhanging trees and branches are checked on arrival. Hazards are identified during site inspection. - A clear method is used to gather the group and check numbers. Boundaries are explained. Staff monitor contact with members of the public and intervene if needed. - Activities are suitable for the age group of pupils. Physical play is supervised. High-risk areas (e.g. water, vehicles) are restricted. - Participating children are briefed on branch hazards. This includes risks to head and eyes. Both overhead and ground-level branches are considered.	Low

	Encourages responsibility and ownership by caring for living things. Supports teamwork and cooperation when working in groups. Builds confidence through practical, hands-on learning. Enhances problem-solving skills (e.g. where and how to plant). Provides a sense of achievement and pride in contributing to the environment. Encourages patience and understanding of growth over time. Promotes social interaction and communication between children and adults. Increases awareness of sustainability and	isolated. This may lead to harm or distress. Members of the public may behave inappropriately or aggressively. Adverse weather (e.g. high winds, snow, ice) may increase risk of injury. Falling objects or trees may occur. Risk of ingesting harmful plants or substances from the natural environment. Depending on location, proximity to moving vehicles on roads, car parks or in park.		• Children will be briefed and shown how to use any tools safely and correctly. • Group advised to stand still if approached by a dog. Staff remain vigilant. • Dangers of litter are explained. “Don’t know? Don’t touch” rule is reinforced. • Staff check current and forecast weather. Activities are adapted as needed. Extra caution in high winds and near certain trees (e.g. beech, Scots pine). • Hand cleaning facilities are provided (e.g. wipes, gel). • A first aid kit is carried. Staff are trained in basic first aid. At least one member of staff holds a first aid qualification. Emergency access routes and support are known. • A fully charged mobile phone and list of contact numbers to parents/carers of all children attending trip/activity.	
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	environmental responsibility.				
	Enjoyment and fun with peers.				

The role of outdoor education has increasingly been promoted to develop children's and young people's physical, social and cognitive development. Outdoor learning is an important aspect of children and young people's academic journey that takes place outside of the four walls of a formal classroom (The Muddy Puddle, Teacher, 2025). Outdoor learning is a pedagogical approach that involves learning in outdoor natural environments, aiming to provide experiential, collaborative, and hands-on learning opportunities to develop a range of personal skills, such as problem-solving, risk-taking, independence, sharing, and self-confidence (Papadopoulou & Vincent, 2025; United Nations, 1989).

Drawing on Friedrich Froebel's 'Kindergarten' Theory (1840). Froebel described play as the:

Purest, most spiritual activity of man...typical of human life as a whole –
of the inner hidden natural life in man...it gives therefore joy, freedom,
contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world
(Froebel, 1887, p. 54 *as cited in* Kemp *et al.*, 2022).

This is significant to outdoor learning, as Friedrich Froebel (1840) advocates that children learn best through meaningful activities tailored to the individual child, which can enhance social, emotional, and physical development (Froebel Trust, 2023, School A, 2024; 2025; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Welsh Government, 2015; 2022; 2025). Froebel (1840) argued that by integrating regular outdoor learning into school life, schools can foster a more holistic, inclusive approach to child development (Learning Through Landscapes, 2022; School A, 2025; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Froebel, 1840), which can often be restricted within formal education settings (Gessiou and Mart, 2023). These ideas align with the current curriculum for Wales (2022), which consists of four purposes: critical thinking,

creativity, collaboration, independence and communication (*as cited in* Welsh Government, 2022). Despite Wales becoming the first country in the world to legislate for play through the children and families (Wales) Measure 2010, Section 11 of the measure places a duty on all local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in the local area (Play Wales, 2012). In contrast, outdoor learning opportunities have decreased in recent years (Prince, 2019, *as cited in* Parkin *et al.*, 2026). Many teaching staff highlight multiple barriers such as inadequate staff training, time constraints and curriculum demands (Parkin, *et al.*, 2026). Conversely, Marchant, *et al.* (2019) proposes teachers who have undergone outdoor learning teacher training, such as Forest Schools, feel more confident in teaching outdoors.

In contrast, outdoor education and learning is not a mandatory requirement within the Welsh curriculum for primary aged children attending education settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). However, outdoor learning can be offered as an enrichment activity (Senedd Research, 2023). The international Framework, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, states that all children have a right to have rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities and to participate in cultural life and the arts (Froebel, 1840; School A, 2025; United Nations, 1989; Welsh Government, 2025). Additionally, the Seven Core Aims (Wales) of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, Core Aim 4, focuses on ensuring all children and young people have access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities to support their physical, social and emotional development (Mygind *et al*, 2021 *as cited in* Parkin, 2026; Welsh Government, 2011; 2014; 2015, Froebel, 1840, School A, 2024; 2025; 2025a; United Nations, 1989). Furthermore, outdoor learning alone is not sufficient; to be effective, sustainability should also be embedded in the curriculum, school policy and culture to avoid being tokenistic. Sustainability must include regular staff training, accessible

resources, and continuous evaluation to maintain high-quality provision and equitable access for all learners (Gessiou and Mart, 2023). Nevertheless, providing the resources necessary to support high-quality outdoor learning for all children can be costly, and with ongoing budget deficits in schools across Wales, such resources are often limited or reduced which can negatively impact children's access to, and engagement with, meaningful outdoor learning experiences and further marginalise vulnerable learners (Impact Wales, 2022, National Education Union Cymru, 2025, Reid, 2011).

In 2024, a review focusing on children and young people concluded that, over time, nature has a beneficial effect on mental health and well-being (Lomax, T. *et al.*, 2024; School A, 2024; Wilderness Way, 2026). This is particularly important given that one in five young people in Wales is estimated to experience a diagnosable mental health condition. This indicates a substantial rise from one in ten in 2024 (Cardiff University, 2023; Public Health Wales, 2025). A student-centred, therapeutic approach within small groups through a range of outdoor activities, can build trust, increase serotonin and create resilient learners (Froebel, 1840; Welsh Assembly Government, Welsh Government, 2014; 2015; 2022, Wilderness Way, 2026). Fresh air, natural light and physical movement can trigger the release of endorphins promoting relaxation and a sense of belonging (UK Youth, 2024; Welsh Government, 2011; 2022). This concept aligns with John Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory (1938) as Dewey emphasised the importance of authentic experiences to enhance cognitive engagement and development (*as cited in* Roberts, 2003). Moreover, a sense of belonging is a key component of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1943), as children and young people must feel accepted and connected to enable them to fully engage and reach self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). Conversely, not all children excel in outdoor environments, as some children may experience sensory sensitivities and anxieties or fear, which can make busy, noisy or

unpredictable outdoor sessions overwhelming for them (Finnigan, 2024; Gessiou and Mart, 2023). Moreover, a significant number of children embrace the natural characteristics of outdoor settings, including changing weather conditions, sounds, smells and textures, which offer diverse sensory experiences that can significantly enrich and enhance individuals' learning and metacognition development (Bilton, 2010). This challenges the assumption that outdoor learning is universally beneficial, highlighting the need for differentiated approaches to ensure all learners can access and benefit from outdoor experiences (School A, 2024; 2025; 2025a). Therefore, practitioners must ensure that outdoor learning opportunities are inclusive and appropriately adapted to meet the diverse needs of all children (Education Endowment Foundation, 2026; School A, 2024; 2024a; 2025; 2025a; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Welsh Government, 2014; 2022). Furthermore, sustainable traits require systematic reinforcement, particularly through routines established within the home environment, to be maintained consistently over time (Gessiou and Mart, 2023).

Regular access to outdoor education not only promotes children's health, happiness and wellbeing but also cultivates a sense of global citizenship that can positively influence their attitudes and behaviours into adulthood (School A, 2024; 2025; 2025a; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Welsh Government, 2014; 2022; 2025). Moreover, various outdoor activities involve some form of risk-taking. Little (2006) defines risk as any behaviour in which there is uncertainty about the outcome (Little, 2006). However, when appropriate safety measures and a thorough risk-benefit assessment are implemented, children can engage in outdoor learning safely, allowing them to explore and learn within managed boundaries (Froebel, 1840; Ball *et al.*, 2008; School A, 2025; 2025b). While risk–benefit assessments are essential for ensuring safety, they may contribute to increased workload for teachers already facing considerable time constraints (Marchant *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, many schools in Wales

do not have available, adequate green space to pursue these meaningful outdoor learning activities (Parkin *et al.*, 2026). Furthermore, education settings could utilise local green spaces such as parks, woodlands or other local schools with ample natural environments to expand outdoor provision (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). Conversely, this can incur additional risk factors and transportation costs (Dyment, 2005; Marchant *et al.*, 2019).

In conclusion, the role of outdoor education has been shown as a multifaceted approach to education, promoting the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children and young people. While cultivating curiosity and a sense of global citizenship. Drawing on Froebel's philosophy, play and experiential activities foster holistic growth and nurture individual potential, while Dewey's emphasis on learning through doing underscores the value of real-life, hands-on experiences that enhance engagement and problem-solving. This concept aligns with John Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory (1938) as Dewey emphasised the importance of authentic experiences to enhance cognitive engagement and development (*as cited in* Roberts, 2003).

Additionally, outdoor education also supports Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs concept of belonging and self-actualisation, as children who feel connected and safe are better able to explore, take risks, and achieve their full potential. However, its success relies on consistent integration into the curriculum, staff training, accessible green space, and ongoing evaluation to ensure high-quality, equitable provision. By embedding outdoor learning systematically, Welsh schools can offer meaningful, inclusive experiences that cultivate resilience, creativity, wellbeing, and civic awareness, equipping all learners with the skills and confidence to thrive both academically and personally. In the 21st century, experiential learning prepares children and young people for lifelong learning, active citizenship and participation in society within Wales and beyond.

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