Research for Learning: What are the challenges and facilitators to implementing outdoor play in an early years education settings?

No AI has been used in this assignment.

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1. Literature Review

Welsh Government (2024) notes that playing outdoors is essential for children's development as it can provide them with valuable opportunities to learn, grow, and support their overall well-being. It plays a vital role in their holistic development by meeting their physical, emotional, social, and even spiritual needs. Being outdoors allows children to be active, discover new things and enjoy nature and the environment. These experiences can help build confidence, independence, and a deep connection to their environment. Outdoor play also stimulates the senses, sparks curiosity, and encourages empathy for nature. Through time spent outdoors, children develop important life skills and a strong sense of belonging to their surroundings and the wider world. However, Bento and Dias (2017) suggests that despite strong evidence of the benefits, outdoor play is becoming less common for children. This is because of factors such as living in cities with heavy traffic and limited open spaces for children to play, increased screen time from tablets and other devices, and fears and worries about children's safety when they are outside. According to Ouvry and Furtado (2019), there are many reasons practitioners and parents give for not taking children outside, but these are usually based on fear and worry rather than a clear understanding of what children really need. They may not fully realise how useful outdoor spaces can be for children's learning and motivation, and their decision to stay indoors often comes from hidden doubts or assumptions about the value and benefits of outdoor play. Therefore, this study will be exploring the challenges and facilitators to implementing outdoor play for children in an early years education setting. Tovey (2016) explains that Friedrich Froebel was one of the first to recognise how important outdoor play and being in nature is for children’s learning and development. Froebel believed that outdoor play helps children connect with the world around them and supports their creativity. Froebel’s ideas show why playing outdoors is so significant for a child’s holistic development. Froebel’s views help practitioners understand why outdoor play is important and why it’s necessary to overcome challenges and facilitate it.

According to Learning Through Landscapes (no date), the weather is regularly used as an excuse to avoid outdoor play, but it is usually adult attitudes and a lack of preparation that create the real barrier. Adults may worry that children will be uncomfortable or unsafe in rain, cold, or snow, even though many children enjoy

playing outside in all kinds of weather. Concerns about safety, such as slipping or becoming unwell can also lead practitioners to keep children indoors. In some early years settings, there may be a lack of suitable clothing or resources to support outdoor play in different weather conditions. An adult's own view of the weather will also influence whether children are given the opportunity to play outdoors. For example, if an adult dislikes the rain, it is highly unlikely that children will be allowed to go outdoors to play in wet weather. Waters and Rekers (2019) suggest that a major challenge in providing meaningful outdoor play experiences for children is the role and mindset of the adults involved. What adults think and believe about outdoor play affects how children use and experience outdoor spaces. This includes their views on play itself, what they believe children are capable of, and how they see the outdoor environment. It can also be hard for adults to balance giving children the freedom to play and meeting curriculum-based learning goals. Not all early years settings have access to spacious, high-quality outdoor areas, which can then limit the type of play children have. In addition, changes in society and culture over time have gradually reduced opportunities for outdoor play, which makes it harder to include outdoor play regularly. Sandseter et al. (2019) notes that parents can sometimes create challenges that make it harder for children to access outdoor play. Some parents worry about safety, such as their child getting hurt, becoming unwell, or just getting dirty. These concerns are often based on fear rather than real danger, which can lead to children spending more time indoors. Some parents also feel unsure about whether their child can handle the challenges that come with outdoor play, especially when it involves taking small risks or being more independent. These feelings can make it harder for children to explore freely, and why it is important for early years practitioners to work with parents, build trust, and help them feel more confident about the value of outdoor play.

However, Play Wales (2020) suggest that a facilitator to outdoor play is the outdoor environment itself. Outdoor spaces can support and encourage children's play when they are interesting and give them freedom to explore. Natural elements like trees, mud, water, and the weather, along with "loose parts" such as sticks, fabric, or boxes, allow children to be creative, take small risks, and learn through hands-on experiences. These types of outdoor areas are often more engaging and exciting than parks or playgrounds. A well-designed outdoor space can make play more

enjoyable while also supporting children's learning and development. According to Dietze and Kashin (2024), having supportive leadership is also important for outdoor play. Leaders show they value outdoor play when they make it part of their setting's policies and daily routines. They also make sure staff get the right training to feel confident teaching and supporting children outside. By making outdoor play a priority, leaders can also help parents understand why it is important, which then ensures outdoor play is a regular and valued part of the day. Bilton and Crook (2016) state that adults' attitudes towards outdoor play can be a key facilitator. Practitioners who stay positive, dress appropriately for the weather, and show excitement about being outdoors help children feel safe, comfortable, and eager to explore outdoors themselves. Since children often pick up on the feelings of adults around them, practitioners play an important role in shaping the outdoor experience. How practitioners act can either make outdoor play enjoyable and successful or cause children to feel worried and less interested in playing outdoors.

Welsh Government (2024) has created 'A Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings' policy, which highlights that playing outside is an important part of how children grow and develop. It encourages settings to use outdoor spaces to help children grow in all developmental areas. By making outdoor play a part of the curriculum, this policy helps practitioners see it as beneficial, valuable and necessary. This policy is mandatory, meaning that practitioners in funded non-maintained nursery settings are required to follow it, therefore making it a strong facilitator for outdoor play.

2. Methodological Considerations

To find out what the challenges and facilitators to implementing outdoor play in an early years education settings are, this study will be carrying out primary research. University of Southampton (2024) suggests that Primary research is the process of gathering new information that has not been collected before. To do this, different methods can be used by the researcher, such as observations, surveys or interviews. The information that is found will then be the researcher's main source of data for the study. Primary research can be quite useful when there is not much existing information available on the chosen topic.

The researcher in this study will be focusing on using a mixed method approach. Roberts-Holmes (2018) suggests that mixed methods is a valuable approach in early years research because it uses both qualitative and quantitative methods, which helps give a fuller understanding of a topic. For example, researchers might begin by interviewing early years practitioners to understand their views, and then create a questionnaire based on what they have learnt. Using both research methods together makes it easier to understand different opinions and experiences within an early years setting. Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) highlight that a mixed methods approach can help give a more balanced view by reducing the limitations that come with using just one method. Each method has advantages and disadvantages, but it is the researcher's choice on which ones they choose depending on the overall aim of their study.

This research study will be using both questionnaires and a focus group interview to gather a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. UK Research and Innovation (2022) states that quantitative research involves gathering and examining numbers and data to help spot patterns or understand actions in a group of people or society. It is a useful tool for researchers who want to study a large group of people and find out information that would not be possible through just observation. Quantitative research uses data from lots of people to give a clearer and a more reliable understanding of a topic. According to Lambert (2019), it is difficult to use just number data when trying to understand things, such as schools, as it can miss out people's thoughts, feelings and beliefs. This does not mean that quantitative data is not useful, but it is important to have more data to fully understand what is going on.

To do this, researchers can use both quantitative and qualitative research and not just rely on one approach.

Leavy (2020) states that qualitative research focuses on understanding people's experiences, thoughts and feelings. This kind of research is useful for gaining a thorough understanding of a specific topic. Denny and Weckesser (2022) notes that observations, focus groups and interviews are the main methods used when gathering qualitative data. For this research study the researcher will be using data collected from a focus group, which Denny and Weckesser (2022) describes as a group of participants who are usually chosen based on how relevant they are to the topic being studied. The questions normally begin open and can change as the study develops. When a focus group discussion takes place, the researcher will listen and collect information on what is being said and how participants interact. Focus groups and interviews are flexible and focus more on people's views and experiences, unlike quantitative methods.

This research study will be using purposive sampling to select participants who are appropriate to the research topic. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) notes that a purposive sample is when the researcher chooses a specific group of people to take part in the study, rather than selecting random participants. The specific group of people chosen will be relevant to the research or study that is taking place. For this research study there will be two groups who take part, early years practitioners and children in an early years setting. The researcher's aim is to understand their thoughts and views on the challenges and facilitators to implementing outdoor play. The researcher has chosen early years practitioners for this study because they are directly involved in the planning and running of outdoor activities and has chosen children in early years because they are the ones taking part and experiencing outdoor play. The researcher has chosen to invite around 100 early years practitioners from numerous schools and settings to complete a questionnaire and has selected a small group of 6 children in an early years class to take part in a focus group. The Open University (2024) suggests that using a large sample for questionnaires makes the results more dependable, as it represents more participants and their views, instead of just a few. As well as noting that not everyone may respond to the questionnaire, so sending it out to more people than needed can

help ensure that enough responses are collected. Arthur et al. (2021) recommends having 4 to 12 people in a focus group, as it helps the researcher gather deeper discussion, thoughts and opinions from individuals and from the group, and both being equally as important to the research.

The researcher needs to be mindful of possible influences that can interfere with the data that is being collected. Oswald, Sherratt and Smith (2014) explains that the Hawthorne effect can cause participants to act differently when they know they are being observed. This could impact both the practitioners and the children in this research study. This is because practitioners may respond differently in the questionnaire as they know they are being studied, and during the focus group, the children will be aware that they are being observed, which may make them change their behaviour or their responses to the questions asked. According to Productivity Guy (2021) the Halo effect can influence how people see someone or something based on just one positive feature. For example, if a new business is connected to a well-known and trustworthy company, people might assume that it is also reliable, even though there is no actual proof. The researcher in this study needs to be aware of how the Halo effect may influence the participants. For example, if practitioners enjoy outdoor play they may give positive answers, even though it may not be one hundred percent truthful. Similarly, if the children enjoy outdoor play or like the researcher leading the focus group, they may respond with what they believe the researcher wants to hear, instead of expressing their own thoughts. Both the Hawthorne effect and Halo effect can impact the honesty and accuracy of the data being collected in this research study.

This questionnaire will be made up of semi-structured questions. Arthur et al. (2021) explain that this means it will include mostly closed-ended questions, along with a few open-ended ones to allow participants to give more detailed responses if they want. Arthur et al. (2021) notes that closed-ended questions use ticking a box, ranking options or writing very short responses to make up data. Closed-ended questions are helpful to researchers when analysing a lot of data, but it should only be used when the researcher has a good idea of what kind of answers people will give. According to Ranganathan and Caduff (2023) questionnaires can be a useful research method as they are not expensive, quick to complete and allow researchers

to gather data from many people. However, there are some limitations to questionnaires, such as only gathering information that the researcher has asked for, which means that practitioners might not have the chance to share additional information about what they do in their setting. In this research study, the questionnaire allows the researcher to gather a lot of views and opinions. By including open-ended questions, practitioners can share more detailed answers, which can give the researcher more in-depth data.

The focus group questions will be made up of open-ended questions, so that qualitative data is gathered. According to Durham County Council (2017) open-ended questions require participants to answer the questions with a written or spoken response of their own views. Open-ended questions are useful when exploring a new topic and idea, or when the researcher is unsure of what kind of answers they will receive. HM Government (2020) suggests that focus groups can be beneficial because they can encourage conversation and shared ideas between participants in the group. They also allow the researcher to gather different thoughts and views from various people. However, HM Government (2020) also notes that there are some downsides to focus groups, such as needing enough staff to lead and take notes, and the challenge of getting all the participants together at the same time. This research study will take place in an early years setting with six children from the same class. Having them in a familiar group makes it easier to bring them together and helps them feel more comfortable, which may encourage them to share their thoughts and ideas more openly.

Using both questionnaires and focus group methods in this research helps to balance out the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Questionnaires allow for a wider range of responses from early years practitioners, while focus groups give children the chance to share their thoughts and ideas in more depth. By using both methods, this study benefits from triangulation. Punch (2009) notes that triangulation is when both quantitative and qualitative data are collected together to explore the same topic. Using these two methods helps the researcher to understand the challenges and facilitators to implementing outdoor play in an early years settings.

3. Ethical Considerations

Before beginning a research study, it is crucial to think about the ethical responsibilities involved. This is especially important for this study, as it involves working with young children and early years practitioners. According to Arundel (2023), before starting a research study, researchers must choose a method or methods to use that best suit the study, carefully choose participants who are relevant to the topic, and make sure they get ethical approval. It is important for researchers to keep participants' information safe and private, and make sure that all data collected is handled correctly. The British Educational Research Association [hereafter BERA] (2024) emphasises that all educational research should be carried out with respect and care. This means respecting the participants involved, the research process and the knowledge gained. Ethical research is much more than just getting permission with a consent form or ticking a box, but it should be carefully thought out and planned (Walker and Solvason, 2014). When doing research involving children, researchers need to take extra care to make sure they are kept safe, comfortable and respected whilst it is taking place. Being ethical means building trusting relationships with the children, parents and practitioners, and being able to handle any unexpected issues that may come up. Having a clear ethical approach throughout the study is important as it shows the researcher is taking their responsibility seriously (BERA, pp. 11-13, 2024). For this study, the researcher will have a clear ethical approach throughout and will aim to build trust with participants and guardians. As well as ensuring children are safe, comfortable, and respected throughout the study. A key ethical principle is to do no harm (BERA, pp. 11-13, 2024), meaning researchers must take every step to avoid causing physical or emotional harm to participants. In this study, the researcher will ensure that children and practitioners are not made to feel upset, confused or embarrassed. The questionnaire will not involve any inappropriate questions and the focus group will be age-appropriate, safe, and supportive.

An important part of ethical research is making sure that participants give voluntary informed consent before taking part in the study. It is important for this research, that both the child and their parent or carer understand the research and that they agree to take part willingly. This is highlighted by BERA (pp. 13-18, 2024), who states that

participants must agree to take part in the study by their own choice, after being given clear information about the study, including the reason why this study is taking place and what it involves. The participants should understand that they do not have to take part if they do not want to, and that they are allowed to withdraw from the research study whenever they wish without any hassle or consequences. For children, this means that their parents or carers must give permission, and if the child is old enough, they should also be asked for their consent in a way that they can understand. Participants of this research study will receive a detailed letter and consent form with all the information needed to make voluntary informed consent, including their right to withdraw without any consequences. It will include why the researcher has chosen them to take part, what it will involve the participants doing, information about confidentiality and data storage, how to withdraw from the study, and who the researcher is and why they have chosen this research. To make sure children understand what is being asked of them, the study will be explained using child friendly language and visual pictures such as drawings. The children in this research study will be chosen with the help of the setting and will be based on their age and if their able to take part in group conversations. Consent will be gained from both the setting and the children's parents or carers. The researcher will look out for any signs that a participant may want to stop and will regularly remind them that they are free to stop at any time.

Another important part of the researcher's ethical responsibilities is making sure that participants' personal information is kept safe. According to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David [hereafter UWTSD] (pp. 24-25, 2022), researchers must follow the Data Protection Act 2018 and UK GDPR to ensure this. UWSTD focuses on two key principles for protecting participants privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. Confidentiality means controlling who can access the information that participants share, and anonymity means keeping participants identities hidden in any research documents, so they cannot be identified. The researcher is responsible for protecting participants' privacy, and should be careful about what personal or sensitive information is being gathered and recorded. Special category data collected can contain a person's race, their sexual orientation, their religious beliefs or their ethnicity (Information Commissioners Office, 2024). As this research involves children, it is likely that some special category data will be collected, such as

information on health, their background or behaviour, this type of data requires extra protection (BERA, pp. 22-23, 2024). In this study, the researcher will only collect information that is needed, and participants/guardians will be made fully aware of what type of information is being gathered. The researcher will ensure that children and practitioners identities are not revealed by referring to them as Child A/B, or under a false name in recordings. All data will be kept confidential by storing it in password protected files on a secure device, which only the researcher, and potentially the supervisor if needed, can access. Any handwritten notes will be locked away in a secure file cabinet and all personal information will be deleted properly once it is no longer needed for the research.

UWTSD (pp. 27-28, 2022) notes that it is mandatory for anyone working with children who are 18 or under, to go through a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, to confirm they are safe to work with children. The researcher will have an enhanced DBS check in place, prior to starting the research study. BERA (p. 20, 2024) mentions that incentives can help motivate people to participate in a research study, but the incentives should be sensible and not be big so that it pressures someone into saying yes. This research study will not be using any incentives to encourage people to take part in the study.

When carrying out research, it is important to think about any possible risks to the participants, the researcher or the institution and how these risks can be reduced or managed.

<u>Possible risks to the participants</u>

BERA (p.24, 2024) notes that there may a risk that confidentiality may need to be broken if the research believes someone is at risk or a law is being broken. If a participant makes a disclosure, the researcher has a legal duty to report it to the right authorities. This must be explained clearly in the information letter and consent forms, and the researcher should get advice from their supervisor. If it is safe to do so, the participant or guardian should be informed on why confidentiality is being broken. In this study there is also a possible risk that participants may feel uncomfortable, upset, or anxious. This may be because they are asked sensitive or personal questions, they may feel unsure about what is expected of them, or they

may not feel confident in their answers and have a fear of being judged. To reduce these risks, the researcher will clearly explain about confidentiality in both the information letter and consent forms and will use age appropriate and non-personal questions in both the questionnaire and focus group. The researcher will keep an eye on participants for signs of worry and stress and will inform them that no answer they give is wrong, they can skip questions if they wish and that they can stop at any time.

Possible risks to the researcher

It is important to consider any risks that may occur to the researcher during the study. In this study, there is risk of distress or upset, for example the researcher may hear a child or practitioner reveal something upsetting, or the researcher may feel stressed if managing challenging group behaviour. To try and reduce these risks, the researcher will be prepared for any disclosures or upsetting information and will not ask unnecessary questions. If a disclosure is made or upsetting information shared, they will follow the correct procedures and/or make time at the end of the session to discuss anything if the participant wishes too. To manage challenging behaviour, the researcher will reduce this risk by keeping the children in a familiar environment, with trusted staff nearby to support if any behaviour becomes disruptive.

Possible risks to the institution

It is important to consider any potential risks to the institution during this study. One risk is reputational damage if the research is not carried out ethically or professionally. To prevent this, the researcher will follow the institutes and ethical guidelines, including gaining correct consent and carrying out the research in a respectful and responsible way. There is also a legal risk to the institution, such as the potential loss of data that could make participants complain or take legal action. To reduce this risk, all information gathered will be kept securely, either on a secure device that has a password to protect it or in a locked cabinet, which only the researcher and their supervisor can access. Once the data is no longer needed, all personal information will be deleted properly.

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