

Research For Learning

ECEY5010

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AI Statement

AI was used in this assignment following the guidance.

1. What theorists are best to use for outdoor play and observation?
2. Can you read through my work and tell me if I need a new paragraph?
3. I have paraphrased this paragraph, do you have any feedback on how I have worded it?
4. Can you read my assignment and check for errors, paragraphs and spelling mistakes?
5. Do you have any suggestions?

How does outdoor play influence social development?

Introduction

Firstly, this paper will explore how outdoor play supports young children's social development with support from Welsh guidance, key theorists and recent research. This section will look at how outdoor environments encourage communication, cooperation and relationship-building, as well as its limitations. Secondly, the paper will outline the methodological considerations for this research, including why observation is an appropriate choice for researching young children and how triangulation strengthens the observation. Thirdly, the paper will discuss the ethical responsibilities involved in early childhood research, including consent, confidentiality, minimising harm and secure data handling.

Literature Review

Outdoor play is seen in Welsh early years guidance as an important part of children's overall development, especially their social skills and development. The Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care explains that play helps children grow socially, emotionally and mentally, and that good play environments should support interaction and working together (Welsh Government, 2022). The Children's rights also link play to social development. Article 31 of the UNCRC says children should have time and space to play in ways that help them build relationships and take part in social life (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). Outdoor play also gives children chances to talk, share ideas and build confidence when playing with others (Early Years Alliance, 2023).

Froebel's ideas also help show why outdoor play supports social development. The Froebel Trust describes the garden as a place where children learn about themselves and others, and where they can explore freely while still being part of a group (Froebel Trust, 2021). Froebel believed children learn well when they feel connected to others and when they take part in shared activities, such as looking after outdoor spaces or exploring together (Froebel Trust, 2021). These kinds of experiences help children learn to cooperate, show care for others and build positive relationships.

Research from the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning also shows how outdoor play supports social skills. Their work suggests that nature-based play helps children communicate, work as a team and interact with others through shared tasks and exploration (Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2024). They also note that outdoor spaces can feel more open and less pressured, which helps children of different abilities join in and feel included (Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2024). Taken together, these ideas show that outdoor play has a strong role in supporting children's social development and helps explain why this is an important area to explore.

There are well-known theorists that explain why outdoor play supports children's social development. Vygotsky believed that children learn through social interaction and that communication with others helps them develop new skills (Vygotsky, 1978). He explained that adults and peers can support children's learning by guiding them and helping them take the next step, which he called scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Outdoor play gives children many chances to talk, share ideas and work together, which links closely to Vygotsky's view that learning happens through social experiences.

Parten's stages of play also help show how outdoor play supports social development. She suggested that children move from playing alone to playing alongside others, and eventually to playing cooperatively (Parten, 1932). Outdoor environments often encourage associative and cooperative play because children have more space, freedom and shared resources. This means they are more likely to join in with others, negotiate roles and take part in group activities, which supports their social development (Parten, 1932).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory also explains the importance of outdoor play. He believed that children develop within different environments, and that these settings influence their relationships and behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Outdoor spaces form part of the child's microsystem and can support positive social interactions by giving children opportunities to explore, communicate and build relationships in a natural and open environment. This shows how the outdoor setting itself plays a role in children's social development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Although research shows many benefits of outdoor play for social development, there are also important factors that can limit children's experiences. The Welsh Government says that not all children have equal access to high-quality outdoor spaces, and this can affect the opportunities they have to interact with others (Welsh Government, 2022). Some settings may have limited outdoor areas, or the space may not be designed in a way that supports social play. The Children's Commissioner for Wales also highlights that some children do not feel they have enough time or freedom to play outdoors, which can reduce their chances to build relationships and take part in shared activities (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023).

Practical barriers can also make outdoor play more difficult. The Early Years Alliance (2023) explains that staffing levels, safety concerns and weather conditions can influence how often children go outside (Early Years Alliance, 2023). Research from the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning also says that adults may sometimes be cautious about risky play, which can limit children's opportunities to develop confidence and social skills through challenge (Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2024). This shows that while outdoor play has clear social benefits, it is not always easy to provide consistent, high-quality outdoor experiences in every setting.

This literature review shows that outdoor play has an important role in supporting children's social development. The frameworks and guidance used in Wales highlight

that outdoor environments give children valuable chances to interact, build relationships and take part in shared experiences. Theorists such as Vygotsky, Parten and Bronfenbrenner also help explain why social interaction and the environment are key parts of children's development. Research from organisations like UNICEF, the Early Years Alliance and the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning strengthen the idea that outdoor play encourages communication, teamwork and confidence. However, there are also limitations, such as access to outdoor spaces, staffing and safety concerns. This shows why it is important to explore how outdoor play supports social development within early years settings.

This review also highlights why understanding children's social development outdoors is important for early years practice in Wales.

Methodological considerations

In early childhood research, the environment where the research takes place is an important starting point. Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) explain that early childhood research sits within a complex landscape shaped by historical views of children, diverse settings, and the need for thoughtful approaches when working with young participants. They also say that young children are recognised as capable, active learners with their own perspectives. Researchers must design studies that respect their experiences and allow them to participate in ways that feel natural and comfortable (Nolan et al., 2013).

For this research project, selecting a small group of children aged 3–5 within their familiar early year's environment aligns with the nature of early childhood research. Nolan *et al* (2013) highlights that research often takes place in real-life settings, where children's everyday interactions can be observed without disrupting their routines. This method allows the researcher to capture authentic behaviours that reflect children's experiences in their natural environment.

The chosen method for this research project is observations, as it allows the children to be studied within their everyday play without interference. Bradbury (2014) explains that observation is central to early years practice because it provides insight into children's learning and social interactions as they naturally occur. This approach is particularly suitable for young children, who often communicate their understanding through play rather than verbal explanation (Bradbury, 2014). Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) also highlight that observing children in familiar environments supports more authentic behaviour. Vygotsky's view that children learn through social interaction further supports using observation, as meaningful learning and communication take place during shared play experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

Using observation as the main method in this research project offers several advantages, particularly within early years settings where children learn through play and everyday interactions. Bradbury (2014) explains that observing children during their normal routines allows practitioners to capture behaviour that is genuine and reflective

of their real experiences. This is especially important for young children who may not yet be able to express their thoughts verbally. Similarly, Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) highlight that observing children in familiar environments supports more natural responses, as children feel comfortable and are more likely to behave as they usually would (Nolan, *et al*, 2013).

Palaiologou also emphasises that observation is a simple and immediate method, enabling practitioners to record meaningful moments as they occur. This is particularly useful in early years settings where learning often happens spontaneously and unpredictably. The Connect Childcare guidance further supports this by noting that observations help practitioners understand children's development, interests and needs, and can also strengthen communication with parents by providing clear examples of children's learning. The Welsh Government (2023) also recognises the value of observation as part of ongoing assessment, stating that children's learning should be understood through everyday experiences and interactions. Together, these sources show that observation is a flexible, practical and developmentally appropriate method for researching young children.

However, there are also limitations. Hammond and Wellington (2013) point out that small qualitative samples limit the extent to which findings can be generalised, meaning the results of this study cannot be applied to all children (Hammond and Wellington, 2013). Palaiologou also notes that observations can be incomplete, as practitioners may not be able to record everything that happens. If notes are written after the event, important details may be forgotten or unintentionally altered. Devereux (2003) adds that observational notes can be difficult to organise and categorise, which may affect the reliability of the data (Devereux, 2003).

Bradbury (2014) also highlights that observational data is influenced by the practitioner's own interpretations, meaning there is a risk of bias (Bradbury, 2014). What the observer chooses to record, and how they understand it, can shape the findings. The Welsh Government (2023) reinforces this by stating that assessment should draw on a range of evidence, suggesting that relying on observation alone may not provide a complete picture of children's learning. These limitations show that while observation is valuable, it must be used carefully and supported by reflective practice.

Triangulation is used in qualitative research to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of findings by drawing on more than one method or source of evidence. The EBSCO article *The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Research* explains that combining different methods allows researchers to cross their interpretations, reducing the likelihood that results are shaped by a single viewpoint (ESBCO, n.d). This helps ensure that the data is more balanced and reliable, particularly in small-scale studies where the researcher is closely involved in the setting. Using more than one method is especially important in early childhood research, as young children express their thoughts and experiences in varied ways, and no single method can fully capture the richness of their learning (ESBCO, n.d).

For this project, triangulation will be achieved by combining observations with informal interviews. Observations offer insight into children's natural behaviour during play, but they can be affected by factors such as the Hawthorne effect, where children may act differently because they know they are being observed, and the halo effect, where the researcher's existing impressions may influence how behaviour is interpreted (Cook, 1962). The EBSCO article on triangulation explains that using more than one method helps reduce these risks by allowing researchers to cross-check their interpretations and strengthen the credibility of the findings (EBSCO, n.d). Informal interviews support this process by giving children the opportunity to share their own perspectives in a simple, child-friendly way, helping the researcher confirm whether their interpretations of the observations are accurate. This aligns with the Mosaic Approach, which emphasises gathering information in varied ways to build a fuller picture of children's experiences (Lyndon, 2019). It also reflects the Curriculum for Wales guidance, which states that assessment should look at a range of evidence from children's everyday experiences rather than relying on a single method (Welsh Government, 2023). Together, these sources support the use of triangulation in this project to create a more balanced and trustworthy understanding of children's learning.

The value of using more than one method is also reflected in the Mosaic Approach by Clark and Moss (2001). This approach brings together different forms of evidence such as observations, interviews, photographs, tours and children's drawings to build a fuller picture of children's experiences. Lyndon (2019) explains that each method contributes a different perspective, and only by gathering information in varied ways can practitioners understand a child's true preferences and experiences (Lyndon, 2019). However, Lyndon (2019) also says that multi-method approaches can be time-consuming (Lyndon, 2019).

Triangulation is also supported by the Curriculum for Wales, which states that assessment should draw on a range of evidence gathered from children's everyday experiences (Welsh Government, 2023). Combining observations with informal interviews aligns with this guidance and ensures that the findings are more accurate, balanced and reflective of children's real experiences within the setting (Welsh Government, 2023).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential when carrying out research with young children because they have specific rights and may be more vulnerable than adults (ERIC, 2013). ERIC explains that ethics should be viewed as an ongoing process that researchers think about before, during and after the study, rather than a single step at the beginning (ERIC, 2013). The UNCRC states that children have the right to be protected and to have decisions made in their best interests, which also applies when they take part in research (UNCRC, 1989). Article 12 of the UNCRC adds that children have the right to express their views freely in matters that affect them, and these views should be taken seriously according to their age and maturity (UNCRC, 1989). Robinson (2024) highlights that this right is just as important in research as in everyday life, and that ethical practice must balance children's protection with their participation rights (Robinson, 2024). She also notes that adults often hold more power in research situations, which can influence how children respond, so researchers must be sensitive to this (Robinson, 2024). ERIC emphasises that children should be recognised as capable of sharing their own perspectives when supported appropriately (ERIC, 2013). Alderson and Morrow explain that researchers must communicate clearly and use age-appropriate explanations so children can understand what taking part involves (Alderson and Morrow, 2020). BERA also stresses that children should feel comfortable and able to stop participating at any time without pressure or negative consequences (BERA, 2018).

Seeking informed consent from both children and their parents or carers is described by ERIC (2013) as central to an ethical, children's-rights approach to research because it shows respect for children's dignity, their ability to express their views, and their right to have these views heard in matters that affect them (ERIC, 2013). Informed consent requires that children understand the research and what their participation involves, and ERIC explains that this understanding must be supported through clear, age-appropriate information (ERIC, 2013). Alderson and Morrow also emphasise that researchers must use simple explanations so children can genuinely decide whether they want to take part (Alderson and Morrow, 2020). BERA adds that participation must always be voluntary and free from pressure (BERA, 2018).

ERIC (2013) states that consent should be an explicit agreement, usually involving the researcher, the child, their parents or carers, and sometimes the wider institution or community (ERIC, 2013). The UNCRC (1989) supports this by highlighting children's rights to express their views (Article 12) and to receive information in ways they can understand (Article 13) (UNCRC, 1989). ERIC also stresses that consent must be renegotiable, meaning children can withdraw at any stage of the research process if they change their mind (ERIC, 2013).

Knowing when a child does not want to participate is equally important. ERIC explains that dissent is as significant as consent and may be shown verbally, visually or through non-verbal behaviour (ERIC, 2013). Children may show reluctance through silence,

withdrawal, avoidance, or changes in body language, and researchers must recognise these as valid expressions of dissent. The ERIC website reinforces that children's understanding and feelings may change over time, so consent should be revisited throughout the study (ERIC, 2013).

In this project, parental consent will be obtained first, and children will be given simple explanations about what will happen. Their assent will be checked verbally and through observing their behaviour. Any sign of discomfort or unwillingness will be treated as dissent, and the child will not be included.

Protecting children's confidentiality and anonymity is a core ethical requirement in research. The UNCRC states that children have a right to privacy and protection from interference (Article 16) (United Nations, 1989), which directly applies to how their personal information is handled. ERIC emphasises that confidentiality is essential for respecting children's dignity and ensuring they feel safe to share their views (Graham et al., 2013). It stresses that researchers must prevent children from being identifiable in any data and only share information when necessary for safeguarding or when children have agreed to it (ERIC, 2013).

The NSPCC notes that confidentiality strongly influences whether young people feel comfortable taking part in research. Their guidance explains that some children worry that anything they say will be passed on to other professionals, which can stop them from engaging (Hamilton-Giachritsis, Hanson and Branigan, n.d.). Being clear from the start about what will remain confidential, and what cannot be kept private if there are safeguarding concerns, helps children feel more in control and reduces anxiety about participation.

BERA also requires researchers to anonymise all data by removing names, locations and any details that could identify a child (BERA, 2018). This includes using pseudonyms, altering contextual details and ensuring that no identifiable information appears in notes, transcripts or reports. ERIC further states that data must be stored securely and only accessed by authorised individuals (ERIC, 2013).

The UWTSD Research Ethics and Code of Practice reinforces these expectations by requiring researchers to protect participants' identities and handle all data securely in line with institutional policy and data protection legislation (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, n.d.).

In this research project, confidentiality will be protected by anonymising all children's details, using pseudonyms in written work, and storing data securely on a password-protected device.

Minimising harm is a central principle in research with children, and the UNCRC states that adults must always act in the best interests of the child (Article 3) (United Nations, 1989). ERIC emphasises that researchers have a responsibility to anticipate and reduce any potential risks, ensuring that participation does not cause emotional, physical or psychological harm (ERIC, 2013). This includes being sensitive to children's comfort

levels, monitoring for signs of distress, and stopping the activity immediately if a child appears uncomfortable (ERIC, 2013).

The NSPCC highlights that some children may feel anxious or worried about taking part in research, particularly those who have experienced challenges or who are considered vulnerable (Hamilton-Giachritsis, Hanson and Branigan, n.d.). Their guidance explains that children may fear that information will be shared with others, which can increase emotional risk. Being clear about confidentiality and creating a supportive environment helps reduce this anxiety (Hamilton-Giachritsis, Hanson and Branigan, n.d.).

BERA also states that researchers have a duty of care to protect participants from harm and must design research in ways that minimise risk (BERA, 2018). This includes avoiding intrusive questions, using age-appropriate methods, and ensuring that children can withdraw at any time without consequence (BERA, 2018). ERIC further stresses the importance of recognising non-verbal cues, as children may show discomfort through behaviour rather than words (ERIC, 2013).

The UWTSD Research Ethics and Code of Practice reinforces these expectations by requiring researchers to follow safeguarding procedures, report concerns appropriately and ensure that children's wellbeing is prioritised throughout the research process (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, n.d.).

In this research project, risk will be minimised by using non-intrusive observation, avoiding sensitive topics, and ensuring the class teacher is present. If a child shows any sign of discomfort, the observation will stop, and concerns will be reported following the setting's safeguarding policy.

Ethical data collection and secure data storage are essential when conducting research with children. The UNCRC states that children have a right to privacy and protection of their personal information (Article 16) (United Nations, 1989). ERIC reinforces this by emphasising that researchers must ensure children's data is handled respectfully, stored securely, and only used for the purposes explained during the consent process (ERIC, 2013).

BERA states that researchers must follow strict procedures to protect participants' data, ensuring that all information is anonymised and stored in a way that prevents unauthorised access (BERA, 2018). ERIC also highlights that children should be informed about what will happen to any materials produced during the research, such as drawings or written responses, and whether these will be kept or returned (ERIC, 2013).

The NSPCC says that children may worry about how their information will be used or who might see it, which can affect their willingness to participate (Hamilton-Giachritsis, Hanson and Branigan, n.d.).

The UWTSD Research Ethics and Code of Practice requires researchers to follow data protection legislation, use secure storage systems, and ensure that data is only accessible to authorised individuals (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, n.d.).

In this research project, no photographs, recordings or sensitive information will be gathered. All notes will be anonymised immediately, stored on a password-protected device, and deleted after assessment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this assignment has shown why outdoor play is an important part of children's social development and how it gives them everyday opportunities to communicate, work together and build relationships. The literature review and theorists highlight how social learning happens naturally when children play outdoors, while also recognising that some settings face barriers that can limit these experiences. The methodological discussion explained why observation is a suitable approach for studying young children in familiar environments, and how triangulation can help strengthen the observation. Finally, the ethical considerations outlined how the research will be carried out safely and responsibly. This research aims to develop a clearer understanding of how outdoor play supports children's social development in early years settings.

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