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WORK BASED LEARNING PROJECT APRIL 2026

Does the establishment of an outdoor based wellbeing community have a positive impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of staff in a special school?

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ABBREVIATIONS

ALN – Additional Learning Needs

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

GP- General Practitioner

JD-R – Job Demands – Resources Model

NR-6 – Nature Relatedness score (Short Form)

PMLD – Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties

PSS- Perceived Stress Scale

SLD – Severe Learning Difficulties

SLT – Senior Leadership Team

TA(s) - Teaching Assistant(s)

WHO – World Health Organisation

PROJECT PROPOSAL

1. The Context

The setting for this research is a special school dedicated to pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) and Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD). These learners often have complex medical, emotional, and behavioural needs, requiring a high staff-to-pupil ratio to ensure safe, personalised, and effective support and the highest quality education that they deserve. Staff are therefore routinely exposed to emotionally and physically demanding situations. Over recent years, these pressures have been further compounded by wider social, familial, and financial challenges, contributing to a noticeable decline in staff wellbeing. Furthermore, rising costs of living have meant that many teaching assistants are either leaving their posts to find higher paid jobs or have had to take second jobs to subsidise their income adding to the recruitment and retention issues across the special school sector (NFER, 2023).

Staff absence has become a significant concern. The continuity of care and learning that pupils with PMLD and SLD rely on is highly sensitive to changes in staffing. Relationships, routine, and consistency are central to these pupils' development and emotional security. When these elements are disrupted due to staff illness or turnover, the consequences impact not only individual workloads but also pupil progress and overall team wellbeing. As such, there is a pressing need for sustainable and evidence-based approaches to improving staff wellbeing in this educational context.

A recent national survey (Education Support, 2023) highlights a growing mental health crisis within the education sector. The survey reports 78% of education staff feel stressed, with 36% experiencing symptoms of burnout—an increase of 9% from the previous year. Alarming, 51% of respondents reported insomnia or difficulty sleeping, and the overall wellbeing score for staff was significantly below the national average, suggesting a high risk of psychological distress and depression.

Further evidence from the NASUWT Wellbeing at Work Survey (2024) revealed that 84% of teachers experienced increased work-related stress, with 86% reporting that their job negatively impacted their mental health. High levels of anxiety, sleep difficulties, and even instances of self-harm were recorded, demonstrating the urgent need for effective and sustainable wellbeing interventions across school settings.

Findings from a survey of over 3000 participants as part of the annual Teacher Wellbeing Index (2022), showed that overall, stress levels have increased when compared to the previous year and that staff working in education also continue to experience higher levels of depression and anxiety than those reported in the general population.

These findings highlight the need for sustainable, preventative strategies to support the wellbeing of educational staff, particularly in specialist settings where staff are exposed to heightened emotional and physical demands. My proposed project aligns with this need by exploring a proactive approach that aims to enhance mental health and resilience among school staff by fostering a supportive community through outdoor activities and shared experiences. The initiative aims to mitigate stress and promote overall wellbeing, potentially serving as a model for similar educational settings facing these pervasive challenges

2. The Justification

This research stems from a recognised need to explore meaningful strategies that support the health and wellbeing of staff in special education settings. Staff in these environments require resilience, empathy, and a thorough understanding of each pupil's specific needs and triggers. When staff wellbeing is compromised, their capacity to deliver consistent, high-quality care and education is also affected.

A wide range of literature explores the potential health benefits of spending time in natural environments and whether nature-based wellbeing approaches—such as forest therapy, mindful walking, and outdoor social activities—can reduce stress, boost mood, and foster a sense of connectedness. This study aims to explore such claims and examine how such interventions could be adapted and implemented in a special school setting to support staff.

The research will focus on whether creating an outdoor-based wellbeing community can reduce absenteeism and enhance emotional resilience, team cohesion, and overall workplace morale. In doing so, it seeks to identify low-cost, sustainable strategies that support a healthy and positive school culture.

3. The Intended Impact

This research intends to assess whether embedding a nature-based, community-focused wellbeing programme into the school's staff culture can lead to measurable improvements in wellbeing and reduced absenteeism. More specifically, it will evaluate the effects of nature-inspired group activities on staff stress levels, emotional regulation, and overall workplace satisfaction.

By trialling a variety of approaches—such as calming breathing, forest inspired activities, walk-and-talk sessions, and coastal reflection activities—the study will explore whether these practices help participants manage stress more effectively and feel a greater sense of self-worth and professional fulfilment.

The wider aim is to foster a supportive and connected staff culture, where shared experiences in nature contribute to wellbeing and retention. If effective, the model may provide a replicable framework for other high-pressure educational settings to adopt.

4. The Outlined Intention

The overarching intention of this research is to create a happier, healthier, and more consistently present team of staff who are better equipped to provide high-quality learning experiences for pupils with complex needs. By establishing a sustainable, outdoor-based wellbeing community, the research seeks to explore how nature-inspired initiatives can positively influence stress management and emotional wellbeing. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Examine the impact of nature-based activities and social outdoor communities on staff wellbeing, stress management and absenteeism.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of well-being strategies, including toolkits and workplace culture initiatives, in developing sustainable, positive staff well-being.

By understanding these dynamics, the research aims to provide insights into how nature-inspired interventions can enhance workplace resilience and staff retention.

Through these intentions, the research hopes to make a tangible contribution to the field of educational wellbeing and offer a viable strategy for supporting staff in demanding school contexts.

5. Ethics and Insider Research

As this study will be carried out within the researcher's own workplace, ethical transparency and responsibility are vital. Participation will be entirely voluntary, and all participants will be provided with clear, accessible information outlining the study's purpose, scope, and use. Informed consent (see Appendix C) will be obtained from all participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity will be upheld through secure data handling and the careful removal of identifiable information from any shared results. Given the relatively small size of the staff body, care will be taken to ensure that individuals cannot be recognised through responses or data, and there will be explicit reassurances of anonymity.

The data collected will include responses to the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), accessed via the Be Mindful online platform (Be Mindful, n.d.), alongside a bespoke wellbeing questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and aggregated anonymised attendance records.

The information gathered from these diverse data sources will be triangulated to support the interpretation of findings, and, where appropriate and with permission, anecdotal feedback and participant quotations may be used.

Ethical approval will be sought through the appropriate institutional review board. All data collection and storage procedures will comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the ethical guidelines set out by professional research bodies in education.

6. The Expected Learning Outcomes

This research project is expected to deliver the following learning outcomes:

1. Enhance personal research skills to effectively analyse and implement well-being strategies; including the design of data collection tools, analysis of data and synthesis of findings.
2. Investigate well-being approaches in education settings at local, national, and international levels to identify best practices.
3. Explore and review a range of nature-based wellbeing literature which examines the potential of outdoor spaces on the wellbeing of adults.
4. Design and implement a nature-based intervention to enhance workplace well-being in the current education setting and can be used and adapted in similar settings.
5. Measure staff stress levels and wellbeing prior to and after participation in the community activities using qualitative data from semi- structured interviews, validated scales such as the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and a bespoke questionnaire on wellbeing.
6. Demonstrate if the strategies, initiatives and activities had a positive impact on staff wellbeing.
7. Evaluate which strategies positively influence staff well-being.
8. Develop ethical reflection and awareness, especially in relation to conducting insider research within a professional setting.

The project will strengthen the researcher's skills in planning, evaluation, and ethical enquiry. Institutionally, the findings aim to contribute to a healthier, more resilient staff culture, ultimately benefiting the pupils through more consistent and emotionally available staff.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed growing recognition of the positive impact of nature on mental health and wellbeing, particularly within high-stress environments. The University of Sheffield's Green Social Prescribing Evaluation Report (Centre for Sustainable Healthcare and University of Sheffield, 2023) highlights that participants engaging in regular outdoor activities such as gardening, nature walks, and conservation projects reported significant improvements in their emotional wellbeing. Specifically, the study found reductions in anxiety and depression alongside increased feelings of happiness, social connection, and life

satisfaction. These improvements were especially evident among individuals who initially demonstrated lower-than-average wellbeing, suggesting that nature-based initiatives can act as powerful early interventions for vulnerable populations. This evidence supports the rationale for investigating the potential benefits of an outdoor-based wellbeing community in a special school setting, where occupational stress and emotional demands on staff are particularly high.

The setting for this research is a special school for pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) and Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD). Staff working in this environment face unique and persistent challenges. Due to the complex medical, behavioural, and emotional needs of the pupils, the staff-to-pupil ratio must be high, and the emotional investment in daily routines is considerable. Over time, these demands, compounded by broader social and financial pressures, have contributed to noticeable declines in staff wellbeing and increased staff absence. As consistency and relationships are fundamental to pupil development in special education, frequent staff turnover and absence not only burden colleagues but also disrupt the care and progress of the pupils themselves.

Considering the ongoing challenges affecting staff wellbeing, there is a growing recognition of the need for innovative and holistic strategies that move beyond traditional, reactive interventions such as counselling, occupational health referrals and crisis support. The World Health Organization (2022) emphasises that workplace mental health should prioritise preventative, community-based approaches that build support, resilience and belonging rather than relying solely on crisis driven interventions. Within this context, nature-based activities, particularly those that are shared and community-driven, offer a promising avenue. A systematic review of literature by Yau and Loke (2020) examining the effects of forest bathing on adults with pre-hypertension and hypertension found that a single two-hour forest walk produced both physiological and psychological relaxation effects, suggesting that structured outdoor and nature-based engagement can contribute to a reduction in stress , improvements in psychological restoration, and enhanced social cohesion.

Building upon this evidence, the project aims to evaluate whether the implementation of a structured outdoor wellbeing community can offer a sustainable and effective model for enhancing mental and emotional wellbeing and reducing inconsistencies among staff in a special school context. Activities such as guided walks, forest therapy, and reflective coastal activities will be introduced with the intention of fostering a sense of shared purpose and emotional connection through nature-based experiences. If successful, the outcomes could provide a practical, low-cost model that other educational settings could replicate to improve staff wellbeing and retention.

Through undertaking this study, several key learning outcomes are anticipated. The researcher aims to develop advanced research skills, including mixed-methods data collection and critical analysis. Additionally, the project will provide a deeper understanding of evidence-based approaches to wellbeing in educational contexts. A practical wellbeing toolkit will be created, adaptable for similar school environments, and empirical data will be gathered to demonstrate the effectiveness of nature-based interventions. Finally, conducting insider research ethically and responsibly will further enhance the researcher's critical reflection and professional practice, contributing both personally and institutionally to a healthier, more sustainable workplace culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review of nature-based communities and the impact on adult mental health.

The increasing recognition of mental health challenges among adults, particularly those working in high-stress professions such as education, has prompted a significant shift in the research landscape toward preventative and holistic wellbeing interventions. This literature review critically explores the evidence base for nature-based and group exercise interventions, especially those situated in green and blue spaces, as strategies for enhancing adult mental health. It also examines the role of community and social connectedness in fostering psychological resilience and improving longevity. The review is underpinned by foundational theories such as Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan and

Kaplan, 1989, cited in Simply Psychology, 2025) and The Biophilia Hypothesis (Wilson, 1984, cited in Britannica, 2025), offering a multidimensional lens on the dynamic relationship between natural environments, human behaviour, and psychological wellbeing.

Having personally and professionally observed the significant toll that school-based roles can take on staff wellbeing, this review was undertaken to explore adaptive strategies for emotional regulation and wellbeing, rather than the maladaptive coping approaches often observed in high-stress educational environments, including substance-based coping, elevated emotional responses, and unstructured venting.

Many educators, dedicated to the care of others, often neglect their own health. In this context, nature-based interventions, aligned with the ethos of "prevention is better than cure", present a promising, sustainable approach for institutional wellbeing strategies.

Mental health challenges among education professionals are well-documented. Kidger et al. (2016) identified elevated depressive symptoms among secondary school teachers. In special education, these stressors are often intensified due to the emotional demands of supporting pupils with such complex needs.

Geary et al. (2023) demonstrated that exposure to green and blue spaces significantly improved wellbeing in high-emotion-labour settings. These findings advocate for the integration of nature-based strategies into school staff wellbeing frameworks. Given individual variability in nature affinity, interventions should be tailored—offering guided nature walks, mindfulness practices, or green activity programs. However, successful implementation depends on leadership commitment and policies that explicitly prioritise staff wellbeing. The aim of this research is to advocate for a policy framework in which wellbeing is treated as a systemic imperative rather than a discretionary concern.

Natural Environments

Humans are instinctively drawn to forests and coastlines for rest and recuperation. Activities like yoga, breathwork, and meditation are frequently practiced in these settings, reflecting a tacit awareness of their calming effects. Wilson's (1984, cited in Britannica, 2025) biophilia hypothesis supports this notion, suggesting an innate human tendency to seek connection with nature. Understanding these relationships can inform the development of workplace health interventions and policy. To support this, school architecture and organisational wellbeing strategies should ideally embed access to green and blue spaces as a routine element of the working day. However, in settings where such integration is constrained by environmental or logistical limitations, every effort should be made to encourage staff to

engage with neighbouring natural spaces, thereby ensuring equitable opportunities for restorative experiences.

Green Spaces

The physiological benefits of forest environments have been extensively explored. A recent focused review by Li (2022) synthesises clinical and experimental research showing that Shinrin-Yoku (forest bathing) supports health promotion and helps prevent disease. Significant reductions in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, pulse rate, and stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol were consistently observed. These outcomes are linked to increased parasympathetic nervous system activity, as indicated by heart rate variability (HRV), which supports autonomic balance and cardiovascular resilience. Further benefits have shown to include improved sleep quality. Li (2022) attributes these physiological improvements to several mechanisms, including phytoncides emitted by trees, reduced environmental noise, and psychological relaxation. Collectively, these findings position forest bathing as a non-pharmacological, low-cost strategy with significant potential in preventing and managing significant health risks.

Kotera et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of thirty-six studies involving 3,554 participants to evaluate the psychological outcomes of nature-based interventions, primarily forest bathing. The review identified moderate-to-large reductions in depression and anxiety, along with improvements in positive affect. Although physiological markers such as blood pressure and HRV were less consistent, the psychological benefits were robust. The authors attribute these findings to attentional restoration, reduced stress, and increased mindfulness opportunities, aligning with Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989, cited in Simply Psychology, 2025). However, they also call for improved methodological rigour, including larger sample sizes and long-term follow-ups.

The Nature Relatedness Scale – Short Form (NR-6) has emerged as a robust and efficient tool for measuring individuals' psychological connection to the natural world. Originally developed by Nisbet and Zelenski (2013), the NR-6 captures key dimensions of nature relatedness—particularly self-identification with nature and experiential engagement—while maintaining strong internal consistency and predictive validity. High NR-6 scores have been consistently linked to enhanced wellbeing outcomes, including increased happiness, vitality, and environmental concern (Nisbet and Zelenski, 2013). More recently, Kövi et al. (2023) validated the NR-6 across culturally diverse populations, demonstrating that nature relatedness positively correlates with wellbeing across Hungary, India, South Korea, and Canada. Their findings also revealed that gratitude and spirituality mediate this relationship,

suggesting that nature connection fosters deeper emotional and existential benefits. The scale's versatility has been further demonstrated in applied contexts, including studies on consumer behaviour and emotional regulation, reinforcing its relevance for adult populations engaging with nature-based interventions (OpenPsychometrics.org, 2023). Collectively, these findings position the NR-6 as a valuable instrument for evaluating the psychological impact of natural environments on adult wellbeing.

Fraser, Munoz, and MacRury (2019) compared psychological outcomes between walking and golfing in natural settings. Walking was more beneficial for attentional restoration and mood, likely due to its lower cognitive load. Similarly, Pretty et al. (2007) found moderate effect sizes in green exercise meta-analyses, with water features producing the greatest wellbeing gains. These results emphasize that low intensity, less cognitively demanding activities in aesthetically rich natural environments are particularly effective.

Blue Spaces

The therapeutic value of coastal environments has deep historical roots. During the eighteenth century, sea-bathing and cold-water immersion were widely promoted as medical treatments, particularly through the work of Richard Russell, who advocated the use of seawater for conditions such as scurvy and glandular illnesses (Russell, 1750). By the nineteenth century, these ideas had become embedded in institutional practice, with dedicated facilities such as the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital in Margate providing structured seaside convalescence for patients with tuberculosis and other chronic conditions (The National Archives, n.d.).

Historical records also document the rise of coastal convalescent homes in towns such as Felixstowe and Charmouth, where children and adults were sent to recuperate from the effects of overcrowded and polluted industrial cities (Hidden Lives Revealed, n.d.; Salisbury Healthcare History, n.d.). Although based on now-outdated medical theory, these early practices anticipated contemporary understandings of the health benefits associated with exposure to blue spaces, including psychological restoration, enhanced respiratory health, and improved emotional wellbeing.

Parallel to green-space research, emerging evidence highlights the psychological and physical benefits of blue spaces—coastal areas, lakes, rivers, and canals. A systematic review of 35 quantitative studies reported strong associations between blue-space access and improved mental health (12 studies) as well as elevated physical activity (13 studies) (Geary et al., 2023). In addition, large-scale international survey data from the BlueHealth Project (2020), including more than 18,000 participants across Europe, North America, and

Australia, found that individuals living near or regularly engaging with blue spaces reported higher WHO-5 wellbeing scores and lower usage of antidepressant or anxiolytic medications (White et al., 2020a). The broader “blue-health” framework suggests that sensory qualities of water—including soft visual and auditory fascination, mindfulness, and opportunities for social connection—act as mediators of reduced rumination and enhanced mood (White et al., 2020b). Importantly, coastal proximity has been shown to buffer psychological distress, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged populations (White et al., 2020b).

Community

In addition to environmental factors, social connection plays a vital role in mental health and longevity. Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton (2010) found that strong social relationships reduce mortality risk as effectively as quitting smoking. Data from the UK Biobank (Smith, Liu et al., 2023) revealed that frequent group activity participation and social visits significantly lowered risks of all-cause and cardiovascular mortality.

Emerging research highlights the compounded benefits of combining physical activity with nature exposure. Bramwell et al. (2023) conducted a randomized pilot study examining stress outcomes among college students participating in group exercise sessions held either indoors or outdoors. The results indicated that outdoor exercise led to significantly greater reductions in perceived stress compared to indoor sessions ($p = 0.003$, $\eta^2_p = 0.626$), suggesting a substantial effect size. These findings underscore the therapeutic potential of natural environments in enhancing the psychological benefits of physical activity, reinforcing the relevance of environmental context in wellbeing interventions. This supports Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) Attention Restoration Theory, which posits that natural environments restore depleted cognitive capacities. However, Rogerson et al. (2020) examined the effects of running alone versus in small groups within green spaces. While both groups showed improved mood and self-esteem, the presence or absence of social interaction made no statistically significant difference. This suggests that while green exercise is beneficial, the social context may not always amplify its effects.

Conclusion

Community-based nature activities—such as group walks, community gardening, and outdoor volunteering—offer a compelling intersection of social engagement and environmental therapy. These interventions have been shown to buffer stress, support immune function, and reinforce positive behaviours, making them especially valuable for long-term health promotion.

An expanding body of evidence supports the integration of nature-based and community-oriented approaches into adult mental health strategies. Engagement with green and blue spaces, particularly in group settings, provides accessible, low-cost, and scalable solutions for reducing stress and enhancing wellbeing. For professionals experiencing chronic stress—especially educators in emotionally demanding roles—these interventions are not only beneficial but potentially transformative.

To optimise impact, interventions must account for individual preferences, accessibility, and institutional culture. When championed by leadership and embedded within systemic policy, these holistic approaches can foster restorative ecosystems that nurture both personal and professional wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of this project which explored whether the establishment of an outdoor-based wellbeing community has a positive impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of staff in a special school setting, the methodology was designed to generate findings that are both academically robust and directly relevant to the wellbeing of staff within the school.

Work-based research demands a careful balance between scholarly rigour and practical feasibility. The methods chosen therefore needed to be sensitive to the realities of the school environment, respectful of the needs of participants, and capable of capturing both measurable outcomes and lived experiences.

Research Philosophy and Approach

This study adopted a pragmatic stance to generate actionable insights for the school while contributing to wider wellbeing research. Pragmatism offers methodological flexibility and prioritises practical consequences, enabling the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Gillespie, Glăveanu & de Saint Laurent, 2024). Unlike positivism, which assumes a single objective reality and privileges measurement, pragmatism recognises wellbeing as complex and context-dependent, making it better suited to educational settings (Foster, 2024). Constructivism, though interpretivist, resists quantitative integration, limiting scope. Pragmatism supports methodological pluralism, combining validated scales with narrative inquiry to enhance credibility and depth (Feilzer, 2023). This approach ensured methods were chosen for effectiveness rather than paradigm loyalty.

The inquiry was primarily interpretivist, seeking to understand how staff use outdoor spaces for wellbeing and the meanings attached to participation. Wellbeing is subjective and cannot be fully captured by numbers alone, so qualitative methods were essential for nuance. Quantitative tools such as the NR-6 scale added a complementary dimension, offering structured indicators of self-reported wellbeing. Their inclusion did not reduce wellbeing to metrics but enriched interpretation through pluralism. Validated scales provided benchmarks and strengthened credibility when used reflexively alongside qualitative insights (Stewart-Brown, 2021).

Reasoning followed an abductive approach, moving between lived experience and theory. Abduction accommodates complexity and ambiguity, unlike induction, which risks remaining descriptive, or deduction, which constrains emergent insights. Tavory and Timmermans (2014) explain that abductive reasoning involves moving iteratively between emerging data and existing theories in order to develop the most plausible interpretations.

Research Design

The study adopted an ethnographically informed mixed-methods design over several months. While not a full ethnography, it draws on ethnographic principles to explore staff wellbeing in context. The researcher engaged directly with participants in their everyday environments, using immersion and observation to capture lived experience. Data was triangulated across interviews, reflective notes, and contextual materials for a holistic understanding. Reflexivity was embedded throughout, with ongoing reflection on the researcher's role and influence. The process remained iterative and adaptive to emerging

insights, maintaining sensitivity to cultural and relational dynamics (Finlay, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Qualitative methods were central, involving time alongside participants, observation, and both informal conversations and semi-structured interviews to build a nuanced picture of wellbeing. To complement this, validated wellbeing scales captured measurable changes over time, exploring not only how participants felt but whether those feelings translated into observable shifts.

The mixed-methods design reflected both practical needs and the multidimensional nature of wellbeing. Emotional, psychological, and social aspects could not be fully captured by numbers alone, yet personal accounts may have lacked weight for policy influence. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches leveraged the strengths of both, weaving lived experience with measurable outcomes to present a fuller, more persuasive picture of the intervention's impact.

Data Collection Methods

Ethnographically Informed Observation

As both researcher and staff member, an ethnographic stance was adopted during the establishment of the outdoor wellbeing community. This involved participating in and observing weekly sessions, noting staff interactions, engagement with outdoor activities, and informal expressions of wellbeing. Fieldnotes captured descriptive accounts and reflective commentary, offering insight into cultural dynamics and subtleties that formal interviews may have missed.

Informal and Semi-Structured Interviews

Alongside observation, staff who regularly attended sessions were invited to informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. These occurred naturally during walks or after activities, with structured interviews at key points. The format allowed participants to speak freely while guiding discussion around motivations, perceived wellbeing shifts, and the role of outdoor settings. Interviews lasted between 30–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent.

Wellbeing Scales

To complement qualitative data, the NR-6 scale—a validated short-form measure of nature relatedness—was administered at the start of the project, and it was intended that it would be re-administered at the end of the project. Its brevity suits applied settings while

maintaining strong internal consistency and predictive validity (Nisbet & Zelenski, 2013). Using validated instruments enhanced credibility and enabled comparison with existing studies.

Sampling

Participants were recruited voluntarily, with efforts to include varied roles (teachers, support staff, administrative staff) for diverse perspectives. Staff were invited to complete wellbeing scales, participate in interviews, and engage in nature-based activities. Observational data included all attendees, with anonymity maintained through pseudonyms and secure data handling.

Practical Considerations

As an embedded practitioner-researcher, the insider's status facilitated access to participants and fostered trust-based dialogue, particularly within the constraints of term-time scheduling and staff workload pressures. This positionality, whilst advantageous in terms of rapport and contextual insight, also necessitated ongoing reflexivity to critically examine how familiarity might have shaped both data collection and interpretation. Reflexivity was enacted through field notes, questioning and conscious attention to power dynamics and assumptions. Finlay (2002) describes reflexivity as a continuous internal dialogue that enables researchers to interrogate their own influence on the research process. Engaging in this practice not only enhanced the credibility of the study but also contributed to the researcher's professional development and awareness of ethical complexity, relational sensitivity and interpretive responsibility. As Holmes (2020) argues, insider research offers a unique opportunity for practitioners to refine their epistemological stance and methodological agility, thereby strengthening their competence in navigating dual roles of researcher and practitioner. (Holmes, 2020; Finlay, 2002)

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to identify patterns of meaning, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). RTA was chosen for its theoretical flexibility and alignment with an interpretivist orientation, prioritising participant voice and contextual nuance. Unlike coding reliability approaches seeking consensus, RTA embraces subjectivity as a resource (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis began with immersive familiarisation—repeated transcript readings and reflective notes—before developing themes through a blend of inductive and deductive strategies informed by research aims and

literature. This dual approach ensured findings remained grounded in lived experience while engaging critically with theory.

Ethical reflexivity and positionality were central. Interpretations reflected both participant voice and the researcher's educational wellbeing experience, acknowledging co-construction of meaning. Credibility was supported through reflective journaling and peer debriefing to challenge assumptions and maintain transparency. This approach aligned with the study's broader aim: to inform systemic wellbeing policy by grounding analysis in theory and practice.

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data from the NR-6 scale were initially intended to be analysed using paired t-tests to assess changes in nature relatedness pre- and post-intervention. This approach would have allowed comparison of individual scores across two time points to determine whether any observed shifts indicated a meaningful impact. However, the NR-6 was not re-administered at post-intervention. This decision was made due to time constraints and a reconsideration of the conceptual suitability of the measure, as the scale appeared to assess a relatively stable trait that may be less sensitive to change over the short duration of the intervention. While the small sample limits generalisability, the quantitative findings still provide a useful complement to qualitative insights.

Integration of Data

Qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated during interpretation. Quantitative results offered measurable evidence, while qualitative themes revealed the meanings behind those changes, ensuring a rigorous and contextually rich account (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Stewart-Brown, 2021)

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to the project, particularly as it involved colleagues in a professional setting. Approval was obtained from both the UWTSD Ethics Committee (see Appendix A) and the school's governing body.

The title of this dissertation has been refined since ethical approval was granted. The original title submitted for ethics review was 'What impact does participation in nature-based and outdoor group activities have on staff well-being, sense of community, and absenteeism in a special education school setting?' The final title reflects the evolved focus following data collection and analysis.

Informed Consent: All participants received an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, methods, and their rights (see Appendix C). Written consent was obtained for interviews and survey participation, while consent for observation was implied through the voluntary nature of session participation, supplemented by ongoing reminders of the researcher's dual role.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All data was anonymised. Pseudonyms were used in reporting, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and fieldnotes. Data is stored securely in compliance with GDPR regulations.

Power Dynamics: The dual role of employee and researcher raised potential concerns about coercion. Care was taken to emphasise the voluntary nature of participation, and no data was shared in a way that could identify individuals.

Researcher Reflexivity:

A reflexive stance was maintained throughout, acknowledging that the researcher's position as both insider and participant could shape interpretations. The researcher sought to reduce bias and enhance transparency. This involved ongoing reflection on how experiences, values, and professional context may have influenced the framing of research questions, the interpretation of data, and the relational dynamics with participants.

Limitations of the Methodology

Small-scale studies naturally involve certain limitations, particularly regarding how far the findings can be applied beyond the immediate context. Nevertheless, when these constraints are explicitly recognised, such studies can still offer valuable and insightful contributions. Cohen et al. (2018) argue that although these limitations cannot be entirely removed, they can be managed effectively through transparent reporting and thoughtful methodological decision-making.

In this research, careful consideration of limitations was essential. Conducting the study within a single special school means that the findings provide depth and contextual relevance, but they cannot be assumed to represent other settings. The relatively small sample for the wellbeing scale further restricts statistical confidence, meaning the quantitative results should be viewed as indicative rather than definitive. As highlighted by Cohen et al. (2018), small-scale studies can still be meaningful when their constraints are openly acknowledged and situated within broader theoretical and practical understanding.

Through transparency and ongoing reflexivity, this study sought to provide a nuanced and contextually sensitive interpretation of the data.

Working as an insider researcher offered significant depth of insight but also introduced challenges related to bias, positionality, and power dynamics. Holmes (2020) notes that navigating the balance between familiarity and analytical distance can be complex, as established relationships may influence participants' responses and the researcher's interpretations. To minimise these risks, a reflexive approach was maintained through journaling, memo-writing, and regular peer discussion. Assumptions were continually examined during the coding process, and methodological triangulation—including the use of wellbeing scales alongside literature-informed deductive analysis—helped strengthen credibility and minimise interpretive bias. Although positionality can never be fully “set aside,” conscious reflexive practice enabled ethical, transparent, and context-aware analysis. This process also supported the development of professional competence and deeper awareness of the relational and epistemological considerations involved in insider research (Berger, 2015).

A planned post-intervention re-administration of the NR-6 scale was not conducted. This deviation from the original methodology was due to both practical constraints, including time limitations, and a reconsideration of the conceptual suitability of the measure. Upon initial data collection, the NR-6 appeared to assess a relatively stable trait (nature relatedness) rather than a state likely to change over a short intervention period. As such, its sensitivity to detect change within the timeframe of this study was considered limited.

However, the omission of post-intervention data represented a limitation, as it prevented direct assessment of potential changes in nature relatedness. Future research should consider retaining pre- and post-measures or selecting instruments specifically validated for sensitivity to short-term interventions.

A further methodological refinement related to the proposed use of staff attendance data. Initial project planning proposed examining potential impacts on staff attendance through comparison of organisational data. However, this aspect of the study was not pursued following further methodological and ethical consideration. Accessing and meaningfully interpreting attendance data within the timeframe of the study proved impractical, and the complexity of factors influencing staff attendance made it difficult to attribute any changes directly to the intervention.

Furthermore, it was determined that staff attendance operates at an organisational level and may not align closely with the study's primary focus on individual experiences of wellbeing.

As such, its inclusion risked overextending the scope of the research and introducing speculative or unreliable conclusions. The decision to omit this measure allowed for a more focused and methodologically coherent exploration of participant wellbeing within the study's constraints. Future research adopting a larger-scale or longitudinal design may be better positioned to explore potential links between wellbeing interventions and staff attendance outcomes.

Finally, the short timeframe limited insight into sustained impact. A longitudinal design could reveal longer-term effects, but this study provided a meaningful snapshot to inform future inquiry. Despite constraints, the pragmatic, ethnographically informed mixed-methods design—combining observation, interviews, and validated scales—remained appropriate for capturing the complex, subjective nature of wellbeing. Ethical principles were rigorously applied, and limitations acknowledged, ensuring findings were credible within their organisational context.

FINDINGS

This chapter integrates six interconnected datasets collected over nine months to build a coherent account of how staff in a special school experienced stress, wellbeing, nature, and workplace demands. Rather than seeking a single definitive answer, the chapter asks a more generative question: does establishing an outdoor-based wellbeing community appear to support staff mental and emotional wellbeing, and if so, through which mechanisms, for whom, and under what conditions?

The design embraced methodological triangulation (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2002), combining quantitative snapshots with qualitative depth to examine the same issues from different angles. Each dataset contributes something distinct: brief surveys offer breadth and comparability; semi-structured interviews and reflective questionnaires yield emotional nuance and context; weekly wellbeing walks reveal how simple, relational practices play out in lived time and specific places. Where the datasets converge, the interpretation gains strength; where they diverge, these tensions are treated as analytically productive rather than contradictory, prompting questions about role, seasonality, access, and personal capacity.

Two conceptual lenses provide helpful scaffolding for interpreting patterns that recur across the chapter. First, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), highlights how strain arises when emotional, cognitive and organisational demands

are insufficiently balanced by resources such as autonomy, collegial support, recovery opportunities and meaningful work. In educational settings, these dynamics are especially visible around workload, behaviour, safeguarding responsibility and accountability pressures — demands that can be high even in well-functioning schools and that often peak at particular times of the year (Nwoko et al., 2023). Second, the findings repeatedly point to the value of nature-based recovery, where low-threshold outdoor moments provide sensory regulation, attentional reset and a psychological transition between roles, a theme explored empirically in later sections of this chapter.

Across the six studies, the analysis focuses on meaning, context and common patterns of experience over mere frequency counts. Quantitative elements remain descriptive and exploratory; they locate contrasts and gradients (e.g., role-based differences in stress), while qualitative materials explain how those gradients are lived and managed in practice. The resulting synthesis aims to be realistic and usable: it does not ignore constraint, but neither does it overlook everyday, feasible supports that staff already value (e.g., informal collegial conversations outside, short walks, noticing sensory cues).

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were recruited through posters displayed across the school with a QR-code to express interest (see Appendix B) and regular reminders at staff briefings. Over 50 staff initially expressed interest; 53 ultimately took part in at least two components of the research, and five engaged with every element. This breadth produced a diverse but school-specific dataset that captures voices from across the workforce while remaining grounded in a single organisational context.

The recruitment strategy almost certainly introduced self-selection bias (Cohen et al., 2018). Staff who are already interested in wellbeing or who had slightly more flexible time may have been more likely to opt in, while those under the most pressure, often with limited capacity to add “one more thing”, may be under-represented. Importantly, non-response within any dataset need not be treated as empty space: it can signal *something about pressure, timing, role or season*. For example, staff who skipped a post-term questionnaire may have been carrying residual fatigue, while those who missed a mid-week walk might have been catching up with admin, have another wellbeing event or caring responsibilities. These patterns are part of the wellbeing picture rather than artefacts to be ignored.

Many participants framed their involvement not as a discrete research task but as a small, values-consistent action: an opportunity to reflect aloud, to try something gentle and

outdoors, or to foreground an aspect of their professional identity that often comes last in the queue. That ethos — low-barrier, relational, embedded — is central to how the findings should be read: the study did not import a complex intervention; it amplified simple practices already available in the school's places and rhythms.

Staff composition

The school workforce comprised:

- 17 teachers
- 4 senior leaders
- 3 administrative staff
- 1 caretaker
- ~65 teaching assistants

The final analytic sample reflected this profile reasonably closely:

- 11 teachers
- 4 senior leaders
- 1 administrative colleague
- 37 teaching assistants

One participant retired during the study but continued to attend the wellbeing walks, illustrating how the walks functioned as a light-touch community beyond contractual role. Newer staff members, who joined the school part way through the study, also expressed interest in taking part in elements of the project suggesting that activities were accessible and appealing even to those without long-standing links to the school. Because teaching assistants make up the largest staff group, their perspectives naturally carry weight in the dataset and influence the thematic balance.

Representativeness and role-related tensions

Uneven subgroup sizes, particularly the very small administrative and senior-leadership samples, limit the generalisability of role-specific patterns. That limitation is structural and realistic: most schools have many more TAs than SLT members, so any whole-school enquiry will carry this asymmetry. Throughout the chapter, role differences recur. Teachers frequently describe heavier cumulative job demands (workload, behaviour, safeguarding, paperwork, accountability), which aligns with wider evidence on teacher stress (Nwoko et al., 2023) and with the JD-R expectation that high demands, if not adequately buffered by

resources, will increase strain (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Senior leaders, though few in number here, sometimes articulate clearer noticing of natural cues and firmer boundary-setting; these may reflect both experience and role autonomy, but the numbers require caution.

It is also important to note the moral complexity of staff accounts. Participants across roles often hold together two truths: deep commitment to pupils and colleagues, and honest recognition that emotional labour accumulates. The data therefore resist simplistic binaries of “resilient” versus “stressed”. Instead, they portray staff who can be both: resilient in the sense of adaptive capacity and stressed when demands exceed the resources available that day or that term, precisely the interplay JD-R anticipates (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

Engagement across the six studies

Engagement fluctuated by design and season. Broad, lighter-touch elements (e.g., the tailored wellbeing questionnaire) attracted the largest participation, while Wednesday Wellbeing Walks and post-study reflections involved smaller but highly engaged groups. Weather, daylight, mobility, caring responsibilities and term-time workload shaped who could join what, and when. Rather than being a methodological flaw, these fluctuations illuminate real constraints on access to recovery opportunities — a point that sharpens the interpretation of findings in the winter and walking datasets. In other words, *who* participates and *when* often maps onto *how difficult it is to activate coping* during high-demand periods.

Why multiple datasets matter here

The six studies offer complementary perspectives on the same issue. Quantitative indicators map broad patterns—for example, showing that teachers, on average, report higher stress than other groups—while qualitative data provide insight into the lived experiences behind these patterns, including the sensory qualities of woodland walks, the ease of side-by-side conversation, and the restorative effects of brief coastal time. Together, these datasets support explanatory interpretation rather than simple description:

- Surveys and simple scales indicate gradients (e.g., role-based differences in stress, and the weak association between stress and nature-related resources).
- Interviews explain why those gradients occur (emotional labour, safeguarding load, cognitive switching demands).
- Winter questionnaires show how seasonality and environmental conditions shape what staff can realistically do to recover.

- Weekly walks demonstrate what changes when a predictable, relational outdoor slot is built into the working week—not as therapy, but as ordinary, shared time in nature.

Read together, the datasets avoid reductionism. They suggest that staff wellbeing in this special-school context is shaped by role, relationships, place and season, and by the fit between job demands and accessible resources. They also show that small, local and culturally familiar practices, informal conversation while walking, brief sensory noticing, short time near water, can function as meaningful levers even when structural pressures remain. The remainder of the chapter sets out the evidence for these claims study-by-study, attending carefully to both convergence and contradiction, and returning to the JD-R frame where helpful (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Nwoko et al., 2023).

STUDY ONE – WELLBEING, STRESS AND NATURE RELATEDNESS (NR-6)

Overview

Study One provides a quantitative starting point for understanding staff wellbeing by examining perceived stress and nature relatedness among 52–53 staff who completed the Be Mindful online assessment, which uses the validated Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the NR-6 Nature Relatedness scale. Although the NR-6 does not measure resilience directly, it was included as an indicator of participants' psychological connection to nature. Within the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework, stronger nature relatedness can be understood as a personal resource that may support emotional regulation, stress buffering, and recovery. In this study, NR-6 scores are therefore interpreted not as resilience itself, but as a contextual resource that may contribute to resilient functioning.

Although these measures offer brief indicators rather than diagnostic precision, their value lies in the patterns they reveal: variation in stress across roles, relative stability of nature-related resources, and insight into how job demands and available coping resources coexist in a special-school environment. These patterns align with the JD-R framework, which emphasises that stress arises not simply from challenging work, but from imbalances between job demands and the resources individuals or organisations can mobilise (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

Overall Levels of Stress and Nature-Related Resources Supporting Resilient Functioning

Across the sample, stress scores showed significant variability. Some staff reported very low stress, some very high, and many in between. This distribution reflects a realistic picture of

school life where stress is both situational and cumulative, influenced by pupil behaviour, staffing levels, term-time pressures, and personal circumstances. In contrast, nature relatedness scores clustered more tightly around the middle-to-upper range of the NR-6 scale. Rather than indicating contradiction, this pattern reflects current wellbeing theory: stress and coping resources that support resilient functioning are not opposites, but partially independent processes. Staff can experience high stress *and* demonstrate strong adaptive capacities, a central tenet of contemporary resilience thinking (Ungar, 2019).

For many participants, resilience appeared not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process influenced by relationships, experience, and context. Staff frequently described coping approaches that relied on connection, micro-breaks, nature, humour, and team support — resources that may buffer pressure even when demands are high.

Stress and Nature-Relatedness Resources by Role

The most striking gradient in Study One is the higher stress scores among teachers. This aligns robustly with large-scale evidence identifying teaching as one of the most stressful professions due to workload, accountability, safeguarding responsibility, behaviour management and constant cognitive switching (Nwoko et al., 2023). Teachers in this study often hold responsibility for planning, assessment, communication with families, and managing unpredictable behaviour — all while coordinating teams of support staff. The elevated stress scores therefore map onto well-documented structural conditions rather than individual vulnerability.

Teaching assistants reported moderately high stress, though typically lower than teachers. Their stress narratives often centred on emotional labour, physical fatigue and the unpredictability of behaviour-related incidents. Senior leaders reported the lowest stress, but with only four participants, these numbers require considerable caution. Their qualitative accounts, however, sometimes reveal a different pattern: clear boundary-setting, a sense of broader situational oversight and intentional recovery strategies.

Across roles, nature relatedness scores remained relatively stable. This is theoretically important: it reinforces that resilient functioning is shaped by multi-layered processes — relationships, meaning-making, access to supportive environments — and is not simply depleted in lockstep with stress (Ungar, 2019). Staff across the school may therefore sustain strong coping practices despite high job demands.

Association Between Stress and Nature Relatedness

The correlation between stress and nature relatedness was extremely small ($r = .10$), confirming that high stress does not necessarily imply reduced access to nature-related resources that may support resilient functioning, nor vice-versa. This distinction matters methodologically and practically. It challenges deficit-based interpretations that frame staff under pressure as lacking resilience, instead suggesting that contextual demands, not personal insufficiency, often drive strain. This reflects the JD-R emphasis on structural conditions such as staffing stability, workload cycles, time pressure and behavioural intensity (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

Participants in later qualitative datasets described resilience as something cultivated through experience, relationships and small restorative practices, especially nature-based ones, rather than something innate. The weak correlation supports this narrative: resilience is not the inverse of stress, but a resource that helps staff navigate it.

Participation in Wellbeing Activities

The dataset also allowed comparison between those who engaged in the wellbeing walks, interviews or winter activities and those who did not. Participants in wellbeing walks tended to have slightly lower stress and stronger nature relatedness (a potential wellbeing resource). Interview participants showed similar stress levels to non-participants, alongside qualitative indications of stronger coping resources associated with resilient functioning. Winter wellbeing participants showed a similar pattern.

It is crucial not to interpret these as causal effects. More likely, they reflect self-selection: staff already attuned to nature or reflective practice may be more inclined to participate. Yet, these patterns offer a useful insight: those who engage with reflective or nature-based practices often have broader repertoires of coping, which may shape both how they experience stress and how they manage it.

Critical Reflections and Limitations

Study One's strengths lie in its breadth and cross-role representation, offering a panoramic view of staff wellbeing. However, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- Measures were simple and self-reported, offering descriptive insights rather than diagnostic precision.

- The small subgroup numbers, particularly in SLT and administrative categories, limit role-specific inferences.
- Stress scores represent a single moment in time, sensitive to workload peaks or seasonal pressures.
- Self-selection into wellbeing activities complicates assumptions about directionality.
- As the NR-6 was not re-administered post-intervention (see Methodology), only baseline data are reported.

Despite these limitations, Study One lays important groundwork. Its broad patterns, especially the role-based differences in stress and the independence of stress and nature-related resources, are deepened and explained through qualitative analysis in later studies.

Mini-Summary: Study One

Study One indicates that staff experience moderate but variable levels of perceived stress, teachers showing notably higher levels consistent with national and international findings. In contrast, nature relatedness scores showed relative stability across the sample, suggesting that psychological connection to nature may function as a personal resource that remains available even under conditions of high demand. The weak association between stress and nature relatedness reinforces the view that stress exposure and coping resources operate through partially independent pathways. Interpreted through the Job Demands–Resources framework, these findings suggest that staff may experience high stress while still retaining access to meaningful wellbeing resources that support emotional regulation and recovery. Study One therefore provides a contextual foundation for the qualitative analyses that follow, which explore how these resources are experienced, activated, and constrained in practice.

STUDY TWO – SPECIAL SCHOOL STAFF WELLBEING QUESTIONNAIRE

Overview

Study Two extends the quantitative foundation by examining the experiences of 37 staff who completed the bespoke Special School Staff Wellbeing Questionnaire (see Appendix D). The tool explored stress in role, spillover into home life, coping strategies, nature-based wellbeing, workplace pressures and the supportiveness of different resources. Importantly, this dataset reflects staff experiences *in their own words*, bridging the gap between numerical indicators and lived reality. The patterns identified closely mirror those found in

broader educational wellbeing literature but grounded in the distinctive emotional landscape of a special-school environment.

1. Stress in Role

Participants reported a wide range of stress levels, often emphasising the variability of special-school work. *“Some weeks I can cope fine, but others feel overwhelming depending on behaviours and staffing,”* one teacher wrote. This variability aligns with evidence that special-school contexts amplify emotional labour, particularly where behavioural complexity, sensory regulation needs and safeguarding concerns intersect.

The finding that stress “varies” is analytically significant: it reflects how wellbeing is marked by fluctuations, shaped by staffing levels, pupil dynamics, term-time pressures and the emotional climate of particular days. Rather than depicting stress as constant or static, participants highlight its rhythmic quality.

2. Impact of School Stress on Personal Wellbeing

Most staff reported that school-related stress spilled over into home life. This aligns with Work–Family Border Theory (Clark, 2000), which explains how emotionally charged or high-demand work erodes boundaries. Participants described carrying the emotional residue of challenging days into the evening:

- *“If it’s been a tough day, I carry it home with me — I can feel it in my mood.”*
- *“I try really hard to switch off, but safeguarding worries don’t just vanish at 3:30.”*

These accounts reflect the moral weight of special-school roles. Staff support some of the most vulnerable pupils, and this responsibility often lingers emotionally, especially when behaviour incidents, distress or safeguarding concerns remain unresolved.

3. Ability to Separate Work and Home

Despite the spillover described above, many participants reported they could “often” or “always” separate work and home — but only under certain conditions. This points to the conscious application of boundary management. As one participant explained, *“I can switch off most days, unless something big has happened.”* Those who struggled often referenced staffing shortages, behaviour-related incidents, or paperwork that intruded into personal time.

This highlights the central JD-R dynamic: staff with more resources (supportive colleagues, experience, recovery time) can maintain boundaries more easily, while those with higher demands may struggle even with strong personal coping strategies.

4. Personal-Life Stress

Participants generally reported lower personal-life stress compared with work stress. Many described home as “manageable” or “less stressful than work,” indicating that school-based pressures were the primary contributor to cumulative strain. This mirrors research showing that the emotional and organisational demands of teaching, particularly in specialist settings, are unusually high.

5. Coping Resources Available

Most staff said they had access to coping strategies, but many admitted they “forget to use them when stressed.” This gap between knowledge and action is widely documented in workplace stress research, where high cognitive load under high demand makes it harder to activate coping resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Participants described using strategies such as walking, time outdoors, breathing techniques, or talking to others — but emphasised the challenge of remembering or prioritising them when needed most. This finding recurs across later datasets, especially in the winter and walking studies.

6. Quality of Strategies Used

Most participants reported primarily adaptive coping practices (exercise, nature-based activity, social connection, creative hobbies). A minority referenced maladaptive strategies, including avoidance or emotional eating. These patterns fit broader findings that chronic workplace stress can push individuals toward less helpful strategies when demands exceed capacity.

7. Awareness That Nature Supports Wellbeing

Nearly all staff reported awareness that nature benefits their wellbeing. Comments such as “*Being outside resets me — even five minutes helps*” resonate strongly with themes later explored in Studies Three, Four and Five. This suggests a preference for nature-based wellbeing practices, even among those who may struggle to implement them during busy periods.

8. Interest in Exploring Healthier Options

The vast majority of participants expressed an interest or openness to trying new wellbeing approaches. This highlights a workforce that is not resistant to wellbeing initiatives but often constrained by time, energy and structural pressures. Low-barrier, relational and embedded approaches, such as outdoor micro-breaks or predictable weekly walks are therefore especially promising.

9. Helpfulness of Support Sources

Informal support (family, friends, trusted colleagues) was rated more helpful than formal services. As one participant wrote, *“Talking to colleagues who understand the day helps more than anything.”* Staff described Occupational Health or GP services as slower, less personal or reactive. This points to the importance of peer relationships and everyday collegiality in buffering strain. With staff cover and high financial implications associated with support services such as Occupational Health sessions, it is of particular interest that these are less helpful than the relational aspects of support.

10. Helpfulness of Activities

Participants valued activities involving movement, nature, creativity and relational connection. Structured or clinical activities (yoga, counselling, mentoring) were helpful for some but felt too effortful or formal for others. This mirrors evidence that wellbeing supports are most effective when aligned with staff culture, accessible in time and energy, and easily integrated into everyday life.

11. Workplace Stressors

The most frequently cited workplace stressor was inconsistent staffing, followed by workload and pupil behaviour. Staff also highlighted the emotional weight of supporting pupils with complex needs. One participant wrote, *“Some days you hold so much for the children, and it stays with you afterwards.”* This captures the deep relational commitment that characterises special-school work — and the powerful emotional demands it generates.

Mini-Summary: Study Two

Study Two paints a multi-layered picture of staff wellbeing: stress is significant and variable; emotional spillover into home life is common; boundary management is active and effortful; and informal support is crucial. Staff show strong awareness of nature’s benefits and willingness to explore new strategies but face structural and emotional barriers to activating

them consistently. The themes here are: emotional load, episodic strain, nature as resource and relational buffering, which echo and deepen across subsequent datasets.

STUDY THREE – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Overview

Study Three provides a rich qualitative depth in the dataset, drawing on semi-structured group interviews with 26 staff across teachers, teaching assistants, senior leaders, and administrative colleagues. Semi-structured interviews enable both consistent thematic anchoring and the emergence of unanticipated insights, offering a balance between structure and openness. This aligns with established principles of qualitative credibility, where multiple perspectives strengthen thematic robustness (Magdali & Berler, 2020). The interviews revealed emotionally honest accounts of how staff navigate stress, connection, role expectations, and restorative practices within and beyond the school environment.

1. Nature in Wellbeing

Across all groups, nature emerged as a central wellbeing resource. Participants described woodland paths, riversides, beaches, and open skies as spaces that offered calm, grounding, and emotional regulation. One member of staff described this vividly: *“When I walk by the river, I can feel my whole body settling.”* Another noted, *“The woods slow my mind down. It’s the only place I don’t feel overstimulated.”*

These accounts illustrate nature not as a passive background but as an active co-regulator—something that helps settle the body and mind after highly stimulating school days. Participants often described their connection to nature in sensory terms: the sound of leaves, the rhythm of waves, the quality of light, the feeling of fresh air. These sensory cues created what many called “space to breathe,” an important theme throughout the dataset.

Blue spaces drew particularly strong emotional responses. Several participants described the sea or rivers as having immediate calming effects: *“Water resets me instantly.”* These descriptions reflect how the movement, sound, and expansiveness of water provide a kind of psychological “clearing,” giving staff perspective after difficult days.

2. Childhood Outdoor Experiences

A particularly interesting cross-cutting theme was the deep, often emotional, connection between outdoor childhood experiences and adult coping practices. Staff recalled climbing trees, playing in fields, swimming in rivers, and building dens with family or friends. These memories carried warmth, nostalgia, and a sense of freedom, and brought smiles and signs of joy to the faces of the participants as they recalled their childhood experiences.

One teaching assistant reflected, *“My happiest memories are being outside all summer... I think that’s why I go straight to nature when I’m stressed now.”* The ease with which participants connected their current wellbeing habits to these formative experiences suggests an embodied continuity: that their early sensory, relational, and emotional experiences appeared to shape current approaches to how they seek restoration and calm.

This pattern aligns with the broader principle that qualitative insights gain depth when multiple data sources converge on the same idea: here, memories, emotions, bodily experiences, and present-day practices collectively reinforce the meaning of nature in adult coping.

3. Self-Regulation Through Nature

Participants described nature as an active self-regulation strategy that helped them recover from emotional labour and cognitive overload. Staff spoke about walking, cycling, or simply standing outside to “reset,” “clear the mind,” or “let go of the day.”

One teacher shared, *“If I’ve had a difficult shift, I head straight to the coast — the waves are like a release valve.”*

Several participants emphasised that nature-based regulation was multi-modal:

- physical movement
- sensory grounding
- quiet or spaciousness
- opportunities for solitude
- the embodied rhythm of walking

These practices helped staff transition from “school mode”, often described as fast-paced, reactive, and emotionally charged, into a calmer, more centred state.

Self-regulation here is not represented as a luxury but a necessity, something that helps staff maintain emotional safety for themselves and others. This kind of emotional restoration is especially important in high-demand environments where role expectations require attentiveness, empathy, and rapid decision-making.

4. Relational Safety and Social Wellbeing

A powerful theme was relational safety—the sense of being with people who understand, accept, and support you. Staff repeatedly described wellbeing as a relational rather than purely individual process. Nature served as a backdrop that softened interactions and made reflective or personal conversations feel easier.

One participant shared, *“I open up more when we’re walking. It feels easier to talk.”*

Walking side-by-side, rather than face-to-face, reduced social intensity, allowing deeper disclosures or lighter conversations as needed. Staff described woodland or coastal settings as “level”, “neutral”, and “non-judgemental” spaces where hierarchy faded and collegiality strengthened.

This resonates with a key feature of triangulated qualitative research: when interviews, observations, and participant reflections independently point to the same relational phenomena, their credibility increases.

Many staff also expressed that conversations outdoors felt “more real,” “less pressured,” or “more human” compared with classroom or staff-room interactions governed by time constraints, noise, or professional demands.

5. Emotional Demands and Role Differences

Interviews revealed notable differences in emotional load across roles. Teachers described carrying responsibility for planning, safeguarding, behaviour management, and communication with families. They often spoke of emotional experiences “sticking” to them long after the school day ended. One teacher reflected, *“I hold so much for the kids. It follows me home, even when I don’t want it to.”*

Teaching assistants described strong relational fulfilment but also the emotional intensity of supporting pupils with complex needs. Some noted that although they were not responsible for the same quantity of paperwork or high-level decisions, the daily emotional proximity to distressed or dysregulated children was exhausting.

Senior leaders, while describing clear stressors related to accountability and decision-making, often articulated more deliberate boundary-setting — though the very small sample requires caution.

Across roles, nature emerged as a resource that helped staff redistribute emotional weight. Teachers especially framed nature-based coping as “essential,” “non-negotiable,” or “the only thing that stops the day coming home with me.”

6. Methodological Reflexivity

The semi-structured interviews were particularly vital for raising these emotional and sensory themes. Their open format allowed participants to move fluidly between present experiences, childhood memories, workplace pressures, and embodied practices. This depth exemplifies the value of qualitative triangulation, which integrates multiple perspectives to build a more holistic interpretation of complex phenomena.

Themes such as sensory noticing, blue-space affinity, relational safety, and nature-based coping were not fully anticipated at the outset; they emerged because the interview method allowed participants to guide the direction of meaning-making.

Mini-Summary of Study Three

Study Three demonstrates that nature, especially water and woodland environments, plays a vital role in staff wellbeing by supporting emotional regulation, sensory restoration, and reflective transition. Childhood experiences shape adult coping preferences, and relational safety enhances wellbeing in outdoor spaces. Role differences in emotional load are evident, with teachers carrying significant cumulative responsibility. Semi-structured interviews were crucial in revealing these nuanced and emotionally rich insights.

STUDY FOUR – WINTER WELLBEING

Overview

Study Four examines staff engagement with nature during the winter break, following a distributed two-week “Winter Wellbeing Activity Calendar”. Forty staff completed the follow-up questionnaire (see Appendix E), offering insight into how seasonal environments shape wellbeing practices. Winter allows for both opportunities (quiet, crisp sensory landscapes), and obstacles (weather, daylight, safety concerns). Understanding these

patterns helps contextualise when and how staff can realistically activate nature-based recovery or implement proactive nature-based approaches to wellbeing.

1. Engagement Patterns

Engagement in natural environments during the winter break varied across roles and personal circumstances. Teaching assistants tended to engage most consistently; teachers and senior leaders showed more polarisation, with some engaging daily and others not at all due to workload carryover, family commitments, or mobility and weather concerns.

One SLT member explained, *“I love walking, but icy paths make me nervous — so I did less this year.”*

Winter conditions shaped not only whether staff chose to go outdoors, but also which environments they felt confident accessing. These seasonal shifts illustrated how environmental factors influence everyday wellbeing choices and why it is helpful to look at behaviours across different contexts, and how external factors and changing conditions can affect people’s decisions.

2. Sensory Noticing and Presence

A dominant theme was sensory noticing - the colours, sounds, textures, and air quality of winter landscapes. Staff described noticing:

- “the crisp air and frost making everything feel fresh”
- “the quiet of winter birds”
- “the sharpness of morning light”

Participants who reported greater sensory awareness also described stronger emotional benefits. Winter environments appeared to heighten clarity and support attention away from mental clutter and rumination.

Sensory noticing acted as a grounding practice, helping staff inhabit the present moment and distance themselves from accumulated term-time stress.

3. Emotional Outcomes

Across all levels of engagement, whether it be daily, frequent, or occasional, staff reported emotional uplift, feelings of calm, clearer thinking, and psychological reset. One teacher wrote, *“Being outdoors helped me draw a line under the term. I could breathe again.”*

These accounts demonstrate that even brief or infrequent winter nature engagement can support psychological recovery. Staff described shifts from “tightness” to “release,” from “noise” to “quiet,” from “cluttered thoughts” to “space.”

Several staff also described winter blue-space experiences, noting that the sound of waves or flowing rivers felt particularly regulating during this season.

4. Blue Space Experiences

Although the questionnaire did not explicitly prompt blue-space discussion, several participants described visiting beaches, rivers, or lakes. Comments such as *“The waves clear my head instantly”* highlight the strong restorative effect of water, even in colder months.

For some, winter blue spaces were preferred because they were quieter, emptier, and felt “cleaner” or “more spacious.” These reflections align with broader patterns in Studies Three and Five: water carries symbolic clarity and provides strong sensory cues that support emotional release.

5. Social Context and Interpersonal Wellbeing

Participants described enhanced wellbeing when engaging in winter walks with colleagues, family, or pets. Social connection appeared to amplify the emotional benefits of natural environments, helping staff feel more grounded, less isolated, and more positive.

One TA shared, *“Walking with colleagues felt different to seeing them in school. Everyone’s more relaxed outside.”*

Outdoor environments offered low-pressure opportunities for connection compared with busy indoor settings. The relational dimension was especially important for staff who reported loneliness, exhaustion, or emotional carryover at the end of term.

6. Physical and Sensory Restoration

Many staff described physical restoration, including improved sleep, reduced tension, increased energy, and a sense of bodily “lightness.” Sensory elements, such as cool air, winter light, atmospheric quiet, were repeatedly linked to these restorative effects.

Engagement with winter nature appeared to support embodied recovery, not only emotional or cognitive reset. Participants described their bodies relaxing, breathing deepening, and tension dissipating during or after time outdoors.

7. Barriers to Engagement

Despite the benefits, staff identified several barriers:

- weather and icy paths
- reduced daylight hours
- time constraints
- caring responsibilities
- mobility challenges
- emotional exhaustion after term

Sadly, one participant said, *“I wanted to go out more, but I felt too drained after the term.”*

These barriers point to structural and seasonal limitations, reinforcing that wellbeing activities must be accessible, low-demand, and adaptable to individual situations.

Mini-Summary of Study Four

Study Four shows that winter nature engagement, however brief, supports emotional, sensory, and physical restoration. Staff valued quietness, crisp air, blue-space experiences, and opportunities for connection. Seasonal barriers remind us that wellbeing opportunities must be flexible and realistic, especially in demanding school periods.

STUDY FIVE AND STUDY SIX – WEEKLY WELLBEING WALKS AND POST STUDY QUESTIONNAIRES - AN INTEGRATED NARRATIVE

While Studies One to Four mapped the broader landscape of stress, resilience, nature engagement and seasonal rhythms across the school year, an integrative synthesis of Studies Five and Six draws on post-study questionnaires (see Appendices F,G and H) and reflective responses to illuminate what happens when staff step into spaces intentionally created for wellbeing: weekly nature-based walks, reflective dialogue, or the combination of both. These studies reveal not only the benefits of these practices but also the emotional differences, social dynamics and personal shifts they supported. In doing so, they bring the Findings chapter full circle, from broad patterns to lived experience, and finally to integrated meaning-making.

1. The Walks as Lived Experience Rather Than an Intervention

Across both datasets, the wellbeing walks were not experienced as a programme or a health activity, but as a small pocket of humanity carved into the school week. Participants repeatedly described the walks as a threshold space: a crossing point between the compressed emotional demands of the school day and the quieter, more spacious rhythm of the outdoors. What made these walks distinctive was not their structure but their informality, the ease with which colleagues slipped into conversation, the way nature softened the edges of difficult days, and the sense of being temporarily relieved from responsibility.

For many, the walks disrupted the automatic carry-over of stress into the evening. Staff described how sound, movement and sensory noticing created a “letting go” effect that was less about solving problems and more about releasing them. This embodied transition was often described in micro-shifts: breath deepening, shoulders lowering, thoughts slowing, mood lightening. These accounts reflect the lived experience of physiological decompression rather than intellectual reflection - a shift felt before it was thought about.

The physical environment mattered: woods after rain, shifting winter light, the smell of soil or coastline, the muted rustle of trees. Staff drew on these sensory anchors to describe the experience of “coming back to myself.” These descriptions framed nature as an active participant in their wellbeing rather than a passive backdrop.

What is particularly striking is the ordinariness of the walks. Participants did not describe transformative epiphanies; instead, they emphasised relief, steadiness, companionable silence, and the emotional permission to arrive exactly as they were. These everyday qualities appeared to make the walks sustainable and emotionally safe.

2. Social Connection as a Gentle, Emergent Process

Both studies highlight the subtle social dynamics of the walks. The shifting of social positions, no desks, no hierarchy, no time-pressured agendas, allowed participants to meet as people rather than roles. Side-by-side walking facilitated conversations that were easier, lighter and more honest. Staff who rarely spoke during the busy school day found themselves learning about one another’s families, childhoods, humour and interests.

Participants repeatedly described the relief of social interaction without performance: connection without needing to be ‘on,’ humour without forced positivity, companionship without emotional labour. Conversations had a natural rhythm, drifting between playful, mundane, reflective and supportive.

One notable pattern was the blending of work talk and non-work talk. Staff often avoided heavy school-related topics, but when they did arise, they were held differently, with more perspective, more spaciousness, and less emotional charge. The setting enabled thinking-through rather than worrying-through. This testament to the interplay of environment and cognition shows how the natural world shaped not only emotion but also the tone and texture of professional reflection.

3. Reflective Dialogue as a Parallel Wellbeing Mechanism

The interview-only participants in Study Six revealed that reflective dialogue itself offered emotional clarity, validation and a sense of being seen and heard. Talking about stress, nature and coping in a protected space prompted new awareness: recognising patterns, naming pressures, noticing where boundaries had eroded, or realising that nature already played a key role in their regulation.

Many staff described these moments as unexpectedly important. The act of articulating experience allowed them to see their own wellbeing with fresh eyes. For some, this led to small but meaningful shifts: going outdoors more intentionally, paying attention to sensory cues, or giving themselves permission to prioritise rest. These changes were not dramatic; they were gentle recalibrations arising from feeling heard.

Reflective dialogue provided a rare moment of pause in the school day: a space where staff could place their experiences under soft but deliberate attention. The emotional tone of these reflections echoed the tone of the walks: steady, honest, unhurried.

4. The Combined Pathway: When Reflection Meets Embodied Practice

The most compelling patterns emerged among those who participated in both the interviews and the walks. For these staff, reflection did not remain abstract, it became something they could act on, feel, test, and recalibrate through embodied experience in nature.

This created an additive effect across three domains:

A. Cognitive Insight + Embodied Reset

Participants described a sequencing pattern: reflection helped them notice what they needed, and the walk allowed the body to catch up with the mind. Insights gained in the interview became more grounded and more lived through walking.

B. Heightened Nature Awareness

After reflecting in interviews, participants found themselves noticing nature more richly: textures, shifts in light, small details. This heightened noticing appeared to amplify the restorative effects of the walks.

C. Deepened Social Belonging

Reflection brought clarity; walking brought connection. Together, they helped staff feel more embedded in their teams, more understood, and less isolated in their private experiences of stress.

This combined pathway appeared to support the most sustained shifts in mood, awareness and relational confidence.

5. Barriers and Inequities of Access

Across Studies Five and Six, barriers also formed a consistent theme: workload, fatigue, weather, staffing shortages, mobility issues, emotional depletion and competing commitments. These barriers were not incidental; they were structural. Staff who might have benefitted most may have been the least able to attend. This highlights a recurring tension across the Findings chapter: wellbeing opportunities are valuable, but access to them can be uneven: shaped by time, pressure, health, energy, external and family pressures and role expectations.

Participants were aware of this inequity. Several expressed disappointments that they could not “make it work,” while others described feeling torn between self-care and professional responsibility. These patterns underscore the need for systemic support rather than relying solely on individual capacity.

6. Integrative Interpretation Across Both Studies

Together, Studies Five and Six reveal that:

- Nature supports emotional release, clarity and physiological settling.
- Social connection becomes easier and more genuine in low-pressure outdoor contexts.
- Reflection enhances self-awareness and intentionality.
- When reflection and nature combine, wellbeing benefits deepen and become more embodied.

- Access is uneven, shaped by workload, energy, and structural constraints.

Across the entire Findings chapter, these final datasets offer a grounded, relational conclusion: that wellbeing in this school is not simply about reducing stress, but about creating spaces (physical, emotional, relational and cognitive), where staff can breathe, connect, and notice themselves anew.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how nature-connected and relational practices support staff wellbeing within the distinctive context of a special school. The findings indicate that informal, low-intensity outdoor experiences—such as brief wellbeing walks, reflective conversations, and everyday engagement with blue and green spaces—may offer meaningful emotional regulation, relational connection, and restorative relief for staff working in high-pressure environments. Across datasets, staff consistently valued accessible, autonomy-driven approaches that aligned with their personal coping preferences and relational needs.

Quantitative patterns from the NR-6 wellbeing study showed that teachers reported the highest stress levels, reflecting wider sector evidence of significant workload-related strain. Nature-relatedness remained relatively stable across roles, and the weak association between stress and nature-related resources aligns with the contemporary resilience theory, which conceptualises adaptive capacity as distinct from stress exposure rather than its inverse. Participation in wellbeing activities, including nature-based components, correlated with stronger nature relatedness (a potential wellbeing resource) and slightly lower stress, although these associations could reflect self-selection rather than any causal effect. These patterns nonetheless raise the possibility that regular engagement in supportive, meaningful activities may help staff maintain emotional balance.

Qualitative findings enriched this picture by illustrating how nature—particularly blue and green spaces—functioned as a consistent source of calm, clarity, and emotional grounding. Staff frequently linked these experiences to early-life outdoor memories, suggesting that nature may serve both as an immediate regulator and as a long-standing coping template. Outdoor environments also facilitated relational connection: they provided a calmer context for reflective dialogue, strengthened interpersonal trust, and enabled staff to decompress after demanding school days. Weekly wellbeing walks were especially valued for their combination of movement, connection, and shared discovery.

Differences between SLT and teachers were notable. SLT members described more habitual, proactive engagement with nature as a strategy for maintaining perspective and regulating stress. While causal conclusions cannot be drawn, these patterns could indicate

that sustained, self-directed nature engagement may support leaders' emotional capacity and reflective functioning.

Findings from the Winter Wellbeing Questionnaire reinforced nature's restorative value. Across roles, staff reported improved clarity, mood, calmness, and relaxation after even short periods outdoors. Social context amplified these effects, particularly when time outside was shared with pets, colleagues, or family.

This study makes three key contributions to existing knowledge. First, it brings forward the often-overlooked wellbeing experiences of special-school staff, showing how relational and nature-connected practices operate within a uniquely complex educational environment. Second, it offers new empirical insight into the value of low-intensity, everyday outdoor experiences as accessible forms of emotional regulation and relational connection, extending current wellbeing literature that tends to focus on more formal or clinical interventions. Third, the study raises the possibility that sustained, self-directed nature engagement may support aspects of emotional capacity—particularly for school leaders—while highlighting the central role of psychologically safe, relational cultures in shaping staff wellbeing. Together, these contributions nuance existing understandings by emphasising autonomy, relationality, and context-specific pressures within special-school settings.

Taken together, the datasets suggest a multidimensional model of staff wellbeing in which nature, relationships, role demands, and personal coping practices interact dynamically. Staff consistently valued informal, relational, and accessible supports involving creativity, movement, connection, and outdoor time. More formal routes such as Occupational Health and GP services were rated less positively. A small group using limited or unhealthy coping strategies highlights the need for practical, targeted interventions that do not rely solely on clinical pathways.

At an organisational level, systemic pressures such as workload, staffing stability, and timetable intensity require continued attention. Teachers may benefit from role-specific adjustments such as clearer workload expectations, equitable cover, increased planning time, and dedicated decompression spaces. Ensuring flexibility and autonomy is crucial: mandatory wellbeing risks becoming burdensome, whereas diverse, adaptive options accommodate varied needs and responsibilities.

Interpretation of these findings is constrained by the small, self-selecting sample, reliance on self-report measures, and the seasonal timing of data collection, which may have shaped participants' experiences of outdoor environments. The exploratory design limits

generalisability, and the study cannot determine causal pathways between nature engagement, stress, and resilience.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs to examine potential causal mechanisms, including how nature-connected practices influence emotional regulation over time. Comparative studies across different special-school types, mainstream settings, and early-career teachers could illuminate role-specific pressures and coping patterns. Further exploration of variables such as leadership identity, organisational culture, and the mechanisms linking early-life nature memories to adult coping would deepen understanding of the relational and developmental dimensions identified here.

In closing, the study returns to where it began: with the quiet, relational, and nature-connected moments that help staff breathe, connect, and endure—and which may yet guide the development of more restorative special-school environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: PG2 Ethics Form

Appendix B: Outdoor wellbeing Study Interest Form

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Appendix D: Special School Staff Questionnaire

Appendix E: Winter Wellbeing Questionnaire

Appendix F: Post Study Interview Participant Questionnaire

Appendix G: Post Study Walk Questionnaire

Appendix H: Post Walk and Interview Questionnaire

Appendix I: Letter of Approval from Employer (Chair of Governors)

Appendix J: PowerPoint Presentation

Appendix A - PG2 Ethics Form

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

RESEARCH STUDENTS

This form is to be completed by the student within **SIX** months for full-time students and **TWELVE** months for part time students, after the commencement of the research degree or following progression to Part Two of your course.

Once complete, submit this form via the **MyTSD Doctoral College Portal** at (<https://mytsd.uwtsd.ac.uk>).

This document is also available in Welsh.

RESEARCH STAFF ONLY

All communications relating to this application during its processing must be in writing and emailed to pgresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk , with the title 'Ethical Approval' followed by your name.

STUDENTS ON UNDERGRADUATE OR TAUGHT MASTERS PROGRAMMES should submit this form (and receive the outcome) via systems explained to you by the supervisor/module leader.

In order for research to result in benefit and minimise risk of harm, it must be conducted ethically. A researcher may not be covered by the University's insurance if ethical approval has not been obtained prior to commencement.

The University follows the OECD Frascati manual definition of **research activity**: "creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications". As such this covers activities undertaken by members of staff, postgraduate research students, and both taught postgraduate and undergraduate students working on dissertations/projects.

The individual undertaking the research activity is known as the "principal researcher".

Ethical approval is not required for routine audits, performance reviews, quality assurance studies, testing within normal educational requirements, and literary or artistic criticism.

Please read the notes for guidance before completing ALL sections of the form.

This form must be completed and approved prior to undertaking any research activity. Please see Checklist for details of process for different categories of application.

SECTION A: About You (Principal Researcher)

1	Full Name:	CERI HOPKINS
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2	Tick all boxes that apply:		Member of staff:	☐	Honorary research fellow:	☐
	Undergraduate Student	☐	Taught Postgraduate Student	☐	Postgraduate Research Student	☒

3	Institute/Academic Discipline/Centre:	UWTSD
4	Campus:	CARMARTHEN
5	E-mail address:	2431376@student.uwtsd.ac.uk
6	Contact Telephone Number:	07825778509
For students:		
7	Student Number:	2431376
8	Programme of Study:	MA in Professional Practice Institute of Management and Health Work based learning project
9	Director of Studies/Supervisor:	Sarah Loxdale and Lowri Harris

SECTION B: Approval for Research Activity

1	Has the research activity received approval in principle? (please check the Guidance Notes as to the appropriate approval process for different levels of research by different categories of individual)	YES	☐	NO	☒
					Date
2	If Yes, please indicate source of approval (and date where known):	Research Degrees Committee	☐		
		Institute Research Committee	☐		

	Approval in principle must be obtained from the relevant source prior to seeking ethical approval	Other (write in)	☐	
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SECTION C: Internal and External Ethical Guidance Materials

	Please list the core ethical guidance documents that have been referred to during the completion of this form (including any discipline-specific codes of research ethics, location-specific codes of research ethics, and also any specific ethical guidance relating to the proposed methodology). Please tick to confirm that your research proposal adheres to these codes and guidelines. You may add rows to this table if needed.			
1	<u>UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice</u>		☒	
2	UWTSD Research Data Management Policy		☒	
3	<i>[List any other relevant documents here]</i>		☐	

SECTION D: External Collaborative Research Activity

If there are external collaborators then you should gain consent from the contact persons to share their personal data with the university. If there are no external collaborators then leave this section blank and continue to section E.

1	Institution	N/A				
2	Contact person name					
3	Contact person e-mail address					
4	Is your research externally funded?	YES	☐	NO	☐	
5	Are you in receipt of a KESS scholarship?	YES	☐	NO	☒	
6	Are you specifically employed to undertake this research in either a paid or voluntary capacity?	Voluntary	YES	☐	NO	☒
7		Employed	YES	☐	NO	☒
8	Is the research being undertaken within an existing UWTSD Athrofa Professional Learning Partnership (APLP)?	If YES then the permission question below does not need to be answered.	YES	☐	NO	☒
9	Has permission to undertake the research has been provided by the partner organisation?	(If YES attach copy) If NO the application	YES	☒	NO	☐

		cannot continue				
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Where research activity is carried out in collaboration with an external organisation

10	Does this organisation have its own ethics approval system?	YES	☐	NO	☒
	If Yes, please attach a copy of any final approval (or interim approval) from the organisation (this may be a copy of an email if appropriate).				

SECTION E: Details of Research Activity

1	Indicative title:	Does the establishment of an outdoor based wellbeing community have a positive impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of staff in a special school setting?			
2	Proposed start date:	February 2025	Proposed end date:	July 2025	
	Introduction to the Research (maximum 300 words per section) Ensure that you write for a <u>Non-Specialist Audience</u> when outlining your response to the points below: <i>Purpose of Research Activity</i> <i>Proposed Research Question</i> <i>Aims of Research Activity</i> <i>Objectives of Research Activity</i> Demonstrate, briefly, how <u>Existing Research</u> has informed the proposed activity and explain <i>What the research activity will add to the body of knowledge</i> <i>How it addresses an area of importance.</i>				
3	Purpose of Research Activity My workplace is a school with a high staff-to-pupil ratio due to the complex learning, communication, behavioral, and care needs of the pupils. The demanding nature of staff roles, combined with external pressures such as societal, familial, and financial stress, has increasingly affected staff health and well-being. Staff absenteeism is a concern, as pupils in this setting require familiarity, routine, trusting relationships, and consistency. Staff changes can negatively impact learners' well-being and engagement. The smooth and effective functioning of a special education setting				

	depends on staff who are happy, healthy, and resilient, enabling them to fulfill their roles with patience and positivity. Maintaining low levels of absenteeism and promoting high levels of well-being are essential to achieving this. This research aims to explore strategies to enhance staff well-being, foster a sense of community, and improve overall health. Specifically, it will investigate whether introducing nature-based and outdoor-inspired group activities can contribute to reducing absenteeism and increasing staff well-being, ultimately benefiting both staff and pupils. (this box should expand as you type)
4	Research Question What impact does participation in nature-based and outdoor group activities have on staff well-being, sense of community, and absenteeism in a special education school setting? (this box should expand as you type)
5	Aims of Research Activity This research aims to explore the impact of establishing an outdoor and nature-inspired community on staff well-being and absenteeism in a special education setting. Specifically, the study seeks to: 1. Examine the impact of nature-based activities and social outdoor communities on staff well-being, stress management and absenteeism. 2. Evaluate the effectiveness of well-being strategies, including toolkits and workplace culture initiatives, in developing sustainable, positive staff well-being. By understanding these dynamics, the research aims to provide insights into how nature-inspired interventions can enhance workplace resilience and staff retention. (this box should expand as you type)
6	Objectives of Research Activity The primary goal of this research is to cultivate a happier, healthier, and more consistently present team of staff who can provide the best possible learning experiences for students. Specifically, this study aims to:

	1. Enhance my personal research skills to effectively analyse and implement well-being strategies. 2. Investigate well-being approaches in education settings at local, national, and international levels to identify best practices. 3. Design and implement a nature-based intervention to enhance workplace well-being in my current education setting. 4. Measure staff stress levels and wellbeing prior to, during and after participation in the community activities using qualitative data from semi- structured interviews, validated scales such as the Perceived Stress Scale https://www.bemindfulonline.com/test-your-stress and a bespoke questionnaire on wellbeing. 5. Demonstrate if the strategies, initiatives and activities had a positive impact on staff wellbeing. 6. Evaluate which strategies positively influence staff well-being. By achieving these objectives, the research will inform the development of effective well-being initiatives within the workplace. (this box should expand as you type)
	Proposed methods (maximum 600 words) Provide a brief summary of all the methods that may be used in the research activity, making it clear what specific techniques may be used. If methods other than those listed in this section are deemed appropriate later, additional ethical approval for those methods will be needed. You do not need to justify the methods here, but should instead describe how you intend to collect the data necessary for you to complete your project.
	This work-based learning project will adopt a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to develop a comprehensive understanding of staff well-being and absenteeism. This methodological triangulation will enhance the validity and reliability of the findings by capturing both statistical trends and rich experiential data. Interviews – Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with staff members, either individually or in focus groups, depending on participant availability and suitability. These interviews will explore employees' lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of well-being before, during, and after the intervention. The flexible format will allow for deeper exploration of emergent themes while ensuring that diverse perspectives are captured. Questionnaires – Structured, closed-ended questionnaires will be distributed to collect quantitative data on staff well-being, engagement with nature-inspired activities, and absenteeism trends. A follow-up survey will be administered towards the end of

	the project to measure changes over time, enabling a comparative analysis of well-being indicators and potential improvements resulting from the intervention. Data Analysis – A systematic examination of multiple data sources will be undertaken, including attendance records, responses from the structured questionnaires, and transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis will be employed to interpret qualitative data, while statistical methods will be used to analyse quantitative data, ensuring a rigorous evaluation of patterns and correlations. This dual approach will strengthen the depth and breadth of the study's conclusions. This research is informed by a subjectivist ontological stance and an interpretivist epistemological perspective. By adopting a compassionate minds approach to interpreting participants' dialogue, behaviors, and workplace interactions, this study acknowledges the socially constructed nature of reality and the role of individual experiences in shaping perceptions of well-being. Given that the workplace is inherently person-centered, community-driven, and committed to flexibility and support, it is crucial to integrate stakeholders' voices into the research process. While the primary methodological orientation aligns with interpretivism, there is recognition that, in certain aspects, an objectivist or positivist approach may be necessary—particularly when analysing quantitative data and attendance records. Therefore, the study embraces methodological pluralism, ensuring that the research is both empirically grounded and sensitive to the complexities of human experience. This multi-faceted approach will provide a well-rounded understanding of staff well-being and absenteeism, ensuring that findings are both data-driven and reflective of personal staff experiences. (this box should expand as you type)
	Location of research activity Identify all locations where research activity will take place.
8	The research will take place primarily within the school setting, where staff well-being and absenteeism are being studied. Additionally, outdoor activities will be conducted in various natural environments, including: • Local beaches • Woodlands • Parks • Coastal areas These locations have been chosen to explore the impact of nature-based activities on staff well-being in diverse outdoor settings. The activities that will take place at these locations will include:

	• Mindful walking • Panoramic viewing • Simple breathwork techniques such as 'box breathing' • Walking amongst trees and near water at green and blue spaces • Grounding selves by walking barefoot where safe and appropriate • Talking with friends (this box should expand as you type)
	Research activity outside of the UK If research activity will take place overseas, you are responsible for ensuring that local ethical considerations are complied with and that the relevant permissions are sought. Specify any local guidelines (e.g. from local professional associations/learned societies/universities) that exist and whether these involve any ethical stipulations beyond those usual in the UK (provide details of any licenses or permissions required). Also specify whether there are any specific ethical issues raised by the local context in which the research activity is taking place, for example, particular cultural and/or legal sensitivities or vulnerabilities of participants. If you live in the country where you will do the research then please state this.
9	N/A (this box should expand as you type)

10	Use of documentation not in the public domain: Are any documents NOT publicly available?	NO	☐
		YES	☒
11	If Yes, please provide details here of how you will gain access to specific documentation that is not in the public domain and that this is in accordance with the current data protection law of the country in question and that of England and Wales. I will obtain anonymised attendance percentage data from school records to analyse absenteeism rates before, during, and after the interventions. Both the data and the study setting will remain anonymised to ensure that individual staff members cannot be identified. (this box should expand as you type)		

	Does your research relate to one or more of the seven aims of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015?	YES	NO
12	A prosperous Wales	☐	☒
13	A resilient Wales	☐	☒
14	A healthier Wales	☒	☐

15	A more equal Wales	☒	☐
16	A Wales of cohesive communities	☒	☐
17	A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	☒	☐
18	A globally responsible Wales	☒	☐
19	If YES to any of the above, please give details:		
	Many of the planned activities will be physically engaging, designed to elevate heart rates and enhance participants' mental wellbeing. The participants will be volunteers with diverse levels of physical ability and mental health. All activities will be carefully designed to ensure inclusivity, allowing everyone to participate regardless of their abilities. The formation of the group will foster strong connections among participants and extend to wider communities through shared interests and goals. By using local spaces for these activities, we will encourage increased recreational, leisure, and sports engagement, while also deepening knowledge of the area's heritage and culture. This will happen naturally through mindful interactions and conversations sparked by the environments. Ultimately, the goal is for participation in these activities to contribute to the overall physical and mental health of the participants. (this box should expand as you type)		

SECTION F: Scope of Research Activity

	Will the research activity include:	YES	NO
1	Use of a questionnaire or similar research instrument?	☒	☐
2	Use of interviews?	☒	☐
3	Use of focus groups?	☒	☐
4	Use of participant diaries?	☐	☒
5	Use of video or audio recording?	☐	☒
6	Use of computer-generated log files?	☒	☐
7	Participant observation with their knowledge?	☐	☒
8	Participant observation without their knowledge?	☐	☒
9	Access to personal or confidential information without the participants' specific consent?	☐	☒
10	Administration of any questions, test stimuli, presentation that may be experienced as physically, mentally or emotionally harmful / offensive?	☐	☒
11	Performance of any acts which may cause embarrassment or affect self-esteem?	☐	☒
12	Investigation of participants involved in illegal activities?	☐	☒
13	Use of procedures that involve deception?	☐	☒

14	Administration of any substance, agent or placebo?	☐	☒
15	Working with live vertebrate animals?	☐	☒
16	Procedures that may have a negative impact on the environment?	☐	☒
17	Other primary data collection methods. Please indicate the type of data collection method(s) below.	☐	☒
	Details of any other primary data collection method: (this box should expand as you type)		

If NO to every question, then the research activity is (ethically) low risk and **may** be exempt from **some** of the following sections (please refer to Guidance Notes).

If YES to any question, then no research activity should be undertaken until full ethical approval has been obtained.

SECTION G: Intended Participants

If there are no participants then do not complete this section, but go directly to section H.

	Who are the intended participants:	YES	NO
1	Students or staff at the University?	☐	☒
2	Adults (over the age of 18 and competent to give consent)?	☒	☐
3	Vulnerable adults?	☐	☒
4	Children and Young People under the age of 18? (Consent from Parent, Carer or Guardian will be required)	☐	☒
5	Prisoners?	☐	☒
6	Young offenders?	☐	☒
7	Those who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator or a gatekeeper?	☐	☒
8	People engaged in illegal activities?	☐	☒
9	Others. Please indicate the participants below, and specifically any group who may be unable to give consent.	☐	☒
	Details of any other participant groups: (this box should expand as you type)		

	Participant numbers and source Provide an estimate of the expected number of participants. How will you identify participants and how will they be recruited?	
10	How many participants are expected?	Predicting 8 to 16. The outcome of the request for volunteers will determine this number. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
11	Who will the participants be?	Staff members of my workplace <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
12	How will you identify the participants?	Volunteers from a proposal shared with all staff <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
13	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	☒	☐	☐
14	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	☒	☐	☐
15	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	☒	☐	☐
16	Will you explain to participants that refusal to participate in the research will not affect their treatment or education (if relevant)?	☒	☐	☐
17	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	☒	☐	☐
18	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	☒	☐	☐
19	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	☒	☐	☐
20	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	☒	☐	☐
21	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation, in a way appropriate to the type of research undertaken?	☒	☐	☐
22	If NO to any of above questions, please give an explanation			
	<i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>			

	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
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24	Will participants be paid?	☐	☒	☐
25	Is specialist electrical or other equipment to be used with participants?	☐	☒	☐
26	Are there any financial or other interests to the investigator or University arising from this study?	☐	☒	☐
27	Will the research activity involve deliberately misleading participants in any way, or the partial or full concealment of the specific study aims?	☐	☒	☐
28	If YES to any question, please provide full details			
<i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>				

SECTION H: Anticipated Risks

Outline any anticipated risks that may adversely affect any of the participants, the researchers and/or the University, and the steps that will be taken to address them. If you have completed a full risk assessment (for example as required by a laboratory, or external research collaborator) you may append that to this form.			
1	Full risk assessment completed and appended?	Yes	☐
		No	☒
2	Risks to participants For example: sector-specific health & safety, emotional distress, financial disclosure, physical harm, transfer of personal data, sensitive organisational information		
	Risk to participants: There is a potential risk of trips or falls during physical activities.	How you will mitigate the risk to participants: A pre-visit risk assessment will be conducted, and dynamic risk assessments will be carried out as needed. First aid kits will be available on-site, and staff health information and emergency contacts will be documented to ensure a prompt response if necessary. If any concerning issues arise, I will inform the staff member of my duty of care and take appropriate action to support their wellbeing. I will also ensure that all safeguarding	

	Discussions about wellbeing and stress may lead to staff disclosing sensitive information that could impact their own wellbeing or that of others. Identification of person's name because of job role or answers for questions. Disclosing information about colleagues Disclosing information about a negative past experience <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	responsibilities are upheld in accordance with relevant policies and procedures. The researcher will redact any names/ specific job roles/ information so that identification is not obvious Proofread the essay to ensure all names/ job roles are not mentioned to give any identification. Seek advice for the GDPR specialist for the organisation for any other considerations. Informing participants that the interview can stop at any time and offer them direction to the organisations well-being service if needed. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
3	If research activity may include sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use) or issues likely to disclose information requiring further action (e.g. criminal activity), give details of the procedures to deal with these issues, including any support/advice (e.g. helpline numbers) to be offered to participants. Note that where applicable, consent procedures should make it clear that if	

	For example: adverse publicity, financial loss, data protection	
	Risk to the University: Data protection Failure to act professionally and ethically <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	<i>How you will mitigate the risk to the University:</i> Use secure servers to store all data and method data 1. Following ethical process of the university and discussion with supervisor from University about research prior to collecting data. 2. Keeping good contact with University Supervisor <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
6	Environmental risks For example: accidental spillage of pollutants, damage to local ecosystems	
	Risk to the environment: Litter dropped. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	<i>How you will mitigate the risk to environment:</i> Ensure participants take all litter home with them. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

	Disclosure and Barring Service			
	If the research activity involves children or vulnerable adults, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate must be obtained before any contact with such participants.	YES	NO	N/A
7	Does your research require you to hold a	☐	☒	☐

	current DBS Certificate?			
8	If YES, please give the certificate number. If the certificate number is not available please write "Pending"; in this case any ethical approval will be subject to providing the appropriate certificate number.			

SECTION I: Feedback, Consent and Confidentiality

1	Feedback What de-briefing and feedback will be provided to participants, how will this be done and when?
	Confidential discussions and sharing of data and impact of the intervention. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
2	Informed consent Describe the arrangements to inform potential participants, before providing consent, of what is involved in participating. Describe the arrangements for participants to provide full consent before data collection begins. If gaining consent in this way is inappropriate, explain how consent will be obtained and recorded in accordance with prevailing data protection legislation.

	To ensure potential participants are fully informed before providing consent, I will communicate the details of the study in a clear and transparent manner. Initially, I will present the research proposal during a whole-school briefing, followed by an email outlining the study's purpose, objectives, and participation requirements. This will allow staff to make an informed decision about their voluntary involvement. Participants will receive comprehensive information regarding the research aims, their role in the study, and how their contributions will inform the overall findings. They will be explicitly informed that participation is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any stage without consequence. Consent will be obtained through a Google Form, where participants will formally acknowledge their willingness to take part. This process ensures that informed consent is documented before any data collection begins. Additionally, I will provide detailed information on the data collection methods, including questionnaires and interviews, as well as how progress will be measured throughout the study. Measures to protect confidentiality and data security will be clearly outlined, ensuring that all data is anonymized in compliance with data protection regulations. In cases where the standard process of obtaining written consent is deemed inappropriate, I will implement alternative consent procedures that align with data protection legislation and ethical guidelines, ensuring transparency, accountability, and respect for participants' rights. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
3	Confidentiality / Anonymity Set out how anonymity of participants and confidentiality will be ensured in any outputs. If anonymity is not being offered, explain why this is the case.
	Participants' anonymity and confidentiality will be strictly maintained throughout the study. All data collected will be securely stored, and any personal information will remain confidential. To ensure anonymity, all identifying details will be removed or anonymised in accordance with data protection legislation. In any research outputs, data will be presented in a way that prevents the identification of individual participants. The study setting will also be anonymised to further protect participants' identities. These measures align with ethical research standards and ensure that confidentiality is upheld throughout the research process. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

SECTION J: Data Protection and Storage

	Does the research activity involve personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 “GDPR” and the Data Protection Act 2018 “DPA”)?	YES	NO
1	“Personal data” means any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person (‘data subject’). An identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person. Any video or audio recordings of participants is considered to be personal data.	☐	☒
	If YES, provide a description of the data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
2	(this box should expand as you type)		
	Does it involve special category data (as defined by the GDPR)?	YES	NO
3	“Special category data” means sensitive personal data consisting of information as to the data subjects’ – (a) racial or ethnic origin, (b) political opinions, (c) religious beliefs or other beliefs of a similar nature, (d) membership of a trade union (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992), (e) physical or mental health or condition, (f) sexual life, (g) genetics, (h) biometric data (as used for ID purposes),	☐	☒
	If YES, provide a description of the special category data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
4	(this box should expand as you type)		

	Will data from the research activity (collected data, drafts of the thesis, or materials for publication) be stored in any of the following ways?	YES	NO
5	Manual files (i.e. in paper form)?	☒	☐

6	University computers?	☒	☐
7	Private company computers?	☒	☐
8	Home or other personal computers?	☐	☒
9	Laptop computers/ CDs/ Portable disk-drives/ memory sticks?	☒	☐
10	"Cloud" storage or websites?	☒	☐
11	Other – specify:	☐	☒
12	For all stored data, explain the measures in place to ensure the security of the data collected, data confidentiality, including details of backup procedures, password protection, encryption, anonymisation and pseudonymisation: For all stored data, the following measures will be implemented to ensure security, confidentiality, and compliance with data protection standards: Data Storage: All collected data will be stored in a secure, password-protected digital location. This includes both the raw data (e.g., questionnaire responses and interview transcripts) and any other related documents. Encryption: Sensitive data will be encrypted to protect it from unauthorised access. Encryption will be applied during storage as well as when data is transmitted over networks. Password Protection: Access to the data will be restricted through strong, unique passwords. Only authorised personnel, such as the researcher, will have access to the data. Multi-factor authentication (MFA) will also be used where possible to enhance security. Anonymisation and Pseudonymisation: Participants' identities will be anonymised where possible. Any identifiable data (e.g., names or contact details) will be pseudonymised or replaced with unique codes. This ensures that individuals cannot be identified directly from the data, maintaining privacy throughout the research process. Backup Procedures: Regular backups of all data will be made to secure, encrypted cloud storage, ensuring that data is recoverable in the event of technical issues or data loss. Backup copies will also be encrypted and stored in a separate, secure location. Data Access: Only the research team will have access to the data, and access will be logged for auditing purposes. Data will be kept for the required retention period (as outlined in the ethical guidelines) and securely destroyed once no longer needed. These measures will be regularly reviewed to ensure the data remains secure, and participants' confidentiality is upheld in line with the applicable data protection laws and ethical standards. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		

Data Protection			
	Will the research activity involve any of the following activities:	YES	NO
13	Electronic transfer of data in any form?	☒	☐
14	Sharing of data with others at the University outside of the immediate research team?	☐	☒

15	Sharing of data with other organisations?	☐	☒
16	Export of data outside the UK or importing of data from outside the UK?	☐	☒
17	Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, emails or telephone numbers?	☐	☒
18	Publication of data that might allow identification of individuals?	☐	☒
19	Use of data management system?	☐	☒
20	Data archiving?	☐	☒
21	If YES to any question, please provide full details, explaining how this will be conducted in accordance with the GDPR and Data Protection Act (2018) (and any international equivalents, where appropriate): This study will make use of an organisational database which is used for normal storage purposes (Microsoft Office 365 and One Drive cloud storage). The researcher will also have access to this on their device which is password protected and also requires an additional authenticator code generator to access the data. The researcher will ensure to have restricted access on these files so that on the necessary subjects can access the information. Transfer of data is potentially involved in the use of 'Microsoft Forms', though all such data would be anonymous. Any survey's sent out to staff via email will be blind copied so participants cannot see other's email addresses. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
22	List all who will have access to the data generated by the research activity:		
	Researcher The university supervisor <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
23	List who will have control of, and act as custodian(s) for, data generated by the research activity:		
	Researcher <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
24	Give details of data storage arrangements, including security measures in place to protect the data, where data will be stored, how long for, and in what form. Will data be archived – if so how and if not why not.		
	Data generated by this research will be stored on company computers which are password-protected. Data will be anonymous and used only for the research purposes outlined. All data will be erased/ destroyed once the research project is complete. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
25	Please indicate if your data will be stored in the UWTSD Research Data Repository (see https://researchdata.uwtsd.ac.uk/). If so please explain. <i>(Most relevant to academic staff)</i>		
	No		

	<i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
26	Confirm that you have read the UWTSD guidance on data management (see https://www.uwtسد.ac.uk/library/research-data-management/)	YES	☒
27	Confirm that you are aware that you need to keep all data until after your research has completed or the end of your funding	YES	☒

SECTION K: Declaration

	The information which I have provided is correct and complete to the best of my knowledge. I have attempted to identify any risks and issues related to the research activity and acknowledge my obligations and the rights of the participants. In submitting this application I hereby confirm that I undertake to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice which is published on the website: https://www.uwtسد.ac.uk/research/research-ethics/		
1	Signature of applicant:		Date: 27/3/2025

For STUDENT Submissions:

2	Director of Studies/Supervisor:		Date:
3	Signature:		

For STAFF Submissions:

4	Academic Director/ Assistant Dean:		Date:
5	Signature:		

Checklist: Please complete the checklist below to ensure that you have completed the form according to the guidelines and attached any required documentation:

☒	I have read the guidance notes supplied before completing the form.
☒	I have completed ALL RELEVANT sections of the form in full.
☒	I confirm that the research activity has received approval in principle
☐	I have attached a copy of final/interim approval from external organisation (where appropriate)
☐	I have attached a full risk assessment (where appropriate) <i>ONLY TICK IF YOU HAVE ATTACHED A FULL RISK ASSESSMENT</i>
☒	I understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice.
☒	I understand that before commencing data collection all documents aimed at respondents (including information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, interview schedules etc.) must be confirmed by the DoS/Supervisor, module tutor or Academic Director.

RESEARCH STUDENTS ONLY

Once complete, submit this form via the **MyTSD Doctoral College Portal** at (<https://mytsd.uwtsd.ac.uk>).

RESEARCH STAFF ONLY

All communications relating to this application during its processing must be in writing and emailed to pgresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk , with the title 'Ethical Approval' followed by your name.

STUDENTS ON UNDERGRADUATE OR TAUGHT MASTERS PROGRAMMES should submit this form (and receive the outcome) via systems explained to you by the supervisor/module leader.

Appendix B: Outdoor wellbeing Study Interest Form

Outdoor Staff Wellbeing Study

Ceri is undertaking a study into the impact of an outdoor, nature inspired community on the wellbeing of staff and is currently gauging interest.

1. Would you like to be part of a study into the impact of an outdoor community on wellbeing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe - I would like to hear more

2. What is your name?

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Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Does the Establishment of an outdoor based wellbeing community have a positive impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of staff in a special school?

Researcher: Ceri Ann Hopkins

Institution: University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD)

Programme: Masters Degree in Professional Practice Institute of Management and Health Work Based Learning Project.

Project Overview This research project aims to explore how participation in outdoor and nature-based group activities impacts staff well-being, builds a sense of community, and contributes to reducing absenteeism in a special education school setting. The study will investigate whether such interventions can support healthier, more resilient staff teams and, in turn, enhance pupils' educational experiences. **Your Role in the Research** You are being invited to take part in this research because your insights as a member of staff in a special education setting are valuable to understanding the effectiveness of well-being initiatives. Your participation will involve:

1. Your participation will involve:

- Completing a questionnaire - Taking part in a semi-structured interview (if you consent)
- Contributing your views and experiences to help shape the overall findings of the project

Voluntary Participation and Right to

Withdraw Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research at any point without giving a reason and without any consequence. You may also choose not to answer specific questions if you are uncomfortable doing so.

Confidentiality and Data Protection - All personal data will be treated as strictly confidential and stored securely. - Any identifying information will be removed, and your responses will be anonymised in all written work and reports.

- The research will comply with the UK Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

- Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to raw data. Data Collection Methods

This research will involve the use of: - Questionnaires to collect quantitative data on well-being and staff engagement

- Interviews to gather in-depth, qualitative insights (optional)

All data will be used solely for the purpose of this academic research and may be included in the dissertation submitted to UWTSD.

Consent Declaration Please read the following statements and tick the boxes to confirm your consent:

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided above.
- ☐ I voluntarily agree to take part in this research project.
- ☐ I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
- ☐ I understand that all my data will be anonymised and handled confidentially.

- ☐ I agree to the use of my anonymous responses in the final dissertation.
- ☐ I consent to participate in a follow-up interview (optional).

2. Participants full name

3. Participants Signature

4. Date

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Appendix D: Special School Staff Questionnaire

Special School Staff Wellbeing Questionnaire - Summer 2025

This is a confidential questionnaire that is part of my Masters research into the wellbeing of special school staff. This questionnaire aims to find out what types of support you access and how effective you find them. It will also ask you about the types of activities you do to support your wellbeing and it will ask you about what factors impact negatively

1. How stressed do you feel in your role in school?

- ☐ Very stressed
- ☐ Somewhat stressed
- ☐ Not stressed
- ☐ It varies

2. Stress from school impacts on my personal wellbeing and personal life

- ☐ Nearly always
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never

3. I am able to separate work and life

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely

4. How stressed are you in your personal life?

- ☐ Very stressed
- ☐ Somewhat stressed
- ☐ Not stressed
- ☐ It varies

5. I have a bank of resources that I dip into when I am stressed

- ☐ Yes - quite a lot
- ☐ Yes - a few
- ☐ Some - but I sometimes forget to use them
- ☐ No

6. The strategies I use to de-stress are:

- ☐ Healthy, wholesome and make me feel great afterwards
- ☐ Healthy and nurturing
- ☐ Neither
- ☐ Not healthy and they do not make me feel better in the long term
- ☐ I don't have strategies

7. I am aware that there is a growing body of evidence that shows that spending time outdoors can improve our wellbeing.

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ unsure

8. I would like to explore healthier options to help de-stress

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ maybe

9. 1. Please rate how helpful you find the advice and support given by the different types of providers below if you have accessed them. Please leave blank if they do not apply to you.

	Extremely helpful	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Unhelpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful
Occupational Health	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
GP	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Colleagues within your school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Colleagues from other schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
External services eg Education Support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Online Groups	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10.

Are there any other types of providers that you have accessed for wellbeing support? If so, please outline below.

11. Please show what types of activities you engage in to support your wellbeing and rate how helpful you find them. Leave blank if they do not apply to you.

	Extremely helpful	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Unhelpful
Accessing mentoring and coaching	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Accessing counselling	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Exercise	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Yoga/ meditation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mindfulness and relaxation techniques	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cooking and preparing healthy meals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spending time with family and friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spending time in nature	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Being creative	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Volunteering	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Journaling	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Travelling	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Accessing the arts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Spending time with animals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hobbies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Cold water therapy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

12. Do you engage in any other types of activities to support your wellbeing? If so, please outline below.

13.

What factors impact negatively upon your wellbeing as a member of staff in a special school?

	Very much	Quite a lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Workload	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Pupil behaviour	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Increasing complexities of ALN	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Level of responsibility	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parental concerns	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Curriculum expectations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ALN reform	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safeguarding	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inconsistent staffing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

14. Name

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Winter Wellbeing Questionnaire

The following questions ask about your experiences of spending time in nature over the Christmas Break. There are no right or wrong answers. Thank you for taking the time to complete.

1. Time spent in Nature - How often did you spend time in natural outdoor spaces (e.g. parks, woods, beaches, countryside) over the Christmas Break?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Several times a week
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Once
- ☐ Not at all

2. On average, how long did you usually spend in nature each time?

- ☐ Less than 15 minutes
- ☐ 15 - 30 minutes
- ☐ 30 - 60 minutes
- ☐ More than 1 hour

3. Social Context - When you spend time in nature, who were you usually with? (Tick all that apply)

- ☐ On my own
- ☐ With friends
- ☐ With family
- ☐ With a partner
- ☐ With colleagues
- ☐ With a pet
- ☐ Other

4. Experience and Awareness - When spending time in nature, how much did you notice your surroundings (e.g. sounds, smells, colours, movement)?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ A little
- ☐ Moderate
- ☐ Quite a lot
- ☐ Very much

5. What do you most often notice when you are in nature?

6. Emotional and Mental Effects - How does spending time in nature usually make you feel? (Tick all that apply)

- ☐ Calm
- ☐ Relaxed
- ☐ Happier
- ☐ Energised
- ☐ Grounded
- ☐ Less Stressed
- ☐ No noticable effect
- ☐ Other

7. To what extent did spending time in nature help to calm or still your mind?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Slightly
- ☐ Moderately
- ☐ Quite a lot
- ☐ Very much

8. After spending time in nature, how do you usually feel mentally?

- ☐ More clear-headed
- ☐ More focused
- ☐ More relaxed
- ☐ No change
- ☐ More distracted

9. Overall Reflection - Do you feel that spending time in nature supports your overall wellbeing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

10. Please add any additional comments about how spending time in nature affects you

11. Your full name

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Appendix F: Post Study Interview Participant Questionnaire

MA Post Interview Participants Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation in the interview for my MA. Please would you complete the following brief questionnaire. Your answers will be really helpful for my dissertation and helping me form my findings and conclusion about nature based outdoor approaches to wellbeing. Ceri

1. Section A: General Wellbeing & Stress. Since the previous interview, how would you rate your current wellbeing?

- ☐ Much improved
- ☐ Slightly improved
- ☐ No change
- ☐ Slightly worse
- ☐ Much worse

2. How would you describe your current stress levels?

- ☐ Much lower
- ☐ Slightly lower
- ☐ No change
- ☐ Slightly higher
- ☐ Much higher

3. Have you made any changes to how you manage stress since the interview?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

4. If you answered 'YES' to the question above, please describe any changes to how you manage stress since the interview.

5. Section B: Nature-Relatedness & Wellbeing Approaches. Have you found yourself thinking more about nature or natural spaces when considering your own wellbeing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

6. Since the interview, have you spent more time outdoors or used outdoor spaces to support your wellbeing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

7. If you answered 'YES' to the question above, please explain how you have spent more time outdoors to support your wellbeing.

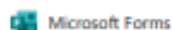
8. Section C: Reflections & Impact. What (if anything) from the interview influenced your thoughts or actions around wellbeing, stress, or outdoor activities?

9. Have you observed any personal changes (emotional, behavioural, mindset) since taking part in the interview?

10. Any additional comments about the experience or its impact?

11. THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS. PLEASE WRITE YOUR NAME BELOW.

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MA Post Walk Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation in the Interview for my MA. Please would you

1. Section A: General Wellbeing & Stress. Did taking part in the weekly walks have an impact on your overall wellbeing?

- ☐ Significant positive impact
- ☐ Some positive impact
- ☐ No impact
- ☐ Negative impact

2. Since the walks began, how have your stress levels changed?

- ☐ Much lower
- ☐ Slightly lower
- ☐ No change
- ☐ Slightly higher
- ☐ Much higher

3. Have you continued to use walking or time outdoors as a way to manage stress?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ No

4. Section B: Nature Spaces & Activities. Did the walking group increase your awareness of nature as a support for wellbeing?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ No

5. Have you spent more time outdoors since participating?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ No

6. Section C: Working Relationships & Group Dynamics. Did the walking group have any impact on your working relationships with colleagues?

- ☐ Strong positive impact
- ☐ Some positive impact
- ☐ No impact
- ☐ Negative impact

7. If you noticed any changes (e.g., improved communication, stronger connection, sense of team), please describe:

8. Section D: Overall Reflections. What aspects of the walking group were beneficial or meaningful to you?

9. Any suggestions for future outdoor wellbeing activities?

10. Name

Appendix H: Post Walk and Interview Questionnaire

MA POST WALK & INTERVIEW Participant Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation in the interview for my MA. Please would you complete the following brief questionnaire. Your answers will be really helpful for my dissertation and helping me form my findings and conclusion about nature based outdoor approaches to wellbeing. Ceri

1. Section A: Combined Wellbeing Impact. Overall, how has involvement in BOTH the interviews and walking group influenced your wellbeing?

- ☐ Significant improvement
- ☐ Moderate improvement
- ☐ Slight improvement
- ☐ No change
- ☐ Decline

2. How have your stress levels changed since engaging in both activities?

- ☐ Much lower
- ☐ Slightly lower
- ☐ No change
- ☐ Slightly higher
- ☐ Much higher

3. Section B: Nature Spaces & Activities. Has the combination of activities increased your awareness or appreciation of nature for wellbeing?

- ☐ Yes, significantly
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ No

4. Are you spending more time outdoors as a result?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ No

Appendix I: Letter of approval from Employer (Chair of Governors)



Pennaeth / Headteacher
Ceri Hopkins
01554 759465
admin@heolgoffa.ysgolccc.cymru
www.ysgolheolgoffa.org.uk

23rd March 2024

To Whom it May Concern

MA in Professional Practice
Ceri Hopkins

I confirm that, in my capacity as Chair of Governors, we are happy to support the Headteacher in undertaking her MA in Professional Practice with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD).

I wish her every success in her studies.

Yours sincerely

O Jenkins

Mr. Owen Jenkins
Chair of Governors
Ysgol Heol Goffa
Governing Body No:151

Vision statement - At Ysgol Heol Goffa our values underpin everything we do. We encourage each other to become independent, ambitious individuals who are confident, creative, and capable. We reach for the stars to fulfil our potential.

Ysgol Heol Goffa, Heol Goffa, Llanelli, Carmarthenshire SA15 3LS
Pawb yn Gallu!

Appendix J: PowerPoint Presentation

Ceri Hopkins
2431376

Does the establishment of an outdoor based wellbeing community have a positive impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of staff in a special school?

World Health Organization (2022): workplace mental health should prioritise preventative, community-based approaches rather than crisis response.

Consideration for Ethics

- Ethical approval obtained (UWTSD Ethics Committee)
- Voluntary participation
- Informed consent
- Anonymity and confidentiality
- GDPR compliance
- Safeguarding awareness



Consideration for Insider Research

- **Advantages:**
 - Access
 - Trust
 - Contextual insight
- **Risks:**
 - Bias
 - Power dynamics
- **Mitigation:**
 - Reflexivity
 - Transparency
 - Triangulation



Context

- Special-school context with emotional and physical demands
- Increasing staff stress, absence and retention challenges
- National data show escalating mental-health concerns across education
- Highlights the need for proactive, sustainable wellbeing approaches

84% of teachers are experiencing increased work-related stress, and 86% say their job negatively affects their mental health.
NASUWT Wellbeing at Work Survey (2024)

Literature Review

- Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989)
- Biophilia Hypothesis (Wilson, 1984; Britannica, 2025)
- Nature restores focus and fulfils our innate need for connection
- Psychological and emotional benefits supported by international research
- Frameworks underpin nature-based wellbeing interventions



"Humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life." (Wilson, 1984)

Nature & Community

- Green and blue spaces support emotional regulation and wellbeing (Geary et al., 2023)
- Exposure linked to reduced stress and improved mental health
- Community and social connection amplify restorative effects
- Nature as a shared, relational experience
- Implications for staff wellbeing and school culture



"Shinrin-Yoku (forest bathing) supports health promotion and helps prevent disease", Li (2022)

Methods & Studies Overview

- Mixed-methods design combining questionnaires, interviews and observation
- Six interconnected studies exploring staff wellbeing through outdoor, relational and reflective experiences
- Iterative design built depth and triangulation across data sources
- Participants drawn from across school roles
- Focus on emotional regulation, relational safety and contextual influences



Study One - NR-6 and Stress Related Score

OVERALL STRESS AND NATURE-RELATEDNESS

Measure	n	Mean	SD	Median	Range
Stress score	52	18.15	7.11	19.0	4–31
NR-6 score	51	3.88	0.75	4.00	2.17–5.00

STRESS AND NATURE-RELATEDNESS BY ROLE

Role	Stress Mean (SD)	NR-6 Mean (SD)
Teacher	21.45 (6.42)	4.10 (0.76)
Teaching Assistant	17.64 (7.16)	3.79 (0.78)
SLT	15.50 (7.33)	4.17 (0.53)



Study One - Comparison with Participation in Other Elements of the Study

Walking group participants demonstrated

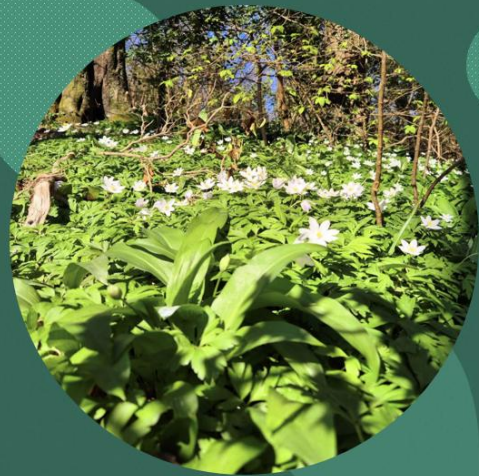
- Lower mean stress (≈ 16.0 vs 18.55)
- Higher nature-relatedness (≈ 4.33 vs 3.80)

Interview participants demonstrated

- Slightly higher nature-relatedness (≈ 4.11 vs 3.66)
- Minimal differences in stress

Winter questionnaire completers demonstrated

- Slightly lower stress (≈ 17.78 vs 19.42)
- Higher nature-relatedness (≈ 3.92 vs 3.73)



Study Two – Bespoke Special School Staff Wellbeing Questionnaire

- 37 staff participants completed a bespoke questionnaire
- The questionnaire examined stress levels, coping strategies, outdoor wellbeing awareness, support sources, and workplace influences shaping staff wellbeing
- Results showed a largely resilient workforce but operating under uneven and sometimes challenging conditions
- Stress is context-dependent, influenced by workload, staffing, and classroom demands
- Staff prefer informal, relational, accessible wellbeing supports over formal clinical pathways
- Strong readiness for nature-connected, low-barrier wellbeing initiatives exists
- Whole-school wellbeing would benefit from system-level improvements (staffing, workload) plus role-specific, relational, nature-based supports



Study Two Themes

Staff Stress & Wellbeing Overview

Variable levels of school-based stress
Work stress often spilled into personal life
Most staff could separate work and home
Personal-life stress was generally lower than school-related stress.

Coping & Wellbeing Practices

Most staff had some coping strategies
The majority used healthy, nurturing strategies
Awareness that time outdoors supports wellbeing was extremely high.
Strong willingness to explore healthier wellbeing options

Support Sources & Activities

Relationship-based support was rated most helpful.
Formal supports much less helpful.
Most beneficial activities: time with family/friends, nature, creativity, movement
Structured or formal activities were less frequently valued.

Workplace Stressors

Inconsistent staffing, workload and pupil behaviour.
Responsibility levels, safeguarding, parental issues, ALN complexity

Role-Based Differences

Teachers reported the highest stress, more spillover into home life, and more difficulty switching off.
TAs, SLT, and admin staff reported substantially lower stress across all measures.
Indicates a distinct wellbeing burden for teachers, requiring targeted support.



Study Three – Semi Structured Interviews

- 26 participants (teachers, TAs, admin staff, senior leaders) took part in semi-structured group interviews exploring outdoor experiences, emotions, and stress-management strategies.
- Discussions evolved using a flexible question guide, beginning with reflections on childhood outdoor experiences and current coping approaches, expanding to workload pressures and wellbeing practices



Study Three – Identified Themes

Nature and outdoor experiences were central to calm, emotional regulation, and stress relief.

Childhood exposure shaped lifelong coping habits and emotional connection to nature.

Relational safety and supportive workplace culture strongly influenced wellbeing.

Staff blended nature, creativity, rest, and reframing into accessible coping routines.

Suggested organisational enablers: wellbeing walks, outdoor breaks, plants, and access to blue spaces.



Study Four – Winter Wellbeing Questionnaire

- 40 staff participants: 70% TAs, 17.5% teachers, 10% SLT, 2.5% admin — broad staff representation
- Questionnaire followed a two-week winter wellbeing calendar encouraging optional nature engagement
- TAs showed most consistent outdoor activity, while teachers and SLT displayed more varied patterns
- Role demands, routines, and weather shaped access to nature; some cited barriers such as time and mobility



“I just love being outside — it makes me feel so much better, more energised.” (TA)

Study Four - Emotional & Sensory Outcomes

- Staff reported positive emotional outcomes — calm, clarity, relaxation, and physical restoration
- Sensory noticing (sounds, textures, light) enhanced mood and reflection; nature supported “walk and talk” conversations
- Social context mattered: outdoor time with colleagues or pets increased happiness and relaxation
- Nature as restorative system: offered stress relief, emotional grounding, and sustained calm beyond the activity

“Nature is where I go to think; it’s also a good place for conversations to happen — like a walk and talk, particularly about things that might be hard to speak about.” (SLT)



“Natural elements help to clear my mind and still an over-thinking mind.” (TA)

Study Five – Weekly Wellbeing Walks

- 9 participants joined weekly guided walks during term time, weather permitting
- Walks took place in woodland, park, reservoir, and coastal areas, lasting 60–120 minutes
- Conversations blended nature-based curiosity (foraging, ecology, seasonal cycles) with personal reflection and social connection
- Walks provided a mental transition from school intensity to calm, reflective space in nature



“By the time we start walking, I’ve already closed off the school day — it’s like a reset.” (Teacher)

Study Five – Weekly Wellbeing Walks

- Walks fostered stronger relationships and informal social support among colleagues
- Non-work conversations built community, belonging, and relaxation
- Participants reported improved physical and mental wellbeing through exercise, nature, and shared time
- Limitations: sessions were inconsistent due to weather, workload, and school-term pressures
- The weekly walks offered valued opportunities for staff to unwind, connect, and recharge — though sustaining them requires flexible scheduling and weather-proof planning



“Cold air, movement, and good company — it’s the best part of my week.” (SLT)

Study Six – Post Study Questionnaires

- Three participant groups:
 - Walk-only (N = 2)
 - Interview-only (N = 12)
 - Combined (N = 7)
- Despite differing modes of engagement, all groups showed improved wellbeing, stress regulation, and relational connection
- Findings are indicative, not causal — small, self-selecting samples and self-report data limit generalisation
- Analysis focuses on patterns of meaning and plausible mechanisms of change

“Opening up to colleagues itself was a positive experience.” (Interview-only participant)



“It was nice getting to know people better outside work.” (Walk-only participant)

Study Six – Post Study Questionnaires

- Walk-only group: valued calm, connection, and embodied presence
- Interview-only group: reflective dialogue prompted behaviour change and increased nature awareness
- Combined group: showed the most comprehensive benefits — wellbeing, stress reduction, and team cohesion
- Overall: integrating outdoor walking with reflection may offer a scalable, accessible approach to staff wellbeing
- Across all groups, everyday contact with nature — supported by reflection — fosters psychological restoration, social cohesion, and healthier workplace cultures
- Findings align with Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995) — natural environments help restore focus and reduce mental fatigue
- Together, these frameworks explain how routine contact with nature and reflective dialogue foster calm, clarity, and relational wellbeing



“The group reminds me that I deserve to have time for myself... in a calm environment.” (Walk-only)

“If I hadn’t gone for the walk, I would have gone home in a very different mood — rather than happy and calm.” (Combined)

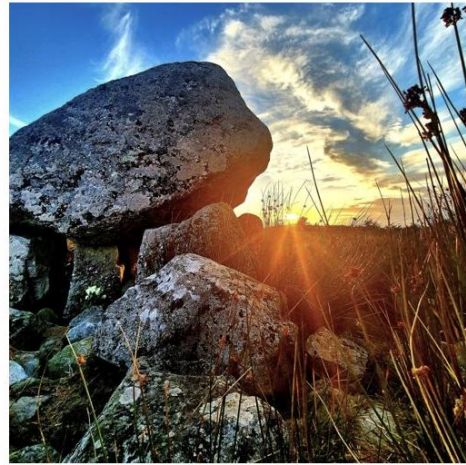
Cross-Study Synthesis

🌿 Nature & Connection	💛 Relational Safety	🌀 Emotional Regulation
Outdoor and reflective experiences consistently enhanced wellbeing	Shared experiences fostered trust, empathy, and belonging	Nature supported stress relief and cognitive restoration



Conclusion and Implications

- Findings highlight the value of relational, outdoor, and reflective experiences for staff wellbeing
- Emotional regulation and relational safety underpin sustainable wellbeing practice
- Triangulated mixed-methods approach strengthened credibility and contextual insight
- Implications for leadership: embedding wellbeing in culture, not as an add-on
- Future research: scaling community-based wellbeing models across educational contexts



Recommendations

- **Embed low-threshold, nature-based wellbeing** into everyday school culture, rather than as add-on initiatives.
- **Protect time and autonomy**, ensuring outdoor wellbeing opportunities are flexible, voluntary, and accessible across roles.
- **Avoid compulsory or clinical wellbeing approaches**, prioritising relational, informal, and community-based supports.
- **Address access and equity**, recognising that role demands, workload, and physical factors shape engagement.
- **Support leadership modelling**, with senior staff visibly valuing and engaging in wellbeing practices.
- **Extend research through longitudinal and comparative designs** to explore sustainability, seasonality, and scalability.



Reflective Examination

- Insider-researcher perspective within a special-school context
- Personal motivation: commitment to staff wellbeing and inclusive practice
- Professional learning through action research and collaboration
- Growth in reflective leadership and evidence-informed decision-making
- Enhanced understanding of relational, nature-based wellbeing approaches

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