I confirm I have used ai throughout this assignment for research purposes only, I have not used ai to generate any written work throughout this assignment.

Title: A Critical Evaluation of Six Activities within Alternative Learning Environments.
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1. **Introduction.**

Alternative learning environments provide valuable opportunities for learners to participate in meaningful, experiential and context-responsive education outside the confines of traditional classrooms. These environments frequently emphasise autonomy, wellbeing, real-world relevance and personalised learning, closely aligning with current Welsh policy frameworks, including the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2024), the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code (2021) and recent national reviews of ALN reform. These policies highlight the importance of inclusive, flexible and learner-centred approaches, emphasising the significance of educational experiences that go beyond traditional school environments.
These approaches also challenge conventional assumptions about where learning should occur, encouraging educators to reconsider the boundaries between formal, informal and community-based education. As a result, alternative learning environments offer valuable insights into how engagement and wellbeing can be strengthened through contextually rich, authentic experiences.

This assignment analyses three distinct activities located within different learning environments, including the following:

- Forest School.
- Prison Education.
- Home Schooling.

to investigate how each setting enables learner development, engagement and holistic growth. Examples such as:

- Fire-lighting.
- Creative writing workshops.
- Self-directed projects.

These illustrate how these environments encourage cognitive, social and emotional development. A comparative discussion evaluates the similarities, differences and implications of these environments for inclusive, learner-centred practice *(Estyn, 2024)*.
By examining these activities critically, the portfolio highlights how alternative pedagogies can complement mainstream provision and address gaps in inclusion, motivation and learner agency.

2. **Key Terminology and Conceptual Analysis.**

Understanding key terminology is crucial for assessing learning in alternative environments. Theoretical, pedagogical and policy foundations shape the activities examined in this portfolio. This section provides a critical analysis of the concepts of experiential learning, alternative learning environments, outdoor learning, Forest School and alternative education models.
Experiential learning is often linked to the contributions of John Dewey (1938) and subsequently David Kolb (1984), who defined learning as a frequent process that includes:

- Concrete experience
- Reflection
- Conceptualisation
- Active experimentation

Parry and Allison highlight that experiential learning is considerably more than learning by doing; it is a structured process where learners find meaning through engagement with real-world contexts (Parry & Allison, 2021). Experiential learning within the Curriculum for Wales corresponds with the focus on genuine, significant experiences that encourage a profound understanding and the development of skills across various subjects (Welsh Government, 2024). The curriculum emphasises creativity, problem-solving and learner agency, aligning with the principles of experiential learning and establishing it as a key pedagogical approach in modern Welsh education.

However, experiential learning also requires careful facilitation, as unstructured activity alone does not guarantee meaningful progression or deep conceptual understanding.

Alternative learning environments embrace any educational settings, methods, or frameworks that deviate from traditional classroom-based education. Carnie defines alternative education as a wide-ranging area that includes democratic schools, community-based learning, outdoor education and self-directed methods (Carnie, 2003). Woods and Woods (2009) contend that alternative environments question conventional beliefs regarding authority, curriculum and assessment, providing more adaptable and learner-centred models. In Wales, alternative learning environments promote the Curriculum for Wales goal of developing adaptable, inclusive and holistic learning pathways that address the varied needs of learners (Welsh Government, 2024). These environments also raise important questions about equity and consistency, as the quality of provision can vary significantly depending on resources, practitioner expertise and contextual constraints.

Outdoor learning is an essential aspect of alternative education, as defined by Rosaleen. It refers to learning that occurs in natural or outdoor environments, allowing children to enhance their physical, cognitive and emotional skills through direct interaction with their surroundings. In Wales, outdoor learning is effectively promoted through the Foundation Phase Outdoor Learning Handbook (Welsh Government, 2015) and recent Estyn reviews (2023–2024) emphasise the beneficial effects on wellbeing, motivation and cross-curricular competence (Estyn, 2024). Outdoor learning is consistent with the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which advocates for sustainability, resilience and a connection to place (Welsh Government, 2015).
Despite its benefits, outdoor learning can be limited by environmental, logistical and accessibility factors, highlighting the need for thoughtful planning to ensure all learners can participate meaningfully.

Forest School is a distinct approach to outdoor learning that is based on long-term, child-led experiences in nature. Knight characterises Forest School as a comprehensive method that promotes resilience, confidence, independence and problem-solving through consistent activities in woodland settings *(Knight, 2016).* Forest School practices focus on risk-taking, exploration and emotional development, providing an alternative to traditional classroom routines. In Wales, the principles of Forest School align with the Curriculum for Wales by encouraging the growth of ambitious, capable learners and promoting healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2024).

Alternative education models include various theories and practices that question traditional schooling methods. John Holt supports self-directed learning that is motivated by natural factors, asserting that children learn most effectively when they possess autonomy and freedom (Holt, 1981). John Taylor Gatto critiques institutional schooling for its

constraints on creativity and independence, advocating for community-based and experiential learning methods. Paulo Freire highlights the importance of dialogic and emancipatory education, where learners actively and critically interact with their environment *(Freire, 1970)*. A. S. Neill's Summerhill model emphasises the importance of democratic participation and emotional wellbeing. These models emphasise learner agency, flexibility and holistic development, providing important insights for assessing alternative learning environments. Collectively, these models demonstrate the diverse ways in which learner autonomy, critical engagement and experiential practice can be embedded across educational contexts, offering valuable alternatives to traditional pedagogical structures.

These concepts collectively offer a theoretical and policy-informed basis for analysing the three activities explored within this portfolio, each situated in a distinct alternative learning environment. Their emphasis on autonomy, experience, environment and critical engagement provides a strong foundation for understanding how meaningful learning can occur outside conventional classroom contexts.

3. **Activity 1: Forest School (Fire-Lighting).**

Forest School is a non-traditional educational setting based on immersive, nature-cantered teaching methods. Developed from Scandinavian outdoor education, it offers consistent, extended sessions in forest environments where participants partake in practical, exploratory activities. The ethos promotes comprehensive growth, independence, resilience and a connection to nature. In contrast to conventional classrooms, Forest School provides open-ended, child-directed activities influenced by the natural environment, seasonal variations and possibilities for responsible risk-taking (Knight, 2016). This emphasis on learner-led exploration is pedagogically significant, as it enables children to develop confidence and autonomy through authentic, hands-on engagement with their surroundings.

The theoretical principles of Forest School closely correspond with experience learning. Kolb's learning cycle is demonstrated as learners participate in real experiences, reflect on their efforts, formulate new methods and implement them in practice (Kolb, 1984). Dewey's view that significant learning arises from engagement with genuine surroundings is crucial to the Forest School methodology, because education is integrated into true, sensory-rich contexts (Dewey, 1938). The ideas of Knight's Forest School emphasise risk, resilience and child-led discovery, which form the foundation of the pedagogy. Holt's promotion of autonomy is evident in the learner-directed activities, whilst Freire's focus on discussion and collaborative problem-solving is manifested through group exercises and collective decision-making (Knight, 2016). Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight how Forest School blends experiential, dialogic and autonomous learning in ways that are difficult to replicate within traditional classroom structures.

Forest School is in strong alignment with current Welsh policy. The Curriculum for Wales (2024) prioritises genuine, real-world education that promotes ambitious, competent learners and promotes wellbeing. Forest School promotes the four objectives by cultivating independence, creativity, problem-solving skills and emotional regulation. The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act (2021) advocates for inclusive and adaptable facilities; Forest School facilitates this through multi-sensory, varied experiences available to a diverse array of learners. Estyn's reviews for 2023–2024 indicate that outdoor learning enhances motivation, engagement and welfare, especially for students who may find traditional environments challenging (Estyn, 2024). The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 emphasises the importance of sustainable, nature-based education, demonstrated by Forest School's focus on environmental awareness and responsible risk-taking (Welsh Government, 2015). This alignment with national policy frameworks reinforces the value of Forest School as a legitimate and impactful educational approach rather than an optional enrichment activity.

A fire-lighting session demonstrates how Forest School activities promote learning. In this exercise, participants collect natural materials, establish a secure fire circle and practice utilising fire steels to generate sparks. The activity, while supervised by an adult, is directed by the learners, who determine the materials, procedures and safety measures. This improves fine motor skills, resilience, collaboration and self-assurance. The task's open-ended nature encourages creativity and problem-solving, while the outdoor setting promotes sensory control and emotional well-being. Students further develop risk-management abilities, judgement and self-awareness (Knight, 2016). Such activities also provide opportunities for learners to negotiate roles, manage uncertainty and develop emotional resilience, all of which contribute to broader personal and social development.

Even so, Forest School has difficulties. High-risk tasks require thorough risk evaluation, skilled professionals and suitable equipment (Knight, 2016). Weather conditions may restrict participation and accessibility must be addressed for learners with mobility or sensory requirements. Supporting diversity might require the provision of alternative tools or responsibilities. Despite these issues, Forest School continues to provide as an effective environment for supporting holistic development, autonomy and significant engagement. These challenges highlight the importance of practitioner expertise and thoughtful planning, as the quality of facilitation significantly shapes the learning experiences available to children.

4. **Activity 2: Prison Education (Creative Writing Workshop).**

Prison education is a unique alternative learning environment functioning within secure, strictly supervised surroundings. Its objective includes not only academic achievement but

also rehabilitation, personal growth, well-being and preparation for societal integration. Numerous incarcerated students possess interrupted educational directions, additional learning requirements, histories of trauma, or adverse schooling experiences. Consequently, prison education must implement flexible, trauma-informed and relational methodologies that significantly vary from conventional classrooms (Freire, 1970). This complexity means that educators must navigate a learning environment shaped by trauma, instability and institutional constraints, requiring approaches that prioritise emotional safety and relational trust.

The theoretical foundations of prison education are significantly influenced by Freire's notion of education as emancipation. Freire contended that significant learning arises from discourse, critical reflection and empowerment, principles that are particularly relevant in rehabilitative settings (Freire, 1970). Dewey's belief that education is a social and experiential effort is relevant, as prison education frequently emphasises practical skills, vocational training and collaborative learning. Transformative learning theory further supports this setting, highlighting identity transformation, reflection and the development of new views (Dewey, 1938). These theoretical perspectives collectively illustrate how prison education can act as a catalyst for personal transformation, offering learners opportunities to reconstruct identity and develop a renewed sense of agency.

Policy frameworks influence prison education in Wales and the broader UK. The Welsh Government's dedication to decreasing reoffending corresponds with educational initiatives that enhance skills, confidence and employment. The Curriculum for Wales does not officially regulate prison education; however, its principles, specifically wellbeing, ethical citizenship and experiential learning, are evident in rehabilitation programs *(Welsh Government, 2024)*. The ALN Code (2021–2024) is pertinent, as a significant proportion of incarcerated learners possess unmet or unrecognised additional learning needs (Welsh Government, 2021). Estyn and HM Inspectorate of Prisons emphasise the significance of superior education, consistent learning and access to valuable qualifications (Estyn, 2024). This policy alignment highlights the growing recognition that education within prisons is not a rehabilitative tool but a basic right that supports social justice and long-term reintegration.

A creative writing session exemplifies how prison education promotes personal development. In this activity, participants partake in reflective journaling, poetry, or story writing. This enhances communication abilities, emotional expression and self-awareness. It conforms to Freirean dialogic ideals by prompting learners to contemplate their experiences, express their viewpoints and participate in collaborative discussion (Freire, 1970). Creative writing may encourage trauma processing, identity reconstruction and confidence enhancement. contrasting vocational pursuits, such as carpentry, catering, or horticulture, offer practical, experiential learning that enhances employability and skill proficiency (Dewey, 1938). Such creative spaces can also provide a rare sense of autonomy

and emotional release, enabling learners to articulate experiences that may otherwise remain unspoken within the prison environment.

Prison education provides substantial advantages. It can boost reading and numeracy, develop occupational skills, improve wellness and promote identity regeneration. Students frequently acquire confidence, purpose and a sense of accomplishment. Education reduces crime by enhancing social skills, problem-solving abilities and future goals (Welsh Government, 2024). These benefits demonstrate how education can interrupt cycles of disadvantage, offering learners a renewed sense of purpose and the tools needed to navigate life beyond incarceration.

However, the hurdles are considerable. Security restrictions limit access to resources, technology and adaptable learning environments. Attendance may be affected by transfers, lockdowns, or mental health concerns. Trauma, decreased self-esteem and adverse previous experiences can influence involvement. Staff must reconcile educational goals with security requirements and curricular choices may be limited. Considering these limitations, prison education is an essential setting for promoting rehabilitation, personal development and social reintegration (Estyn, 2024). These challenges underline the importance of sustained investment, specialist training and trauma-informed practice to ensure that prison education can fulfil its rehabilitative potential.

5. **Activity 3: Home Schooling (Self-Directed Project).**

Home schooling, or Elective Home Education (EHE), is an alternative educational framework wherein parents take responsibility for their child's education outside the conventional school system. In Wales, home schooling is permitted and regulated by legislative advice that prioritises safeguarding, wellbeing and the provision of a "suitable and efficient" education. Home schooling includes several methodologies, ranging from structured, curriculum-based education to unschooling and self-directed learning (Welsh Government, 2024). This diversity of approaches means that home education can vary considerably between families, reflecting different philosophies, resources and levels of parental confidence.

The theoretical foundations of home schooling are significantly influenced by Holt's critique of conventional education. Holt argued that children acquire knowledge most effectively when permitted to pursue their interests, participate in significant activities and study at their own pace (Holt, 1981). Unschooling methodologies prioritise autonomy, intrinsic motivation and experiential learning, which is consistent with Dewey's assertion that education must be linked to lived experience (Dewey, 1938). Freire's focus on learner agency and the collaborative building of knowledge is relevant especially in dialogic, inquiry-based home learning environments (Freire, 1970). These theoretical perspectives

collectively highlight how home schooling can create highly personalised learning pathways that respond directly to a learner's interests, pace and developmental needs.

Home schooling corresponds with elements of Welsh policy, particularly the Curriculum for Wales' focus on learner-centred, genuine and flexible education (Welsh Government, 2024). While home-educated students are not obligated to conform to the national curriculum, numerous families embrace its principles. The ALN Code (2021–2024) pertains to children with additional needs, requiring local authorities to guarantee that regulations are suitable. The guidance from the Welsh Government stresses the importance of protection, welfare and consistent communication between families and local authorities (Welsh Government, 2024). This highlights the delicate balance between parental autonomy and state responsibility, particularly when ensuring that all children receive an education that is both safe and developmentally appropriate.

A self-directed activity exemplifies how homeschooling promotes learning. In this activity, a learner selects a topic of interest, such as marine life, robotics, or local history and develops their own inquiry. This illustrates Holt's focus on autonomy (Holt, 1981). and Kolb's experience cycle, when learners engage in planning, researching, creating and reflecting (Kolb, 1984). It additionally improves cross-curricular education, enhances communication skills and promotes motivational factors. The adaptability of home schooling enables students to do comprehensive projects, participate in practical experiences and study at a speed that accommodates their own requirements. Such projects also encourage learners to take ownership of their progress, developing self-regulation, curiosity and intrinsic motivation that can support long-term academic resilience.

Home schooling has substantial advantages. Students can advance at their own speed, pursue their interests and engage in customised, adaptable learning. The environment may reduce anxiety, enhance wellness and address supplementary learning requirements. Resilient family ties and individualised support can augment confidence and involvement (Holt, 1981). These benefits are particularly significant for learners who have previously struggled in formal schooling environments, as home education can provide a calmer, more responsive setting.

Yet other obstacles include variations in parental capability, possible deficiencies in topic expertise and apprehensions regarding socialisation. Access to resources, outside interests and specialised support may be restricted. Local authorities must manage parental liberty with protection obligations, which may generate conflict. Considering these obstacles, home schooling continues to provide a vital setting for individualised, interest-based education (Welsh Government, 2024). These challenges reinforce the need for constructive collaboration between families and local authorities, ensuring that home-educated learners are supported without undermining parental autonomy.

6. **Comparative Discussion.**

The three alternative learning contexts analysed, Forest School, Prison Education and Home Schooling, illustrate how education beyond conventional classrooms can enhance engagement, wellbeing and overall development. Despite their substantial differences in aim, structure and restrictions, these environments collectively uphold a dedication to learner-centred, experiential and context-responsive teaching (Dewey, 1938). This demonstrates that meaningful learning is not confined to formal institutions but can emerge in diverse settings when pedagogy is responsive to learners' needs and lived experiences.

A key theme in all three environments is the significance of experiential, authentic learning. Forest School combines education with nature, employing sensory, experiential learning and calculated risk-taking to develop resilience and enhance problem-solving skills. Home schooling similarly prioritises experiential, interest-driven education, frequently influenced by self-directed projects and real-world inquiry. Prison education, functioning within a secure and strictly regulated setting, also depends on practical methods, especially through vocational training, creative writing workshops and reflective conversation that encourage identity reconstruction. Learning in each context is based on significant experiences rather than theoretical guidance, according with the principles of experiential learning proposed by Dewey and Kolb (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). Although the nature of these experiences differs, each environment demonstrates how hands-on, contextually grounded activities can deepen understanding and promote sustained engagement.

A common concept is learner agency, although articulated differently across many situations. Forest School promotes independence via child-directed exploration and decision-making. Home schooling positions agency at the core of its education, allowing learners to dictate their own pace, interests and educational pathways. In prison education, agency is limited, although it still develops through avenues for self-expression, reflection and involvement in rehabilitative programs. Freire's view of education as empowerment is especially relevant in this context, as prison education aims to restore confidence and promote personal growth (Freire, 1970). In all three environments, agency serves as a catalyst for engagement, motivation and enhanced learning. This variation highlights how agency is shaped not only by pedagogy but also by structural constraints, demonstrating the importance of context-sensitive approaches to learner empowerment.

Policy alignment also uncovers significant parallels and disparities. Forest School and Home Schooling closely fit with the Curriculum for Wales, especially regarding its focus on welfare, experiential learning and the production of ambitious, capable learners (Welsh Government, 2024). Both environments promote the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code (2021–2024) through adaptable, individualised and multi-sensory provisions (Welsh Government, 2021).

Prison education, while not regulated by the Curriculum for Wales, corresponds with overall Welsh Government objectives including rehabilitation, employment and the reduction of reoffending (Welsh Government, 2024). All three environmental systems embody the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, especially in developing resilience, community connectivity and enduring wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2015). These policy connections illustrate how alternative learning environments can complement national educational priorities, even when operating outside mainstream structures.

Despite these common qualities, the surroundings vary considerably in their limitations and educational obstacles. Forest School necessitates qualified practitioners, secure outdoor environments and comprehensive risk assessment protocols, which may not be accessible in every context. Home schooling is significantly influenced by parental ability, resources and confidence, which raises issues about fairness, safeguarding and access to specialised support. Prison education encounters significant educational limitations, such as security protocols, limited resources, inconsistent attendance and the complex socio-emotional requirements of incarcerated individuals. These inequalities show the significance of context-sensitive practice and the necessity for educators to tailor education to the specific conditions of each environment (Estyn, 2024). These disparities reinforce that no single environment is universally effective; rather, the success of each depends on the quality of facilitation, available resources and the needs of individual learners.

The settings also vary in their fundamental objectives. Forest School emphasises comprehensive growth, wellbeing and a connection to nature. Home schooling emphasises individualised learning, adaptability and family-oriented education. Prison education seeks to facilitate rehabilitation, identity reconstruction and societal rehabilitation. The varying objectives influence the activities employed in each context, such as fire-lighting in Forest School, self-directed projects in home schooling, or creative writing workshops in correctional facilities. Furthermore, despite their differences, all three contexts illustrate how significant, contextually rich activities can facilitate cognitive, emotional and social growth (Dewey, 1938). This demonstrates that meaningful learning is shaped not only by pedagogical methods but also by the broader purpose and ethos of each environment.

The comparative research indicates that alternative learning contexts provide significant opportunity for learners who may not excel in conventional settings. Forest School, Prison Education and Home Schooling each provide distinct advantages, through nature-based inquiry, rehabilitative education, or individualised education. Each context poses unique challenges; however, they collectively demonstrate the efficacy of adaptable, learner-centred methodologies in promoting engagement, wellbeing and holistic development. They emphasise the necessity of reevaluating the locations and methods of learning, as well as the significance of educational settings that cater to the varied needs and experiences of students (Welsh Government, 2024). Taken together, these findings highlight the value of

educational diversity and the importance of recognising that learners thrive in different environments depending on their backgrounds, strengths and personal circumstances.

7. **Conclusion.**

In the three alternative learning environments examined, Forest School, Prison Education and Home Schooling. Meaningful, learner-centred education appears in many forms' dependent of context, purpose and learner requirements. Each venue presents unique advantages: Forest School promotes resilience, autonomy and sensory-rich exploration; Prison Education enables rehabilitation, identity reconstruction and empowerment; and Home Schooling allows for personalised, flexible and interest-driven learning (Dewey, 1938). Although their differences, all three environments embody the principles of contemporary Welsh educational policy, particularly the Curriculum for Wales' emphasis on genuine, real-world learning and the ALN Code's focus on inclusive, adaptable provision (Welsh Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2021). Recent national assessments of ALN reform (2024) and Estyn evaluations highlight the persistent requirement for responsive, context-sensitive practices, attributes that these alternative settings demonstrate through their adaptability and learner-centred ethos (Estyn, 2024). Simultaneously, each context poses distinct issues concerning equity, access, protection, practitioner proficiency and institutional limitations. These conflicts emphasise the necessity of guaranteeing that all learners, regardless of their environment, have access to superior, significant educational experiences. The analysis illustrates that various learning environments are essential for expanding our comprehension of the locations and methods of learning, as well as acknowledging the varied needs, backgrounds and goals of learners throughout Wales *(Welsh Government, 2015)*.

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