

Does outdoor play promote social development in children?

Abstract

The reason of this research project is to find out if children can develop socially through outdoor play. The researcher will use children, parents and practitioners who work within the foundation phase to gather research as these are the children who play outside as part of the curriculum. This research project will use a mixed method, triangulation approach of gathering data to ensure accurate results. The researcher will use observe the children playing outside in the setting, interview the practitioners as they know the children well to comment on their social development and send questionnaires out to parents to get their point of view. The triangulation method will validate the results making the conclusion clear. Ethical considerations such as consent, assent, confidentiality, and safeguarding will also be discussed. As well as how to keep the participants, researcher, and university safe and how to minimise the risks.

Literature review

Veiga, *et al* (2017) suggests that interactions in the outdoor environment provide children with a variety of learning opportunities to improve their social skills. Social competence in children has been linked to all types of social play, such as fantasy, role-play, physical activity and rough and tumble. However, Ouvry and Furtado (2020, p.14) believe that due to the modern screen-based technology, there are concerns on the impact of children's social communication skills. Even though technology is sufficient in children's development Ouvry and Furtado (2020, p.14) indicate that first hand experiences and interactions in the natural world are more valuable for social development.

Brown (2012, p.24) believes that play supports the development of social skills and that children will not understand how to be socially competent by adults telling them how to behave. Similarly, McInnes, *et al* (2013, p.268) state that children learn best when play is perceived as play to the child. So, if an adult told a child how to play co-

operatively, they would view it as work and not enjoy playing with others due to the adult telling them what to do.

During outdoor play Johnson and Watts (2018, p.65) state that children can have many conversations about the natural world whether it be for socialising, questioning, or learning. Social development is enhanced in the outdoor environment as children will need to solve problems, for example how to get a branch through a small gap or how to get a ball that is stuck in a tree. Likewise, as children are naturally curious about the world around them the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022, p.21) states that the natural world allows for a great deal of language development opportunities through playful experiences. Children's senses can be stimulated by describing what they hear, see, touch and smell in the outdoors in the natural environment (The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, 2022, p.16). For example, the sound of leaves crunching and the smell of different flowers.

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022, p.16) suggests that the outdoor environment is sufficient for social development in the early years as it can help boost well-being and self-esteem. This is because during outdoor play children can experiment by making and breaking their own rules without the fear of failure says Ouvry and Furtado (2020, p.27). When children play in an outdoor environment, they will learn to take risks and become responsible for their actions in co-operative play (Ouvry and Furtado, 2020, p.27). For instance, if children are playing fighting and someone gets hurt the children will learn to be sympathetic and apologise. Nevertheless, Johnson and Watts (2018, p.66) suggest that children need to understand instructions and follow rules during outdoor play to keep them safe.

Also, the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022, p.21) suggests that the flexibility of the outdoors can allow children to express themselves and encourage confidence when communicating. In a similar way Ouvry and Furtado (2020, p.27) and Froebel (Froebel Trust, no date) imply that when children play, they learn about their friends, different families, and cultural differences. Froebel Trust (no

date) say that cultural knowledge is developed through shared language, values and beliefs with other children and practitioners. Children might use this new language and knowledge about other cultures and families during imaginative play.

This can help children feel confident, included and that they belong says the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022, p.44).

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022, p.8) and Johnson and Watts (2018, p.69) say that enabling adults should boost children's natural curiosity. The adult should use teachable moments to encourage learning and development when observing or taking part in outdoor play. The adult can therefore encourage new language development when nature opens new experiences. For example, having first-hand experience with insects and learning the name for them. Ouvry and Furtado (2020, p.27) say that communication can further be developed by children discussing with adults and other children any discoveries that have made. For example, if children find a worm in the garden, they will be curious and excited to talk about what they have discovered. On the other hand, McInnes, *et al* (2013, p.272) imply that adult-child interactions and the use of adults using closed questions and teaching simple language will not be seen as play to the child due to the adult presence cue.

Children develop relationships through outside physical interactions such as chasing and rough and tumble play. Through this, the children may develop the ability to regulate emotions, understand limits and develop social skills implies White (2014, p.85) and Ouvry and Furtado (2020, p.43). Similarly, White (2014, p.146) states that construction play which is child-led allows children to learn how to work together, try things out and discuss what works and what does not and be resilient to any challenges. However due to covid-19 the children in the research sample were deprived of going to school and lived in isolation says BBC Children in Need (2020). This impacted their social skills because children lacked contact with friends, family, and other trusted adults. (BBC Children in Need (2020).

Methodological considerations

The sample for this research proposal will consist of convenience and probability sampling from 5 settings in Wales. The researcher will gather information from practitioners, parents and children who are based in Foundation Phase as these are the children who use the outdoor area as part of the curriculum in Wales (Foundation Phase, 2009, p.2). The researcher will use the probability sampling methods to ensure every participant that takes part in the research has an equal chance of being chosen (Berndt, 2020, p.224). The researcher will also use convenience sampling method as it will be quicker and easier to gather information. The people who are asked to participate in the research may also be committed and give more truthful responses when it is convenient implies Berndt (2020, p.226). However, this method of sampling can also link to bias results and create exaggerated or misleading findings which the researcher will need to be aware of.

The researcher will use a mix method approach when gathering research for the proposal. In early childhood research, mixed methods are a sufficient strategy that combines both qualitative and quantitative data says Roberts-Holmes (2018, p.84). According to Simply Psychology (2023) quantitative data gives a numerical result. For example, a question could be 'how many times a day do children play outside?' Whereas qualitative data allows for the participant to expand on their answer, so it is a non-numerical outcome (Simply Psychology, 2023). An example question could be, 'why do the children in your setting like playing outside?' Roberts-Holmes (2018, p.84) says that mixed methods help researchers understand the complex lives of children, their parents, and practitioners by using different ways of gathering data. Data gathering methods include, surveys, experiments, interviews, case studies, questionnaires, and observations.

However, in this research project the researcher will use, questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The use of different research methods is called triangulation. Triangulation compares different sources of evidence to gain a better understanding on a topic. Due to the use of triangulation, it can increase the validity of the data collected says Roberts-Holmes (2012, p.84). The reason for this is that if both

qualitative and quantitative data both agree on an issue this can give the researcher confidence in their findings.

The researcher has chosen not to use case studies as a way of gathering data because the children could develop a strong attachment to the researcher over time and it could make it hard for the researcher to stay professional says Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p.128).

Questionnaire

Firstly, the researcher will ask the parents of the settings chosen to complete a questionnaire about their child's social development during outdoor play.

The researcher has chosen to ask the parents to partake in the questionnaire because according to Callan and Reed (2011) and Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p.123) questionnaires can be a quick way to get results as it saves time and does not take long to complete. Also, the questionnaires do not involve the participant directly and can be anonymous. Newby (2014, p.288) states that questionnaires are flexible as in it does not matter when or where it is completed.

Questionnaires can utilise a range of questions that can allow for qualitative and quantitative data. This is because they can use closed questions that are just a tick box for yes or no or a rating scale providing pre-determined quantitative data. An example question could be 'on a scale of 1 to 10 how well does your child share when playing with other children outside?'. Whereas open ended questions would allow the participant to extend their answer giving their own views and feelings on the matter says Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p.123). Lambert (2019, p.1) says that questionnaires are a good way of finding out if people agree or disagree on the issue. Due to the mixed method questions, that can be asked it can help validate results if both qualitative and quantitative results agree or disagree.

Although according to Lambert (2019, p.2) even though questionnaires generate large numbers of responses, they are also known for low completion rates. A possible reason for this could be confusion with question phrasing suggests Lambert

(2019, p.2). For example, leading questions such as 'do you agree that outdoor play promotes good social skills?' can cause biased results and alter the validity of the data.

Observations

The researcher has chosen to observe the sampled children during outdoor play for 1 in their setting for. This is to observe the children's interactions to be able to see first-hand if outdoor play can promote social development. Observations provide qualitative data as everyone's perception from an observation will be different. Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p.105) state that the reason for observing is to gather insider knowledge as an outside researcher. However, a limitation to observations is that they can be time consuming, and the data gathered might not be accurate in the time frame (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p.104).

Observations are viewed as an appropriate method when researching children says Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p. 104) as it will take place in the child's natural environment meaning they will be comfortable and confident.

According to Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p104) observations are a way of gathering information from children that is child-led, they can still follow their own interests and has respect for their independence. McInnes, *et al* (2013, p.268) implies that play is most beneficial when it is perceived as play to the child. Adult presence is one-way children cue whether what is play and what is not says McInnes, *et al* (2013, p.268). That is why the researcher will stand back to observe and not to get involved in the play cycle unless invited in.

When observing one limitation is the Hawthorne effect. The Hawthorne effect is when people change their natural behaviour because they know they are being watched says Papatheodorou, Gill, and Luff (2013). However, Papatheodorou, Gill, and Luff (2013) suggest that observing from the back may minimise the Hawthorne effect as the observer could blend into the background not attracting too much attention to themselves.

Due to the observations being child-led this will give the researcher a true authentic view on the children's social development. Although, when observing the researcher could miss relevant data implies Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p.104). But Papatheodorou, Gill, and Luff (2013) suggests that video recordings could be used as a tool for acquiring results that can be looked at again.

Interview

The researcher has chosen to interview the practitioners that work in the foundation phase of the settings chosen for the sample. The researcher has chosen to use semi-structured group interviews which means that there will be a set of open-ended questions pre-planned, but the researcher has the flexibility to ask more questions to gather more relevant information (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell, 2013, p. 120). According to Lambert (2019, p.14) the semi-structured interview types can help build a relationship between researcher and participant. This can make participants more likely to be open about their opinions and feelings. However, due to the Hawthorne effect where people change their behaviour when they know they are being watched it can alter the authenticity of the data gathered.

A strength of interviews includes the participants ability to revisit points, ask for clarification and seek further explanation says Lambert (2019, p.16). Also, the use of recording interviews means that the researcher will not need to write anything down during the actual interview and can revisit the recording later to analyse, giving the participants their full attention.

Group interviews can encourage involvement with all members of staff that can add their own feelings and views on the topic making it less intimidating than individual interviews say Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2013, p.121) and Newby (2014, p.340). Lambert (2019, p. 15) states that semi-structured interviews are a sufficient way of gathering qualitative data, although for that reason they can be time-consuming for both the researcher and participant.

Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2014, p.121) imply that group interviews are a cost-effective and efficient way of gathering data. However, during group

interviews there could be a challenge where one participant dominates the others says Newby (2014, p.366) and Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell (2013, p.121) states that this can shape the data that emerges.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations must be implemented throughout the research project when working with children suggests the University of Brighton (2014, p.12 and p.25). The considerations include confidentiality, safety of participants, and researcher, safeguarding and the right to withdraw. Papatheodorou, Gill, and Luff (2013) suggest that in line with ethical considerations it would be good practice for the class teacher to introduce the researcher to the children explaining exactly what they are doing at the setting, this can also help the children feel more at ease.

University of Brighton (2014, p.25) state that respect must be shown to all the participants in the research process in this case the children, parents, and practitioners. This is in accordance with UNCRC's Article 12, which states that children have the right to express and have their opinions and feelings considered in all situations affecting them (UNICEF, no date). This means that if the children want to withdraw from the research, they have the right to states BERA Guidelines (2019, p.31). NSPCC Learning (no date) states that the researcher should aim to be as inclusive as possible during the research project. Translating questionnaires into other languages can ensure more parents in this case can access them.

During this research proposal the researcher will need voluntary informed consent from every participant. Consent is the agreement which must be freely given by the child's legal guardian to conduct research involving that child (UWTSD, no date, p.4). The consent can be obtained using a consent form that outlines what the research is about, what is expected, the risks and benefits and that the research is voluntary says NSPCC Learning (2023). Assent is the verbal consent that the child would give the researcher if they were not able to fully understand what is expected of them (NSPCC Learning, 2023). However, if a child does not consent or assent to the research this overrides the consent from the parent. Article 3 from the UNCRC says

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that the best interest of the child should always be top priority in any decision regarding the child (UNICEF, no date).

When undertaking research with children there is a risk that they could make a safeguarding disclosure to the researcher. Article 3 from the UNCRC also state that the best interest of the child should always be considered top priority. BERA Guidelines (2019, p.52) and University of Brighton (2014, p.28) state that the researcher will have to break anonymity and confidentiality to follow the safeguarding procedures that the setting has in place to ensure the child's safety.

The researcher has chosen to record the children during outside play and record the interviews with practitioners to be able to re watch later and analyse. However even though technology has allowed for research to be recorded there are ethical and technical issues that much be considered says Papatheodorou, Gill, and Luff (2013). Technology such as mobile phones, cameras and recording can break confidentiality and anonymity due to the participants faces being on camera. This can also increase the Hawthorne effect due to the presence of the camera states Papatheodorou, Gill, and Luff (2013).

The researcher will have to consider who owns the recordings, who has access to them and if they will be password protected. This can break confidentiality if not considered says The Data Protection Act (2018) and BERA Guidelines (2019, p.50). Also, The Data Protection Act (2018) states that the recordings should be kept for no longer than is necessary and the participants have the right to be informed on how the data will be used.

NSPCC Learning (no date) states that the researcher should aim to be as inclusive as possible. Translating questionnaires into other languages can ensure more parents in this case can access them.

<u>Risk to Participants</u>	<u>How to minimise the risk</u>
Participants might find participating in research stressful says University of Brighton (2014, p.26) and NSPCC Learning (2013).	The researcher could minimise the risk of stress by introducing themselves and explaining what the research is about when they first getting into the setting implies University of Brighton (2014, p.26).
Children might fall over and hurt themselves in the outdoor area when observing them.	The researcher could also make the participants aware that they have the right to withdraw at any time for any reason says (BERA, 2019, P.31). It is also ethical according to Page, Clare, and Nutbrown (2013, p.10) to stop recording when the participants are in distress not be intrusive.
Participants could be at risk of harm from the researcher's electrical equipment.	Save the children (2004, p.29 and p.30) state that this risk could be minimised by assessing any risks before starting the research. Page, Clare, and Nutbrown (2013, p.10) suggest that the researcher should identify all possible risks that the electrical equipment has and let participant known to keep them safe.

<u>Risk to the researcher</u>	<u>How to minimise the risk</u>
One risk to the researcher includes hacking on the system where video recordings will be stored.	To minimise this risk BERA Guidelines (2019, p.50) suggest not to share data by email or USB sticks as they can be susceptible to hacking. Instead, the researcher should ensure that the data is stored on a secure location that is password protected states BERA Guidelines (2019, p.50).
Another risk to the researcher is that a disclosure can be made about them when working with children or other adults.	Ofsted (2021) state that researchers will require a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check before starting the research. This ensures that the children's right to be protected from violence and abuse is considered (UNICEF, no date). Also, according to the University of Brighton (2014, p.28) it is suggested that researchers are never alone with the participants and work in an open space where they can be observed by others.
Researchers may also struggle to gain consent from participants.	However, to minimise this risk on the consent form the researcher will include the researcher's role, aims, methods and the right to withdraw suggests BERA Guidelines (2014, p.9). It is also suggested by NSPCC Learning (no date) to explain to children the aims of the research in a child-friendly way, so they understand exactly what is happening.

<u>Risk to the University</u>	<u>How to minimise the risk</u>
One risk the University faces is the educational researcher not following the guidelines and legislation.	To minimise the risk the researcher will read the UWTSD Research Data Management Policy (no date, p.8) to ensure there is no misconduct.
The educational researcher could also plagiarise information.	Also, BERA Guidelines (2019, p.63) state that educational researchers must uphold the reputation of the university to the highest standard.
The educational researcher could injure themselves when carrying out the research.	To minimise this risk all sources used in the research should be disclosed suggests BERA Guidelines (2019, p.67).
The educational researcher could injure themselves when carrying out the research.	BERA Guidelines (2019, p.84) state that it is the institutions responsibility to consider an in-depth risk assessment and monitor the researcher's safety.
A complaint could be made about the educational researcher.	NSPCC Learning (no date) says that a complaints procedure should be in place and should include a way to contact someone who is not involved in the research.

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