

Holistic Play-Based Learning. The Child, Adult and the Non- Human World

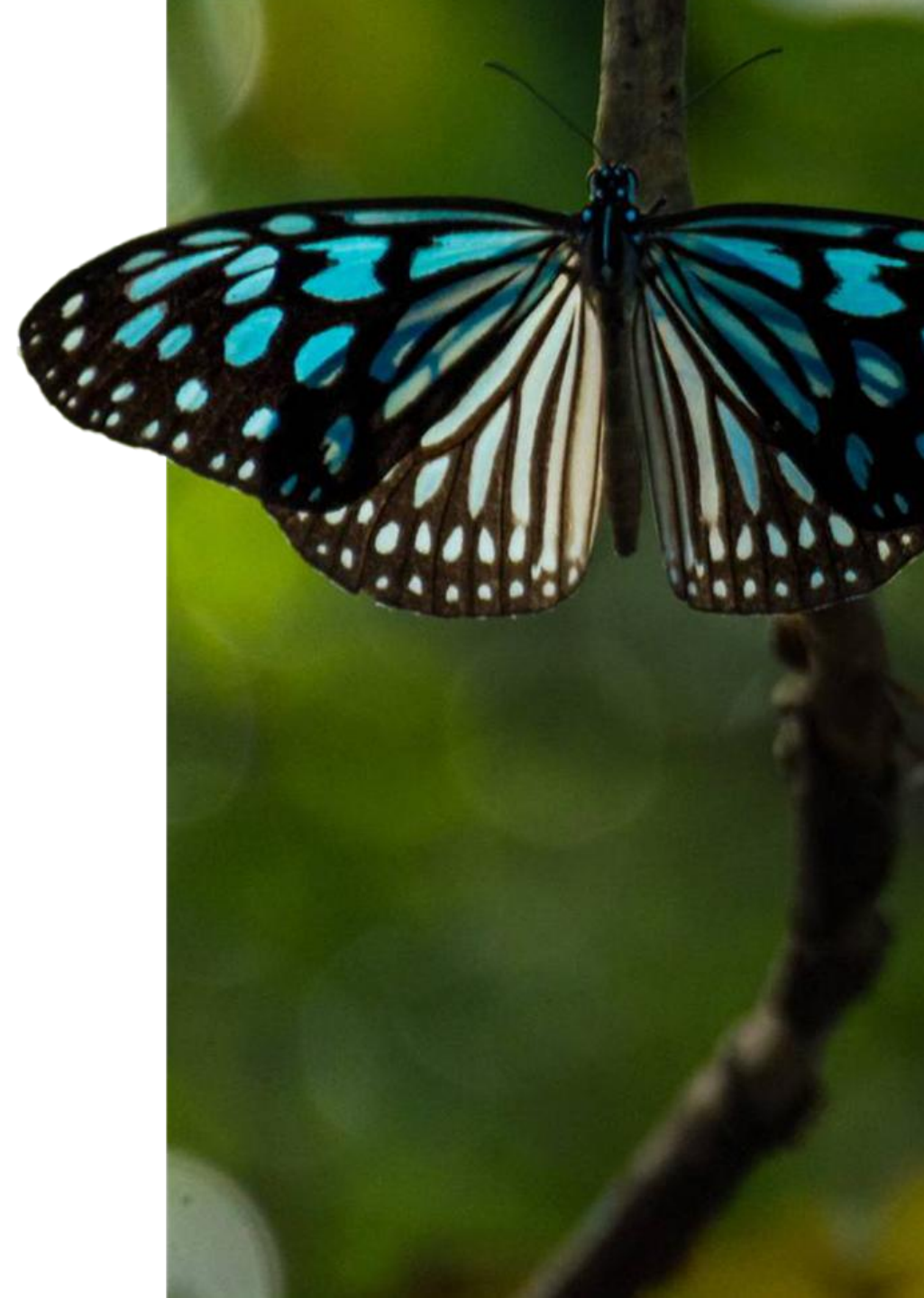
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Module: Young Children Learning

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Presentation Overview

- Why I chose my image
- Positive learning environments
- The child as an active learner
- The role of the adult
- The non-human world
- Rights, agency and sustainability
- Critical tensions and barriers
- Conclusion
- Questions



Figure 1: Children exploring woodland environments (Louisville Nature Center, n.d.)

'Play-based learning can be understood as learning that emerges through exploration, interaction and meaningful engagement rather than through direct instruction alone' (Bruce, 2011).



Child Agency Within Play-Based Learning

- Children as active meaning-makers
- Exploration and curiosity
- Agency and choice
- Embodied and sensory learning
- Rights-based perspectives

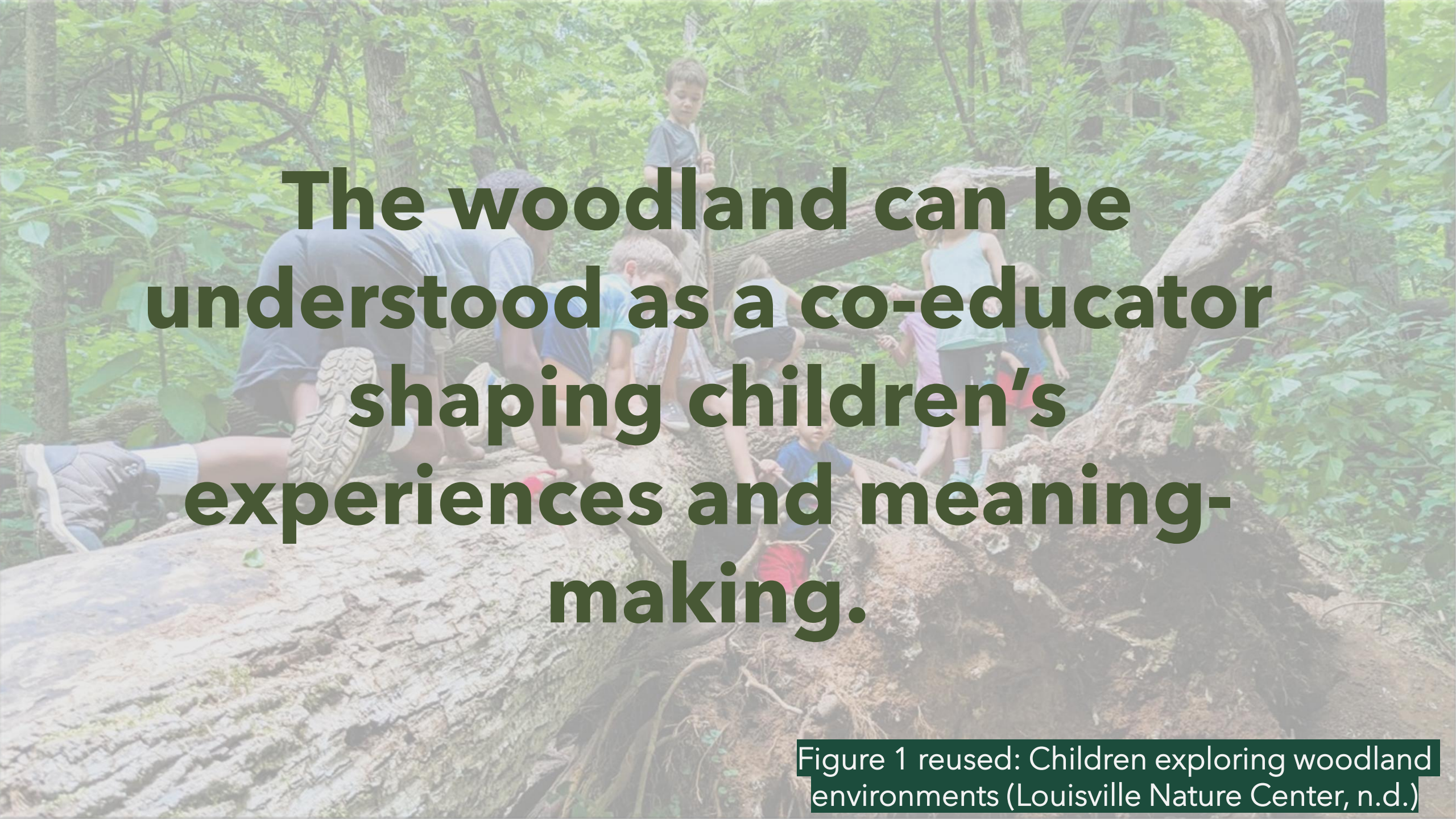
- Figure 1 reused: Children exploring woodland environments (Louisville Nature Center, n.d.)





The Role of the Adult

- Facilitation does not control
- Sustained shared thinking
- Responsive interactions
- Balancing safety and exploration
- Relational pedagogy

A group of children are exploring a woodland environment. They are gathered around a large, fallen tree trunk, which is covered in moss and lichen. The children are dressed in casual outdoor clothing, including t-shirts, shorts, and sneakers. Some are standing, while others are crouching or sitting on the log. The background is filled with lush green foliage and trees, creating a dense forest atmosphere. The text is overlaid on the image in a large, bold, dark green font.

The woodland can be understood as a co-educator shaping children's experiences and meaning-making.

Figure 1 reused: Children exploring woodland environments (Louisville Nature Center, n.d.)

Sustainability and Ecological Awareness



Figure 2: Well-being of Future Generations Act (Welsh Government, 2015)

- Structural inequalities
- Accountability pressures
- Risk-averse cultures
- Uneven access to outdoor learning

'Play is frequently promoted within policy discourse yet tightly regulated in practice' (Wood, 2014)

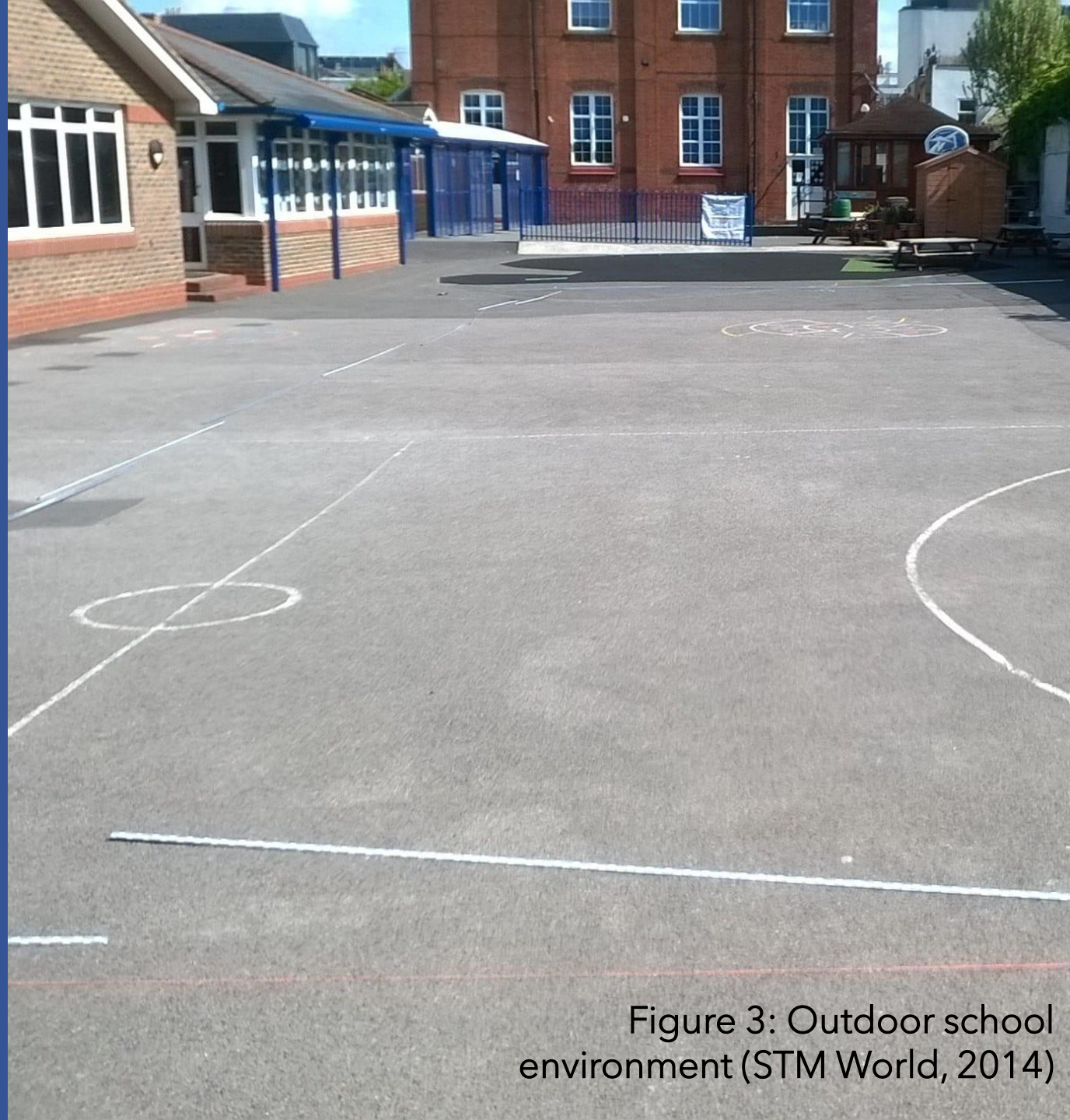


Figure 3: Outdoor school environment (STM World, 2014)



Conclusion

Figure 1 reused: Children exploring woodland environments (Louisville Nature Center, n.d.)

A group of children are exploring a woodland environment. They are gathered around a large, fallen log that has been cut into sections. One child is lying on the log, while others are standing or sitting on it. The background is filled with lush green trees and foliage, creating a dense forest atmosphere. The text "Any Questions?" is overlaid in a large, bold, dark green font across the center of the image.

Any Questions?

Figure 1 reused: Children exploring woodland environments (Louisville Nature Center, n.d.)

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Notes

Slide 1 - Info and Introduction (1 min)

Read my info

Good morning

Today I will critically explore the interplay between the child, adult and non-human world in fostering holistic play-based learning.

To support this, the image I have chosen reflects my own worldview regarding young children's learning and positive learning environments.

Throughout the presentation, I will critically consider how relationships between children, adults and environments shape learning experiences, while also exploring issues of rights, agency and sustainability discourse.

I will also examine some of the tensions and barriers that influence how holistic play-based learning is realised within contemporary early years practice in Wales

Slide 2 - Presentation Overview (0.5 min)

Read points

Slide 3 - Why I choose my image (2 mins)

I chose this woodland image because it reflects my understanding that young children learn most meaningfully through direct interaction with people and the natural world.

This perspective has been shaped by both my personal and professional experiences. Growing up on a farm meant learning was connected to seasons, weather, animals, plants and outdoor experiences as part of everyday life. I recognise that having continuous access to outdoor environments was a privilege, and this significantly shaped my understanding of positive learning environments.

My worldview has also been influenced through working at a summer camp in America, where children from inner-city areas of New York, who had little to no access to green spaces, experienced natural outdoor environments for the first time. Daily routines, learning and play took place almost entirely outdoors within simple natural environments, including cabins without full walls. Children engaged directly with weather, natural materials and outdoor challenges.

I have also observed while working in early years settings in Wales that children often appear more engaged, confident and physically active when learning extends beyond the classroom.

For me, the woodland image reflects how learning emerges through exploration, movement and interaction with both people and the environment. Changing seasons, weather, sounds and textures create opportunities for curiosity, exploration and discovery.

This aligns with experiential learning perspectives, where knowledge emerges through active participation and lived experience (Kolb, 1984).

The image also reflects Froebel's view of nature as central to children's learning and development. Froebel described the kindergarten as a "children's garden", emphasising relationships between children, adults and the natural world (Tovey, 2013).

For me, positive learning environments are not simply physical spaces, but places where children feel connected and able to actively participate with meaningful learning experiences.

Slide 4 - What Is a Positive Learning Environment? (2.5 mins)

Play-based learning can be understood as learning that emerges through exploration, interaction and meaningful engagement rather than through direct instruction alone (Bruce, 2011).

Positive learning environments extend beyond physical spaces. A positive learning environment can therefore be understood as one that supports children's wellbeing, agency, belonging and opportunities for meaningful participation within learning. They are environments where children feel emotionally secure, valued and able to actively participate within learning experiences.

Holistic play-based learning recognises that children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development are interconnected (Moyles, 2010). Katz and Chard (2000) further argue that holistic learning should support emotional, social, moral and creative dimensions of development alongside knowledge and skills.

Bruce (2011) argues that meaningful play depends upon children having agency, time and opportunities for deeper engagement. However, outdoor play is not automatically developmental. Its value depends on the quality of relationships, opportunities for participation and how experiences are supported.

The woodland also challenges narrow classroom-based understandings of learning. Research suggests that outdoor environments can support curiosity, creativity and sensory engagement through open-ended experiences (Kiviranta et al., 2023).

However, definitions of positive learning environments remain contested. Play is frequently promoted within policy discourse yet regulated in practice (Wood, 2014).

While outdoor and play-based approaches are widely promoted within Welsh policy, access to such environments continues to be shaped by structural inequalities, practitioner confidence and policy pressures (Estyn, 2023).

Within Wales, this understanding is reflected in the Curriculum for Wales and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (Welsh Government, 2022; 2023). However, the extent to which these approaches are consistently realised in practice remains contested.

Slide 5 - Child Agency Within Play-Based Learning (2 mins)

The woodland image reflects children as active participants in learning who construct meaning through interaction and exploration. Children engage physically, emotionally and socially with environments. In woodland spaces, children make decisions, negotiate risk and interact with materials in unpredictable ways.

Froebelian and post-humanist perspectives position children as active co-constructors of meaning through relationships with people, materials and environments rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Tovey, 2013; Taylor, 2013). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) emphasises learning through interaction and social engagement, while Bruce (2011) argues that meaningful play depends upon children having time, agency and opportunities for deeper engagement.

Research by Kiviranta et al. (2023) found that outdoor environments can increase children's engagement, movement and exploratory behaviours within play-based learning. These interconnected experiences reflect holistic learning by recognising children's emotional, social, physical and cognitive development as closely connected.

The image also connects strongly to children's rights discourse. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) recognises children's right to play. Within early childhood education, agency can be understood as children's capacity to actively participate, make choices and influence their learning experiences.

From this perspective, learning is co-constructed through interaction, guidance and context rather than existing as an isolated activity. However, children's agency within early years settings can still be limited because opportunities for participation are often shaped by adult expectations, safety rules and curriculum goals.

Slide 6 - The Role of the Adult (1.5)

The woodland image also reflects the important role of adults within play-based learning.

Adults influence how environments are experienced through their interactions, expectations and responses to children.

Within woodland environments, adults may scaffold learning by asking questions, extending thinking or supporting children's confidence. Research also highlights that practitioner confidence significantly shapes the quality of play-based learning experiences (Wood, 2014).

However, there is tension between guidance and control.

If adults over-direct play, children's autonomy may become limited. Yet insufficient adult engagement may also restrict opportunities for deeper thinking.

Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) describe sustained shared thinking as a process where adults and children collaboratively extend learning.

Within relational pedagogies, learning is shared between children and adults rather than controlled solely by the practitioner.

However, achieving this balance can be difficult within settings shaped by time pressures, staff ratios and increasing accountability demands, which I will return to in Slide 9.

The woodland image therefore reflects how adults may support shared learning experiences through responsive and facilitative interactions rather than direct instruction.

Slide 7 - Nature as an Active Participant in Learning (2.5 mins)

Posthumanism challenges the idea that humans exist separately from or above the natural world, instead viewing learning as emerging through interconnected relationships between humans, materials, environments and non-human entities (Taylor, 2013).

Gibson's (1979) concept of affordances helps explain this relationship, suggesting that environments offer possibilities for action, exploration and interaction. The woodland therefore functions as more than simply a backdrop for learning.

Within the woodland, uneven surfaces, natural materials, changing weather and movement opportunities all influence children's curiosity, risk-taking and sensory engagement. From this perspective, the woodland can be understood as a co-educator shaping children's experiences and meaning making.

Woodland environments also introduce uncertainty and unpredictability, which may support exploration, adaptability and complex forms of learning.

Approaches such as Forest School further reinforce this relational understanding of learning through repeated engagement with outdoor environments and child-led exploration (Knight, 2013).

Research by O'Brien and Murray (2007) found that regular Forest School experiences supported children's confidence, independence and engagement with learning. Similarly, Estyn (2023) identified examples of effective outdoor pedagogy within settings where woodland activities and exploratory environments supported resilience and wellbeing.

However, while post-humanist perspectives reposition environments as active participants in learning, some critics argue that these approaches may risk minimising the continued importance of human relationships and pedagogical intentionality.

Access to such approaches also remains uneven. Outdoor play is not inherently developmental, but structurally contingent upon funding, practitioner confidence and access to outdoor environments.

Slide 8 - Sustainability and Ecological Awareness (1.5 mins)

The woodland image also symbolises sustainability and ecological awareness.

Davis (2015) argues that early experiences in nature can shape children's long-term relationships with the environment. When children regularly engage with spaces such as woodlands, they may develop emotional attachment, responsibility and care toward the natural world.

Repeated engagement with natural environments may also support children's developing ecological consciousness and emotional connection to sustainability. Davis (2015) further argues that sustainability education should move beyond future-focused environmental messages and recognise children's present relationships and experiences within the natural world.

This connects closely to children's rights discourse. Children have a right not only to play, but also to access meaningful environments that support wellbeing, participation and belonging.

Within Wales, this perspective is reflected in frameworks such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) and Wales - A Play Friendly Country (Welsh Government, 2014).

However, despite strong policy rhetoric, opportunities for meaningful outdoor play remain uneven across settings and communities (Estyn, 2023).

Where opportunities for meaningful engagement with nature are inconsistent, sustainability risks becoming symbolic rather than embedded within practice.

Slide 9 - Critical Tensions and Barriers (2.5 mins)

Structural inequalities continue to shape opportunities for outdoor play and learning. Some settings lack outdoor infrastructure, resources and practitioner confidence, while funding pressures, staff ratios and increasing accountability demands may restrict opportunities for responsive outdoor pedagogy and sustained shared thinking.

Inspection evidence from Estyn (2023) identified inconsistency in both the quality and frequency of outdoor learning experiences across Welsh early years settings. Programmes such as Bod y Tu Allan reflect growing recognition of the need for practitioner support and professional development within outdoor pedagogy (Mudiad Meithrin, 2023).

Jefferson and Anderson (2021) describe a “pedagogy parachute”, where layered professional expectations make responsive play-based practice increasingly difficult to sustain. Risk-averse cultures may further limit opportunities for challenge and exploration. Similarly, Wood (2014) argues that play is frequently promoted within policy discourse yet tightly regulated in practice, while Bradbury (2023) suggests that systemic pressures often restrict meaningful play-based learning.

These tensions reflect a broader disconnect between macro-level policy rhetoric and children’s everyday experiences within early years settings. Clark (2023) further argues that contemporary childhood is increasingly shaped by “hurried” educational cultures focused on measurable outcomes, which can conflict with the slower, exploratory nature of outdoor play.

It is also important not to romanticise nature or assume outdoor play is automatically beneficial. Meaningful learning depends upon relationships, practitioner skill and sustained opportunities for engagement. Outdoor play can therefore be understood not as a universally enacted pedagogy, but as a negotiated practice shaped by institutional priorities, practitioner confidence and material conditions.

The woodland image therefore represents not only opportunities for connection, exploration and play, but also the tensions between pedagogical ideals and the realities of contemporary early years practice.

Slide 10 - Conclusion (2 mins)

In conclusion, the woodland image encapsulates my worldview that positive learning environments are relational, experiential and shaped through meaningful interaction with people and the natural world. Throughout this presentation, I have critically explored how relationships between children, adults and the natural environment contribute to holistic play-based learning experiences.

The woodland symbolises child agency, embodied exploration, adult relationships and ecological interconnection, demonstrating that learning emerges through participation, interaction and lived experience. These experiences reflect holistic learning by recognising children's emotional, social, physical and cognitive development as relational and interconnected.

However, the presentation has also highlighted tensions between pedagogical ideals and the structural realities of contemporary early years provision. Although play, sustainability and outdoor learning are strongly promoted within policy and theory, access to meaningful outdoor experiences remains uneven and shaped by wider social, institutional and material conditions.

This suggests that outdoor play is not automatically transformative, but depends on practitioner confidence and understanding, structural support and children's access to meaningful environments. Ultimately, this presentation argues that learning should not be understood as something delivered to children, but as something co-constructed through relationships between children, adults and the non-human world.

Slide 11 - Questions (5mins)