



ECIE6001

Portfolio

2204676

BA Hons Inclusive Education

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Element 1 - Essay

An outdoor learning environment can be understood as either a deliberately designed space or a natural, unaltered setting in which learners can engage in authentic, hands-on learning experiences (Kiviranta *et al.*, 2024). Outdoor provision plays a significant role in children's learning and development across educational phases; however, the scope and approach differ considerably between early years settings and primary schools (Kiviranta *et al.*, 2024; Scott *et al.*, 2022). This essay critically compares these differences, examining how outdoor education is conceptualised and implemented, and questioning whether the shift between phases reflects developmental need or systemic constraint.

Outdoor learning in early years education is deeply rooted in constructivist and play-based traditions. Froebel (1887) viewed the environment as a garden for children's growth, while McMillan (1923) advocated outdoor nurseries to promote health, well-being, and social reform. Pestalozzi (1801) similarly emphasised experiential learning, arguing that knowledge emerges through direct engagement with the world. Collectively, these perspectives position the outdoor environment as a fundamental context for development; a view that continues to shape contemporary early years practice where outdoor provision is regarded as essential rather than optional. Developmental theory further strengthens this position. Piaget's (1962) constructivism proposes that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, making outdoor spaces conducive to exploration and discovery. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory highlights the importance of interaction, language and scaffolding, all of which are facilitated through collaborative outdoor play. However, a critical perspective suggests that while these theories are frequently cited, their application can be superficial; simply providing outdoor access does not guarantee meaningful cognitive development without skilled adult mediation (Kiviranta *et al.*, 2024). Welsh policy attempted to address this by emphasising purposeful, experience-based learning (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009).

In contrast, primary education, although informed by similar theoretical foundations, tends to adopt a more structured and curriculum-driven approach (Scott *et al.*, 2022). Outdoor learning is commonly utilised as a strategy to achieve predefined learning objectives rather than as a central pedagogical mode, with curriculum demands such as evidencing work presented as barriers to implementing outdoor pedagogy (Marchant *et al.*, 2019). This reflects a broader shift from developmental priorities towards measurable attainment; while this transition may be justified by increasing academic expectations, it arguably narrows the breadth of learning experiences available to children. Recent reforms associated with the Curriculum for Wales attempt to reintroduce experiential and outdoor learning across phases, yet tensions remain between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Tinney, 2023; Welsh Government, 2026).

The scope of outdoor provision illustrates a clear divergence between phases. Within early years frameworks, such as the Foundation Phase, outdoor learning is embedded as a continuous provision and is considered equal to indoor learning (Wainwright *et al.*, 2020). Guidance stresses that access to outdoor environments should be a daily entitlement, integrated across all areas of learning and emphasises that outdoor learning offers unique affordances rather than replicating indoor tasks (Welsh Assembly Government and Learning Through Landscapes Cymru, 2008; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). This reflects a holistic view of the child, where physical, social and emotional development are prioritised alongside cognitive growth. Inspection evidence reinforces the value of this approach. Estyn (2019) highlights how effective outdoor provision supports the development of problem-solving, communication and physical skills, while also fostering independence and well-being. Furthermore, outdoor learning has been identified as particularly beneficial for engagement and inclusion, especially for learners who may find conventional classroom environments challenging (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016). However, it is important to acknowledge that such positive outcomes are not universal; variability in practitioner expertise and resource availability can lead to inconsistencies in quality, raising questions about how effective practice is defined and measured (Davies and Hamilton, 2018).

In primary schools, the scope of outdoor provision is typically more limited and less consistent. Although its benefits are widely acknowledged, competing demands such as curriculum coverage and assessment accountability often marginalise outdoor learning. Ofsted (2011) observes that outdoor education is frequently confined to alternative provision or targeted interventions, rather than embedded within mainstream practice. This positioning risks framing outdoor learning as remedial or supplementary, rather than as a core entitlement for all learners. Moreover, outdoor learning in primary settings often occurs during timetabled lessons, such as science or physical education, or through occasional enrichment activities (Davies and Hamilton, 2018). While initiatives supported by the Institute for Outdoor Learning (2025) demonstrate the potential of outdoor experiences to re-engage learners, particularly in alternative provision, their sporadic nature due to barriers within the education system limits sustained impact (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016). This contrasts sharply with the integrated model evident in early years settings, suggesting a lack of continuity that may not align with children's ongoing developmental needs (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009).

Pedagogically, early years outdoor provision is characterised by play-based, child-initiated learning, in which practitioners adopt a facilitative role, observing children and extending their interests through responsive interactions (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). This approach supports autonomy, creativity and intrinsic motivation, aligning with both constructivist theory and Welsh guidance (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1962). However, such approaches require highly skilled practitioners; without intentional planning and interaction, play may remain superficial rather than cognitively challenging (Jensen *et al.*, 2019). A lack of risk-taking further hinders early years practice as managed risk is considered essential for developing resilience, confidence and physical competence (Welsh Assembly Government and Learning Through Landscapes Cymru, 2008). Outdoor environments provide opportunities for children to test boundaries and develop judgement (Welsh Assembly Government and Learning Through Landscapes Cymru, 2008). Estyn (2019) emphasises that effective settings balance safety with challenge, enabling meaningful risk experiences. Nevertheless, increasing societal concerns around safety can lead to risk-averse practices, potentially limiting these developmental opportunities.

In primary education, outdoor learning tends to be more teacher-directed and outcome-focused; activities are designed to meet specific curriculum objectives, such as developing scientific enquiry or applying numeracy skills in real-world contexts (Welsh Government, 2026; Marchant *et al.*, 2019). While this structured approach can enhance relevance and engagement, it may also constrain creativity and reduce opportunities for child-led exploration (Marchant *et al.*, 2019). The emphasis on measurable outcomes can further discourage teachers from utilising outdoor environments, particularly where assessment frameworks prioritise written evidence (Marchant *et al.*, 2019). Learning Through Landscapes (2019) argues that outdoor environments in primary school can still support play, creativity and social interaction, yet these aspects are frequently undervalued. This reflects the broader tension within the education system, where performance and accountability can overshadow holistic development. Consequently, outdoor learning may be perceived as less academically rigorous, despite evidence suggesting a positive impact on engagement and well-being (Miller *et al.*, 2021).

Both early years and primary settings recognise the benefits of outdoor learning, including enhanced well-being, engagement and social development (Welsh Government, 2026; Tinney, 2023). Play Scotland (2026) highlights the importance of high-quality outdoor environments in supporting inclusive, holistic learning experiences. Similarly, Estyn (2016) demonstrates how outdoor approaches can improve behaviour and outcomes, particularly in alternative settings. However, the persistence of structural barriers suggests that recognition alone is insufficient to drive consistent practice (Miller *et al.*, 2021; Davies and Hamilton, 2018). Challenges vary between phases. In early years settings, issues often relate to practitioners' confidence, training, and resource availability (Davies and Hamilton, 2018). Regardless of strong policy support, interpretations of quality provision can differ significantly, leading to uneven experiences for children (Davies and Hamilton, 2018; Wainwright *et al.*, 2020). In primary schools, barriers are more systemic, including time constraints, curriculum pressures and limited professional development opportunities (Marchant *et al.*, 2019). There is a need for greater support to embed outdoor learning effectively for primary-aged children (Marchant *et al.*, 2019; Miller *et al.*, 2021; Welsh Government, 2026). Despite these differences, important

commonalities exist. Both phases acknowledge the value of outdoor learning and the role of practitioners in facilitating meaningful experiences (Jensen *et al.*, 2019; The Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL), 2026; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). Effective provision in both contexts requires thoughtful planning, appropriate resources and a supportive ethos. There is also increasing recognition of the need for continuity across phases. The Curriculum for Wales promotes a more integrated approach, encouraging experiential learning and the use of outdoor environments throughout children's educational journeys (Tinney, 2023; Welsh Government, 2026).

In conclusion, outdoor provision is valued across early years and primary education, yet its scope and implementation differ significantly. Early years prioritise continuous, play-based outdoor learning grounded in developmental theory, whereas primary schools tend to adopt a more structured, outcome-driven approach. While this shift reflects broader educational priorities, it also exposes inconsistencies that may undermine children's holistic development. A more balanced and consistent integration of outdoor learning across phases is therefore necessary to ensure that its benefits are sustained rather than diminished as children progress through the education system.

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LITTLE EFFORTS, BIG IMPACT!

GARDENING CLUB

EVERYBODY WELCOME!!
PARENT/CARER/GRANDPARENT/UNCLE/AUNT ETC WITH CHILDREN

Tuesday 12th & 19th May 2026
3.20 pm - 4.15 pm

Please wear suitable clothing and footwear - things that you don't mind getting mucky!

WHAT TO EXPECT:
Planting seeds & weeding
Learn about nature & sustainability

IF YOU HAVE ANY GARDENING TOOLS PLEASE BRING THEM ALONG!

SIGN UP NOW!
CONTACT: [redacted] (FEO)
E-MAIL: [redacted]@HWBCYMRU.NET
OR NOTIFY VIA PARENTMAIL/SCHOOL OFFICE

(Canva, 2026)

Element 2 - Reference list

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RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Location / Activity:	On-site School Woodland Activities	Date:	5/4/2026
Assessor:	S R-O	Review date:	5/4/2027

ACTIVITY	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Possible hazards	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to reduce the risk of injury	Overall risk RATING: L/M/H
Toasting Marshmallows	Well-being – mental and physical Social skills – listening/turn-taking Cooking skills Fire Safety Awareness	Fire – burns Food – allergies/choking Unsuitable weather – high winds/heavy rain/lightning, etc	Children, young people, adults	Safety talk prior to the activity starting Safety perimeter around the fire, fire bucket & water Small group of up to 10 pupils at a time around the fire – additional staff support for 1-1 pupils or those with additional needs. Medical kit & medication. Mobile phone, portable charger & emergency contact numbers Check the weather forecast - change to indoor activities as necessary	Low
Woodland Walk	Well-being – mental and physical Social skills – listening & speaking Learning about the environment Motor skills – navigating uneven surfaces/branches/roots	Trip hazards Allergies/health issues Getting separated from the group Unsuitable weather – high winds/heavy rain/lightning, etc	Children, young people, adults	Safety talk prior to the activity starting Suitable footwear & stick to pathways Small group of up to 10 pupils at a time around the fire – additional staff support for 1-1 pupils or those with additional needs. Safe word & meeting point – everyone returns when called Medical kit, medication, Mobile phone, portable charger & emergency contact numbers Check the weather forecast - change to indoor activities as necessary	Low
Hide & Seek	Well-being – mental & physical Social skills – turn-taking, listening/ speaking Motor skills – navigating uneven surfaces/branches/roots	Trip hazards Allergies/health issues Getting separated from the group Unsuitable weather – high winds/heavy rain/lightning, etc	Children, young people, adults	Safety talk prior to the activity starting Suitable footwear & stick to pathways Small group of up to 10 pupils at a time around the fire – additional staff support for 1-1 pupils or those with additional needs. Safe word & meeting point – everyone returns when called Medical kit & medication Mobile phone, portable charger & emergency contact numbers Check the weather forecast - change to indoor activities as necessary	Low

Element 4 - Literature Review

Outdoor education has become increasingly prominent within educational research and practice in Wales and the United Kingdom (UK), reflecting a growing recognition of the pedagogical value of learning beyond the traditional classroom. Broadly defined, outdoor learning refers to structured educational experiences that take place outside the classroom and utilise natural or built environments as learning contexts (Learning Through Landscapes, 2021). Within the UK context, outdoor education is commonly understood as a form of experiential learning that involves environmental engagement, physical activity and personal development (Institute for Outdoor Learning, 2023). Although some scholars attempt to define outdoor learning in simplified terms, such definitions risk narrowing its conceptual scope and overlooking its interdisciplinary nature. In the UK and Welsh context, outdoor learning is recognised as a broad and evolving field encompassing play-based learning, adventure education and environmental education, each underpinned by distinct pedagogical purposes and practices (Brown et al., 2025; Beames, Higgins and Nicol, 2012). This diversity reflects the adaptability of outdoor education across age groups, educational settings and curriculum areas, reinforcing its relevance within contemporary educational discourse.

The theoretical foundations of outdoor education are strongly influenced by experiential learning theory. Dewey (1938) argued that meaningful learning emerges through active engagement with real-world experiences, emphasising the importance of interaction between the learner and their environment. Dewey also stressed that education should be relevant to learners' lives, positioning experience as central to knowledge construction. These ideas were further developed by Kolb (1984), whose experiential learning cycle highlights the relationship between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. This cyclical model is particularly relevant in outdoor contexts, where learners can immediately apply and reflect upon their experiences. Within the UK, outdoor education has also been shaped by Hahn (1960), who emphasised character development, resilience and social responsibility through challenge and adventure. These principles have been embedded in practice through organisations such as

The Outward Bound Trust (2020). However, critics highlight that participation in such programmes can be limited by cost, raising concerns about accessibility, equity and inclusion (NCFE, 2023).

Outdoor education is widely recognised as a pedagogical approach that promotes holistic development, encompassing cognitive, social, physical and emotional growth (Prince, Garrett and Ager, 2026). A central theme in the literature is experiential learning, with outdoor environments providing opportunities for students to engage directly with real-world contexts in meaningful, authentic ways. Research demonstrates that such experiences can enhance problem-solving skills, resilience and self-efficacy, as learners are required to navigate unfamiliar situations and collaborate with others (Dillon et al., 2006; Tyne et al., 2024). This aligns with Dewey's (1938) emphasis on learning through experience and Kolb's (1984) cyclical model of knowledge construction, both of which position the learner as an active participant in the learning process rather than a passive recipient of knowledge.

The social dimension of outdoor education is also highly significant. Group-based activities in outdoor environments foster co-operation, communication and leadership skills, reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, which emphasises the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Through collaboration, learners can co-construct knowledge and develop shared understandings.

Structured programmes, including residential experiences delivered by organisations such as Outward Bound, have been shown to encourage positive social behaviours and a sense of community (Tyne et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2025; Beames, Higgins and Nicol, 2012). These opportunities may not always be replicated within traditional classroom settings, where time constraints and formal structures can limit interaction. Furthermore, outdoor education supports environmental engagement and sustainability education. It enables children and young people to develop ecological literacy, fostering both an understanding of environmental issues and an emotional connection to the natural world (Rickinson, 2010; Brown et al., 2025). This aligns closely with the Curriculum for Wales (2026), which emphasises responsible citizenship, ethical awareness and sustainability as key educational priorities.

Despite these benefits, the literature highlights inequalities in access to outdoor education. Barriers such as socio-economic disadvantage, cultural differences,

additional learning needs and geographical limitations can restrict participation, indicating a need for more inclusive and culturally responsive approaches (Ewert and Sibthorp, 2014; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016; Play Scotland, 2026; Tinney, 2023; Ellis et al., 2024; Davies and Hamilton, 2018). These inequalities suggest that access to outdoor learning is not evenly distributed, potentially reinforcing existing educational disparities. As a result, there is increasing emphasis on ensuring that outdoor education is accessible to all learners, regardless of background. These challenges also highlight the importance of considering how curriculum design, facilitation and accessibility interact to shape learning outcomes across diverse populations.

A key theme within outdoor education is the recognition of play and outdoor experiences as a child's right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights this in Article 31, which states that children have the right to rest, leisure and play (UNCRC, 1989). In Wales, this principle is embedded within national policy, emphasising the importance of accessible outdoor environments where children can explore, socialise and develop through play (Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2026). From a developmental perspective, outdoor play aligns with Piaget's (1952) constructivist theory, which proposes that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. Outdoor spaces allow children to manipulate materials, engage in problem-solving and take risks, supporting both cognitive and physical development (Nicol and Taplin, 2018; Tinney, 2023; Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2026).

Early childhood theorists have long emphasised the importance of outdoor learning. Froebel (1887) argued that nature provides an essential environment for holistic development and viewed play as central to learning. Montessori (1912) similarly highlighted the importance of sensory experiences and active engagement with the environment, suggesting that children learn most effectively when they can explore independently. The Steiner-Waldorf approach also prioritises nature-based experiences, arguing that natural environments support creativity, imagination and emotional well-being (Nicol and Taplin, 2018). However, despite strong theoretical and policy support, research indicates that these principles are not always fully realised in practice (Tinney, 2023; Davies and Hamilton, 2018). Gessiou and Mart (2023) found significant variation in outdoor learning practices across educational

settings, with barriers such as limited resources, supervision concerns and curriculum pressures restricting opportunities for outdoor play. This highlights a persistent gap between policy aspirations and practical implementation.

Another key theme concerns the educational and developmental benefits of outdoor learning environments. Research consistently demonstrates positive impacts on children's physical health, cognitive development and emotional well-being (Brown et al., 2025; Play Scotland, 2026; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016; Tinney, 2023; Dillon et al., 2006; Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2026). A systematic review by Vasilaki et al. (2025) found that outdoor learning enhances social relationships, psychological well-being and environmental awareness among young people. These findings are supported by theoretical perspectives. Dewey (1938) emphasised the importance of connecting education to real-world experiences, while Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the role of social interaction and collaboration in learning. Outdoor environments provide opportunities for group problem-solving, enabling children to learn through interaction with peers and more knowledgeable others within the Zone of Proximal Development.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) further supports the value of outdoor learning, suggesting that children develop through interactions across multiple environmental systems, including family, school and community. Outdoor learning environments can strengthen these connections by linking classroom learning to wider ecological contexts. Papadopoulou and Vincent (2023) emphasise the importance of balancing freedom and guidance, arguing that effective outdoor pedagogy supports exploration while maintaining appropriate levels of structure. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory also highlights the role of observation and imitation, with outdoor environments providing opportunities for children to observe and model behaviours (Play Wales, 2022; Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2026).

However, debates remain regarding the academic impact of outdoor education. While evidence strongly supports its benefits for well-being and social development, its effects on measurable academic attainment are less clear (Rickinson, 2010; Ellis et al., 2024; Dillon et al., 2006; Vasilaki et al., 2025). Some educators express concern that outdoor learning may reduce time allocated to formal instruction,

potentially affecting academic outcomes (Ellis et al., 2024; Davies and Hamilton, 2018). This highlights ongoing tensions regarding how outdoor learning should be integrated within formal educational frameworks (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016; Tinney, 2023; Welsh Government, 2026).

Despite its recognised benefits, outdoor education faces several practical challenges. One major issue is the perception of risk. Tinney (2023) highlights that risk-averse attitudes in educational settings can limit opportunities for adventurous, spontaneous outdoor play. While risk assessments are essential for ensuring safety, excessive restrictions may hinder children's ability to develop risk-management skills, confidence, and resilience (Tinney, 2023; Play Wales, 2022). Broader societal influences, including school policies and cultural attitudes, also shape opportunities for outdoor learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Papadopoulou and Vincent, 2023).

Teacher confidence and training represent another significant barrier. Many educators feel underprepared to deliver outdoor learning due to limited professional development opportunities, time constraints and resource limitations (Tinney, 2023; Davies and Hamilton, 2018; Welsh Assembly Government and Learning Through Landscapes Cymru, 2008). Without adequate support, outdoor learning may be treated as an additional activity rather than an integral part of the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2026; Tinney, 2023). The Curriculum for Wales (2026) promotes the development of "ambitious, capable learners" and "healthy, confident individuals," emphasising experiential and play-based learning environments that support holistic development. As Attenborough highlights, individuals are unlikely to protect environments they have not experienced or connected with (Green Eyed Monster Films, 2017).

However, research suggests that outdoor learning is not always effectively embedded within the curriculum. Teachers report difficulties integrating outdoor experiences within structured timetables and assessment frameworks, creating tensions between policy aspirations and classroom practice (Tinney, 2023; Welsh Government, 2026; Ellis et al., 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a more systematic approach to curriculum design, teacher training and resource allocation. Ensuring equitable access to outdoor learning opportunities also remains a critical priority (Ewert and Sibthorp, 2014).

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that outdoor education represents a valuable and multifaceted pedagogical approach within Wales and the UK. Grounded in experiential learning theory, particularly Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984), outdoor education emphasises active participation, reflection and real-world engagement. Hahn's (1960) focus on challenge and character development further reinforces its holistic nature. Evidence suggests that outdoor learning supports well-being, environmental awareness, social skills and engagement with learning (Beames, Higgins and Nicol, 2012; Rickinson et al., 2004; Vasilaki et al., 2025). Theoretical perspectives, including those of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1952), highlight the importance of social interaction and constructivist learning, both of which are facilitated by outdoor environments. Additionally, outdoor education aligns with children's rights to play and access enriching environments (UNCRC, 1989).

However, the literature also identifies significant challenges, including inequalities in access, risk-averse attitudes, and limitations in teacher training and curriculum integration. While outdoor education is strongly supported by theory and policy, its implementation remains inconsistent. To fully realise its potential, outdoor learning must be embedded within educational practice, supported by adequate resources and inclusive approaches. Future research should prioritise long-term studies to better understand the sustained impacts of outdoor education on academic attainment, well-being and lifelong learning outcomes. Furthermore, additional research is needed to explore how outdoor education can be effectively implemented across diverse educational settings, ensuring that all learners can benefit from meaningful engagement with the outdoors.

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