

Outdoor Education and Learning



Lowdham Preschool (2024)

Reference – Front Cover

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Essay

“Kids aren’t meant to sit still all day and take in information,” (De La Cruz, 2017), and yet children are expected to be able to sit quietly at a desk and learn. Research has shown that going outside is more than just enjoyable for children, it helps their mental health and well being, their physical health, it helps children to regulate their behaviour and can help to improve academic success (Absolutely Education, 2024). Maslow (1943) founded the hierarchy of needs, where by all the lower needs in the hierarchy need to be met in order for humans to reach the highest level of ‘self actualization’, the level where children have acceptance, meaning, creativity and inner potential (McLeod, 2024), this is the level where children are able to access knowledge to reach their full potential. The lower levels of the hierarchy include psychological needs, safety needs, love, social and belonging needs and esteem needs. Although many of these needs would be met in the home and classroom environment, from what we know about outdoor education and the variety of benefits that it has, for example in improving mental health and wellbeing, in connecting with nature and belonging, and the social and communication benefits it has, many of the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy can be met by the children engaging in outdoor learning and learning in the natural environment.

Welsh Government believes in the benefits of outdoor education, influenced by the work of Montessori, Froebel and Steiner. They have placed outdoor play and learning as a prominent feature of the curriculum, stating that all children are expected to have access to the outdoor environment regularly (Boulton and Thomas, 2022). For the purpose of this essay two different settings will be used to show the differences in outdoor education in schools.

School A is a large village primary school for children from the age of three to eleven years old, the school also has two specialist teaching facility classes for pupils with ASD. The School is set in large grounds with woodland areas, school fields, and large playgrounds allowing access to the outdoor environment for all pupils (School A, 2024). In School A the focus will be on the outdoor learning experiences of the specialist teaching facility class for the junior school children, aged seven to eleven years. In this class there are eight pupils and five members of staff at all times.

School B is a large modern primary school for children aged three to eleven years old. The school is the combination of two local primary schools and as a result has over seven hundred pupils. The school building is a new building, with the classrooms on the ground floor having direct access to the outside. Around the school building is the playground however the school sits in the grounds of a local park with fields and woodland (School B, 2023). For School B the focus will be on the pupils in a mainstream year one class, children aged five to six years old. There are 28 pupils in the class with two members of staff.

In School A, the class does not have direct access from the classroom to the outside areas, however the class do embrace the outdoor environment on a regular basis. In addition to play and activity times with their peers this class take part in outdoor learning on a daily basis, regardless of the weather. The pupils take weekly trip to the schools woodland area where they are encouraged to explore both independently and with the guidance of a member of staff. The pupils are also encouraged to partake in learning activities on the school fields where the children have more space and opportunity to engage with nature. The pupils are taken off site twice a week to complete different learning opportunities, for example to local parks, community farms, the beach and sensory gardens. These learning opportunities are allowing the pupils to explore and engage with nature in safe environments. The outdoor space gives these pupils the freedom that they may need to explore and investigate the environment in their own way and in their own time which benefited the individual needs of the pupils. As several of the children were non verbal or had limited oral skills the outdoor environment helps with their communication needs by using non verbal methods of communication to show what they were interested in or what they were needing.

Although the outdoor learning opportunities for the pupils in School A are varied one challenge is that some of the children do not want to engage in outdoor activities, they would rather stay in the classroom environment, this is particularly if the weather was less favourable. Due to the needs of the class, there is a high staff ratio to children. However, if one pupil needs additional support because they were upset or overstimulated in the outdoor environment they will often request to go back to a familiar safe space leaving the rest of the class with limited staffing.

School B has open access from the classrooms on the ground floor out on to the yard which allows for the pupils to engage with the outside environment. There is a small shelter outside each classroom which allows for learning activities to take place outside regardless of the weather. The school is surrounded by secure fencing however there are no boundaries between outdoor classroom areas, so when pupils are outside there is the possibility for them to run off to another class or area if they are not supervised closely, because of this there is a limit on how many pupils can access the outdoor learning area at one time. In the centre of the school there is a sensory garden, all of the children in the school are encouraged to care for this space. Small groups of children are given the opportunity to go and maintain the garden in rotation, teaching the pupils about caring for and maintaining the area.

The main challenges for School B to allow more access to the outdoor environment is the limited staff per class and the lack of space that the classes have free access to. As previously stated the school is based in the grounds of a park, however the park is not solely for the use of the school, it is used by the local community, and there are no secure fences around the park. Therefore, with two staff members to twenty-eight pupils, allowing access to the park area is difficult. The school does have playground area around the perimeter of the school, but as the school is so big, lunch and break times need to be staggered. This means that while the younger pupils are back in class, the older pupils are using the yard outside the classroom doors. This makes it very challenging for the pupils to partake in outdoor learning activities during these times. Although the school does have a garden for the children to enjoy and look after, as the school is so large the pupils do not get to go and experience the garden regularly.

Both School A and School B have outdoor learning policies and recognise the importance of outdoor experiences for their pupils (School A, 2024. School B, 2023). School A's curriculum states that "outdoor learning is more than adventure sports or simply taking PE outside.. In the Foundation Phase this is part of the continuous provision or can be called a class mission and in Key Stage 2, the outdoor learning option may be called a mission and communicated to the pupils as success criteria". (School A, 2024) This is showing that they do not just see the outdoor learning experience as play time but as a learning opportunity and by including it in the topics missions and success criteria they are committed to the provision of outdoor learning.

School B also acknowledges the importance of outdoor education to their pupils in their Learning and Teaching Policy, "The learning environment should allow learners to learn in areas, which are an extension of their classroom e.g. school grounds, learning lounges, local park/community" (School B, 2023). School B does not place as much emphasis on the importance of outdoor education as School A but as previously stated School B does not have free access to the outdoor areas that School A has, and also faces challenges around space and the practicalities of having the children outside at the same time as other children who are on their break time.

The difference in the staff to children ratio also has an impact on the outdoor learning experiences for the pupils. School A has a high staff to child ratio because of the needs of the children where as School B has only two members of staff to a full classroom, meaning that if a small group of children are participating in outdoor learning activities then there is only one member of staff with the rest of the class. It invites the question that if there were more staff available to support the class in School B, would the pupils be able to experience the benefits of outdoor education and nature more frequently? The School does acknowledge the benefits of engaging with nature for the pupils so it is possible to come to the conclusion that the limited staffing and access to nature opportunities on the school grounds could be the reason for the limited availability of outdoor learning.

School A faces different challenges as a Specialist teaching facility. Their challenges include keeping the pupils engaged while supporting their needs, and allowing them to experience the outdoor environment while providing the guidance and reassurance needed so that the pupils did not feel over stimulated. The staff are required to find the balance of supporting their needs and allowing freedom to explore and investigate the world around them.

It is evident that both schools recognise the benefits of outdoor learning, however they face challenges in how they are able to provide the learning experience for the pupils. It could be suggested that not all school grounds allow for the access to outdoor learning and that understaffing in school could be limiting the experiences of children. However, overcoming these barriers could be possible, which would allow both schools to allow the pupils to have the access to nature and the benefits that come from that.

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I'm Not Scared of a Gruffalo.... Are You??



(Wonderkin, 2019)

Please come prepared for all weathers.



(Jabby School, 2013)

Gruffalo's Outdoor Cooking And Nature Trail Let's explore the outdoors!

Can you cook....

Outdoor Cooking Activity

Fun for all the family

Singleton Park, Swansea

Monday 6th May

4pm - 6.30pm

Booking required at:

gruffalo-cooking@gmail.co.uk



(Coleen068trnps, 2019 image 3)



(Coleen068trnps, 2019 image 1)



(Coleen068trnps, 2019 image 2)



(Coleen068trnps, 2019 image 4)

Free
Activity

Vegetarian, Vegan and Halal options available.
Please let us know along with any allergies at
time of booking.



(ClipArtMag, 2024)

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RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Location / Activity:	Outdoor Cooking – Singleton Park	Date:	3 rd April 2024
Assessor:	Rachel Paynter	Review date:	3 rd April 2025

The boxes in the table below will expand as you type into them; pre-entered text is simply for illustration. You should delete irrelevant items and replace with text relevant to your circumstances. Your overall risk rating – Low, medium or high – is based on your judgement about whether the **BENEFITS** of the activity or opportunity outweigh the **RISKS**.

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
Search for the Gruffalo – Woodland hunt	The activity allows for the exploration of the park, looking for objects and exploring in nature, following clues and working as a team with their family.	Slips, trips, falls. Cuts, Grazes and abrasions. Drowning. Abduction. Getting lost.	Children, Young people, Adults	- Talk to the groups before setting out on the activity to warn them of the dangers of slipping and tripping. - First aid kit available with fully stocked first aid kit. - Advise the groups to stay away from the water and that parents/carers need to always keep an eye on the children. - Advise participants on how to get the attention of staff in case of an emergency. - Staff in areas along the trail to provide help if needed. - Advise families upon booking activity to wear appropriate footwear.	Low
Outdoor cooking	Helping to prepare the campfires, learning how to prepare food, learning safety around cooking food.	Burns, food poisoning, food allergies	Children, young people, Adults	- Ask parents to advise staff when booking if there are any food preferences or allergies. If allergies are present, ensure that the family has the mediation required in case of an emergency and that a member of staff is aware. - Keep the children at a safe distance from the fire. - Talk to the groups about safety rules around the campfire and how to stay safe. - Ensure all food is cooked thoroughly and provide food thermometers to allow participants to check the food to ensure it is cooked. - Provide hand washing facilities and encourage hand washing before preparing and eating food.	Low

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The Role of Outdoor Education

Outdoor education is becoming more popular in Wales, especially in primary schools with the use of forest schools and more settings encouraging the pupils to engage with the outdoor environment. When looking at outdoor education and the role it plays in schools today it would first be important to set a definition of what outdoor learning will mean in the context of this essay. Education Scotland (2007) state that “Outdoor learning encompasses the entire range of learning experiences undertaken outside.” But what does this mean for children in education settings today. The Early Years Network Team (2023) believe there is more to outdoor education than taking your lessons outside, they believe that outdoor education allows you to use nature to help the holistic development of children, promote wellbeing and to help regulate behaviours and emotions. From this it could be implied that there needs to be a difference in the structure and the purpose of the lessons between indoor and outdoor education, not simply moving the class to a new location. Outdoor education could be perceived as a new idea; however, it could be argued that the work and beliefs of Froebel (1895) have led the way, with his research showing that children needing to understand nature is an important part of their education (Bruce, 2012). This could be thought to have formed the guidance of modern practitioners who see nature and the outdoors as a critical part of a child’s education. This is also the theory of Dewey (1938) who believed that there is a link between actual experience and education (Allison and Parry, 2019). Dewey (1938) observed that children learn by doing, known as ‘experiential learning’, that children learn better when they are actively engaged in what they are learning (Sprouts, 2021). These fits into the ethos of outdoor education where children learn through experience not observation, learning about risk and through making memories that they will remember. This essay will look at three different key themes of outdoor education and how they impact children today.

The physical and mental health and wellbeing of children has never been more of a priority than it is today, with an estimated one in three children in every classroom having a diagnosable mental health condition (Hatherley, 2022). Acton and Carter (2016) found that there were health benefits from having access to nature through outdoor play, green exercise, and wild spaces. With that in mind could the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales be improved by having more time in the outdoor learning environment, engaging with nature? The Welsh

government believe that outdoor learning has a large part to play in the new curriculum, stating that “Learning outdoors can lead to high levels of well-being, confidence, and engagement. Being outdoors supports social, emotional, spiritual, and physical development.” (Williams, 2022). This may not however be accessible for all pupils with some schools not having access to green spaces, however this could be overcome by using the local community, such as parks and woodlands, to facilitate the outdoor learning. Knight (2016) also noted the challenge of appropriate training for staff to support children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing while engaging in outdoor activities. This brings into question if staff in the school have had adequate training to lead the sessions. Learning Through Landscapes (2023) states that the outdoor learning experiences should not be left to one member of staff to implement, it should be a whole school approach with all staff engaging in the sessions. By it being left solely to the one member of staff, it limits the amount of time that the pupils get to participate in the outdoor learning activities as this staff member must be shared among the whole school.

The highest proportion of mental health and wellbeing issues are in young people of secondary school age, eleven to sixteen years, peaking at year ten, age fourteen to fifteen. (Welsh Government, 2022), however Knight (2016) reported that young people of secondary school age are rarely given the opportunity to access outdoor education and it is offered to the pupils with additional learning needs whose educational needs cannot be met in a traditional classroom. If the Welsh Council for Outdoor Learning (2018) shows that outdoor education benefits the mental and physical health and wellbeing of children and young people, then would it not be beneficial for all school age pupils to have the opportunity to engage with it, not just the foundation stage and primary aged children? Cotterill (2022) reported that as many as 65% of parents believe that school puts too much emphasis on exams, with 56% of parents believing that this has a negative effect on young people’s mental health. It could then be argued that potentially the reason for secondary age pupils not having access to outdoor education is that time in school does not allow for it as more emphasis is put on academic subjects.

Outdoor learning offers children and young people the opportunity to develop skills that they would not have been able to achieve in the traditional classroom setting. Merchant (2019) states that learning in the outdoor environment can widen the skills

of the pupils and enrich learning and engagement. This is backed by the findings of Montessori (1964) who felt that children should be free to explore within the limits of the prepared environment, and by encouraging exploration and independence the child would learn to be self-motivated in their learning (Sprouts, 2016). However, this form of education does come with its challenges, as with education culture today all work needs to be proven and teachers fear that by allowing children to explore and learn new skills in the outdoor environment then they will struggle to keep up with curriculum demands. (Learning Through Landscapes, 2023).

The range of skills that children and young people could gain from outdoor learning include critical thinking skills, social and communication skills and risk assessment and management (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). The conversation (2019) reported that through outdoor education, the children felt freer to express themselves and felt more engaged in the lessons. This could lead to the pupils' building skills that they would not have otherwise been able to demonstrate. As previously mentioned, outdoor education for secondary school students is very limited due to a number of factors, however it could be argued that the age range of secondary school students would benefit from skill building in the outdoor environment that they could then use moving forward in the employment market or in further education. Birt (2023) states that skills such as working together, creative problem solving, leadership, decision making and communication, are all skills that will help young people to succeed in any industry. These are all skills that young people can gain through outdoor learning that they may not have the opportunity to develop in the traditional classroom environment. By giving young people opportunities to develop skills in horticulture, building or caring and working with animals you are also allowing them to pursue interest that are important to them, and they again may learn skills that they may not have otherwise gained (Fixers UK, 2019).

One of the benefits of outdoor education is the opportunity to learn about sustainability and the natural environment. Chawla (2022) believes that when children and young people engage in nature, which is mutually beneficial to both the children and to the environment. Chawla (2022) goes on to say how children and young people who have a strong connection with nature are more likely to participate in pro environmental activities such as recycling, feeding wild animals and energy saving. This connection with nature would grow with the child, finding them to be more environmentally

sustainable young people and adults. Boulton and Thomas (2022) agree with this by stating that by engaging in the outdoor classroom and building a relationship with the natural environment that it builds an empathy for nature and helps children and young people to identify their impact on the environment. By realising the impact that everyone has on the environment it is forming a more sustainably aware generation, which could only have a positive impact on the environmental issues that are faced today.

The Curriculum for Wales recognises the need for education on sustainability in its science and technology statements of what matters. “The world around us is full of living things which depend on each other for survival.” (Welsh Government, 2022). From this statement it is clear that showing the importance of sustainable living is a key feature in the teaching of children and young people. The statement goes on to say how children need to learn how we as humans impact the world. It could be argued that the to teach about sustainability and the impact we have on the environment would be through outdoor play, learning and investigating. By allowing children and young people to develop their ‘experiential learning skills, as Dewey (1938) suggested, then the children can experiment for themselves. This is also supported by the theories of Piaget (1952) who believed that children were like little scientists who learn through experience and conducting ‘experiments’, then coming to their own conclusion (Kennedy-Costantini, 2021). All of which could be seen in how children learn outdoors, as learning through exploration and experiments, “One of the most effective ways of teaching children about nature is to take them out of the classroom and into nature.” (Learning through Landscapes, 2023).

Through looking at some of the key themes to do with outdoor education and learning there are multiple benefits to learning outdoors. The ideas of outdoor learning are not new, however outdoor learning is not considered to be part of a traditional educational system. This causes barriers to learning outdoors and embracing outdoor education as some teachers believe that ‘real teaching’ happens in the classroom, and that outdoor space is for play and informal learning (Welsh Government, 2023). This is the case particularly with older primary school children and students in secondary school. However, these are the pupils who would benefit most from the positives that are linked to outdoor education such as the positive impact on mental health and the development of skills. Williams (2019) found that the reasons for the lack of outdoor learning

opportunities in schools could be linked to the lack of flexibility in the curriculum and the time it takes for the additional planning needed for outdoor learning. The behaviour of pupils was also found to be a concern, with some teachers reporting feeling anxious about participating in outdoor learning due to the behaviour of the class.

The role of outdoor education has changed from in the past where the outdoors was used for play and messy activities, now more emphasis is put on how to incorporate the outdoors and nature into the classroom. For some classrooms they always have direct access to the outdoor environment, allowing for children to explore and investigate, although these styles of classroom tend to be in the infant stages of primary school. Unfortunately, the higher up the age groups you move there appears to be less learning opportunities in the outdoor environment (Welsh Government, 2023), as a result, children start to see the outdoor area as play time or a treat rather than as a learning experience. There are many benefits for both the children and young people, and the environment, from engaging in nature and making use of the outdoor environment, from mental health benefits to the positive effect it can have on sustainable living. If the older children and young people in education had as equal opportunities as the foundation phase it could be implied that it would have an equally positive effect on them as it does to the younger age groups, helping with their mental health, wellbeing and the ability to self-regulate and allowing them to experiment, learning new skills and mastering skills that they have already learnt.

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