

Introduction

Good afternoon, my name is Amy Muriithi, student number 1602015. The module reference for this assignment is ECEY5007. I would like to welcome you to my research proposal presentation of which I have chosen to explore the evidence that supports the importance of outdoor play for young children's development. I hope you enjoy.

Abstract

This research explores the benefits of outdoor play for young children's social, emotional, well-being and moral development. It considers studies that have explored sensory experiences in nature that link to the shaping of positive human values which in turn influences positive relationships, social behaviors, personal well-being, and a more sustainable world influenced by high morals. The research explores the benefits to outdoor play however, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between children and nature and the powerful impact that adults can have by influencing and encouraging them to develop a growing relationship with the outdoors. By exploring qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study could explain how adults' attitudes and engagements with the outdoors could impact how children engage with nature in both positive and negative ways. Let us explore this in more depth as I share my literature review:

Literature Review

According to RSPB (no date), Ipsos MORI's carried out a face-to-face survey in 2010 asking 1,012 British people, of which 50 were in Wales and all were over the age of 15, if they believed it was important for children to play outdoors; 92% of people in Wales agreed and 78% of people in Wales believed schools should play a role in providing the experiences. Consequently, early years practitioners and caregivers have a vital role in supporting a child's healthy relationship with nature.

Boyd (2018) suggests human beings have an innate need to be surrounded by nature and by connecting with nature would develop human values for example justice, peace and equality and furthermore respect and responsibility for their environment and the life within it for example, children will learn how to care and protect plants, animals and insects by handling and moving them. Boyd (2018) discusses Montessori and Steiner how they urged children to make outdoor experiences truly sensory and unrushed, and by connecting all their

senses to the world in which they live, human values grow. According to Montessori (2013) living in nature was the goal, immersing children in the outdoors influences mastery; as they connect with their universe they will develop a respect, reverence, and a love for all that their world offers including their own health and well-being for example the physical exercise allowed by space and movement and the emotional development through fun, enjoyable explorations. Furthermore, a qualitative and quantitative research evaluation for The Wildlife Trusts was carried out in 2019 surveying 451 children, 17 teachers and 17 Wildlife Trust practitioners; through observations, interviews, and questionnaires they explored the benefits of children engaging and connecting with nature. All participants had varied levels of prior engagements with nature, pro-environmental values, and well-being. The evidence showed that 90% of children strongly believed that being outdoors in nature revealed to them that citizens should care for the environment; 89% believed animals and plants should be protected; and 83% found joy being in the outdoors (Sheldrake, Amos and Reiss, 2019).

Furthermore, Boyd (2020) suggests the great responsibility that practitioners have in supporting children to create a sustainability mindset by influencing 'change makers. Boyd encourages the use of play within nature to nurture knowledge, kindness, wisdom, creativity, and empathy and in doing so promotes the growing of a healthier world. Murphy (2022) discusses Froebel's theory underpinned by his spiritual and religious beliefs that children should be nurtured by the adults and the enriched environment surrounding them through meaningful play that grows their creativity and self-expression; Froebel believed this play should be child-led and freely chosen with relationship and interactions taking priority as they engage with the natural world that influences their development. Boyd (2020) suggests the importance of inspiring children to be a positive change in the outdoor world through fun, action-orientated learning and respectfulness towards their environment spiritually, morally, socially, and culturally, as suggested in the Fundamental British Values (2014); for example, allowing them to plant, recycle, litter pick and feed wildlife. Boyd (2020) explored qualitative methods to engage with several early years settings across England and practitioners fed back what they felt were the characteristics of effective teaching and learning within this area including the support they felt they needed to help influence children to develop a sustainability mind-set. It was primarily noticed that practitioners needed support on reflective practice and understanding the different ways a child

might want to learn, however, it was also apparent that practitioners felt playing and exploring; active learning and creating and thinking critically were some of the characteristics they had witnessed of effective learning outdoors. Based on the results, Boyd then developed the Early Childhood Education for Sustainability framework (no date) suggesting that when children engage with the world around them, they gain skills and morals to become motivated citizens to create a more just, healthy, and happier society and this also impacts their well-being, social interactions, behaviors, cognitive development and the entire settings success in the forming of positive relationships, appropriate responses, managing emotions and developing confidence and self-esteem.

Likewise, The Welsh Government (no date) suggests that promoting outdoor play by exposing children to hands-on experiences with nature encourages them to challenge themselves, and agreeably developing their confidence and self-esteem. According to nef (2003), an evaluation was carried out by the New Economics Foundation of 2 forest school projects in Wales including the Forest school leaders and other professional practitioners from those settings. Qualitative data was collected between April and November 2003 using focused groups - and their evaluation identified success factors to outdoor learning which supports what the Welsh Government is suggesting. This included children's growing confidence through freedom, time, and space to explore; social skills including teamwork, sharing and appropriate behavior and personal motivation as children's fascination with nature proved to support children's ability to focus for longer. This led to analyzing the research of whether practitioners are allowing children enough time outdoors to develop these skills, and in 2011, Estyn carried out an observational research study evaluating outdoor learning for foundation phase children. It was identified that most schools and settings were using the outdoors adequately to support children's learning; it appeared schools were more confident compared to non-maintained settings and this was due to lack of appropriate outdoor areas within the non-maintained settings; however, it was noted that leadership vision and commitment would overcome those challenges as their research suggested the children benefiting in the outdoors as they presented high levels of interaction, joy, positive behavior, fitness and knowledge and understanding of the world. Throughout the survey, observations concluded that 2 thirds of learning was in fact better outdoors than indoors. Since this study was conducted in 2011, more recent studies could be performed. Hanscom (2016)

suggests allowing for at least 3 hours a day of outdoor free play can make for strong, confident, and capable children.

Public Health England (2013) agrees suggesting physical activity like large gross motor movements that is achieved in outdoor play, is widely associated with positive social interactions like kindness, resolving conflicts and well-being such as happiness and lower levels of anxiety and worry about appearance; however, there are barriers in a society with ever growing technology; according to Young (2022) a survey was carried out of 1,500 parents and it was found that 63% of Welsh parents struggle to get their child outdoors with 68% believing their child is addicted to screens. According to NCT (2019) it is becoming clearer that children are establishing their screen time habits early and it must be a mindful consideration for primary caregivers supporting this.

Wales has emphasized the importance of outdoor play and much research concludes the benefits to children's development by connecting with nature (RSPB, no date; Welsh Gov, no date; Dillon et al, 2005). Therefore, this research will explore the benefits of outdoor play for young children's social, emotional well-being, and moral development. This research proposal will consider practitioners, primary caregivers, and the children within early year's settings by exploring the adult relationship with the outdoors and nature and how it might impact the children's growing relationship with the outdoor environment. This proposal links to the new Donaldson curriculum as children are being encouraged to develop into ethical informed citizens respecting themselves, each other, Wales, and the world (Welsh Government, 2015).

Methodology

This research study will take place in 10 different nursery settings in both primary schools and non-maintained settings across an industrialized area in Wales; this is to explore a smaller area in more depth as appose to the entire of Wales and the United Kingdom such as studies in this literature review. Furthermore, the research that has been discussed discovered the limitations practitioners have to nature based on lack of outdoor space within non-maintained settings compared to primary schools. This study will include 3 separate groups of participants from each setting, including 10 nursery children, 10 primary caregivers to those children and 5 practitioners. 10 is indeed a smaller quantity when compared to a full nursery class, however Jervis and Drake (2014) suggest smaller numbers allow for quality research into the understanding of human behaviors. This study will be carried out over the

span of 1 academic year because of the level of intensity; according to Salazar, Kunkle and Munroe (2020) a combination of engagements, including duration and frequency along with coding could be time consuming; summarizing and analyzing is important for ensuring reliability and validity – 1 academic year allows for time. McFadyen and Rankin (2018) suggests that throughout the study there is an important responsibility delegated to the gatekeeper, this is to enable the smooth process of this research and their role is providing positive influence until it is completed; There will be 1 gatekeeper for each setting of this study, the head teachers at the primary schools and the managers of the non-maintained settings.

For this study both qualitative and quantitative methods will be used; according to Bell and Waters (2018) quantitative methods can be more objective but have no consideration of people's feelings; and qualitative methods can allow for reflection on personal experiences, feelings and personality providing data about emotions and beliefs, the disadvantage being the research process can be more time consuming such as this study. The UK Government (no date) suggests that by using mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative approaches can provide findings at a deeper level, providing stronger evidence; by complementing one another it balances out the limitations of each individual method. Salkind (2010) agrees referring to the term triangulation which enhances the credibility and validity of the study.

There will be 3 approaches to this research study. The first approach will involve a structured scale-based questionnaire with primary caregivers and practitioners. The UK Government (2021) suggests the disadvantages of this approach being, participants involved may be dishonest or not entirely truthful with their answers, for example, in this research study primary care givers may feel embarrassed about their genuine attitude and interactions with nature and so consequently providing an inaccurate statistic for this study. However, according to Bowling (2009) structured questionnaires can support the collection of definite, clear, easy to count quantitative data to analyze. The scale-based approach used in this study will be the 'Nature Relatedness Scale'; this consists of 21 statements and primary caregivers and practitioners will respond on a 5-point scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 5, strongly agree for example, 'I am aware of the wildlife around me'. According to Nisbet et al (2009) it is consistent and has become a stable approach over time correlating with other scales measuring attitudes and behaviours related to time spent in nature; this suggests validity and credibility for measuring one's emotional

relationship with nature. These scale-based questionnaires will be emailed to the confirmed participants to allow them time to consider the questions without pressure; the recommended time frame to return them will be 2 weeks.

While this method is aimed at adults, a more child friendly approach will be used with the children. The communication will be 1:1 and involve 2 gender neutral puppets to carry out the 'The children's Biophilia Interview'. For this interview each puppet will represent 11 statements for example, one puppet will like playing outside and the other puppet will not; one puppet will like playing with worms and the other will not. The child will decide which of the puppets they are most like so to consider their level of relationship with nature based on their response. Experts suggest that when piloting this method, children were able to elaborate on their responses including showing signs of empathy for nature which demonstrates good validity (Salza, Kunkla, Munroe, 2020).

The second approach will be focused groups generating data considering the level of relationship practitioners, primary caregivers and children have with the outdoor environment and nature; according to Litosseliti (2007) focused groups allow for collective activity that can be an enjoyable discussion where participants can share their own perspectives and express their feelings surrounding the research; they can build on the ideas and experiences shared by other's and this can result in insightful findings. Furthermore, there is the consideration of the focus group with the children; Fargas et al (2010) suggests they might require different strategies to support the focus of agenda; fun and interesting materials and techniques might encourage them to share their ideas without feeling pressure and discomfort. During this research study a mapping method will be used to encourage discussion surrounding their ideas and their relationship with nature and the outdoors; outdoor visual aids will enable them to express their thoughts and feelings clearly for example, photos of insects, plants, trees, lakes, mud and puddles (Pain and Francis, 2003; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; Punch, 2002).

The final method for this research will be carried out in the settings over 5 days to include the children's typical weekly routines. It will be an observational study of the children, to gain a visual understanding of their level of relationship to nature based on their freely chosen self-directed play interactions and behaviors. Mayall (2000) suggests this approach involves

listening, watching, and reflecting and furthermore, Fargas (2010) recommends this method is suited well for very young children who are less aware of the presence of the observer; however, PACEY (2016) recommends sensitivity suggesting children might feel uncomfortable if they know they are being watched, therefore, for this part of the study, a small body camera will be worn providing a first-person perspective. According to Digital Innovation Specialist, Hayden, it is suggested that body cameras are an effective tool to capture evidence (Calla, no date).

The data collected from the children will be analyzed and compared with the data collected from their primary caregivers and practitioners. The findings might show a link between the adult's relationship with nature and the influence it might have on the children's growing relationship with nature.

The University of Wales Trinity St Davids Research ethics and integrity code of practice (2017 – 2022) will be followed for this research study. The participants will be asked for informed voluntary consent; the early years practitioners will be asked to simplify the research study so the participating children can understand and if they are willing, the children will be asked to verbally consent. According to the National Health Service Research Authority (2021) if a child objects this must be respected. Observing the children's behaviors regarding consent will be carefully considered as it is suggested that they can express consent in varied ways for example, reluctance or refusal to engage in the study (Save the Children, 2004); article 12 of the UNCRC emphasizes the rights children have which is to be respected for their views including their individual feelings and desires surrounding affairs that affect them; article 13 outlines the freedom they should have to express those feelings (Unicef, no date). Furthermore, all participants will be made aware of their rights to withdraw from the research study at any given point throughout the process and without explanation. Considering the ethics surrounding this study will be vital throughout the entire process to safeguard the children's human dignity; Powell, Graham and Truscott (2016) discuss the Ethical Research Involving Children Framework which encourages an approach that reflects the pledge this research study has towards respecting the children's rights, the role of relationship and reflexivity to ensure children's safety is priority. Similarly, Mayne, Howitt and Rennie (2018) present the development of a rights-based research ethics and participation planning framework assisting researchers to develop and uphold children's rights. This study will consider the ethical guidelines within research that is outlined by the British Education Research

Association (2019); these guidelines have been revised extensively and reflect on several new developments that affects current research within education for example, updated requirements in legislation and best practise. Finally, to guarantee this research study remains ethical, legal, and fair, the General Data Protection Regulations (2018) will be followed; The GDPR recognises that confidentiality is crucial including all participants privacy and data protection.

Conclusion

In conclusion of this proposal, the research explored today considers many studies that have been undertaken to find evidence of the benefits of outdoor play on children's social, emotional, well-being and moral development. It also considers the question of whether adult interactions with nature influences the child's growing relationship with the outdoors which limits or enhances how they interact and engage in nature.

Thank you, I would now like to take this opportunity to welcome any questions.