

ECEY5010

Research question: Exploring a child's perspective on outdoor learning and if it helps the children's development.

Literature Review

Researching and exploring a child's perspective in outdoor learning in the early years can vary and adult's perspective can differ considerably. Adults see outdoor learning from an educational side; however, children see it from a completely different perspective and usually think of it as freedom, play, exploration and discovery. The research conducted will be from the child's perspective, how they think, feel and interact when they have that opportunity to be outdoors.

The Early Years Resources (2025) describes outdoor learning as an educational approach that takes learning out of the traditional classroom and into the outdoor environment. It offers children hands on experiences in nature which will further help them develop skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity etc.

According to Gonzalez-Matthews (2024) outdoor learning is an integral part of a child development, which offers many different learning opportunities, and supports children's holistic learning and brain development.

The United Nations Convention of the child (2019) Article 13 and 31 both state that children have the right to express their opinions and thoughts, and every child has the right to play and take part in a wide range of activities. Supporting this view, The Welsh Government (2009) writes that being outdoors helps a child's development such as their physical, creative, social, personal and cultural development, it becomes an experimental environment to take risks around them, become more aware of textures, sounds, smells and the weather around them which can enhance their learning. In an investigation into a child's perspective of outdoor learning Merewether (2015) found that outdoor learning spaces are vital in a child's early childhood, Merewether (2015) found that children use the outdoor settings to relax, let off some steam, learn through play and communicate and socialise with others. Similarly, Kiviranta et al (2024) makes the case for outdoor learning being an

environment to help reduce stress and promote creativity, vitality and positivity. Kiviranta et al (2024) research states that children being outdoors have more positive effects than negative ones, a child spending even just a short amount of time in an outdoor environment can reduce their cortisol levels and help their health and mental wellbeing.

The Curriculum for Wales explicitly prioritises experiential, child-centred learning and positions wellbeing, autonomy and resilience at the heart of educational provision (Welsh Government, 2022). This paper critically explores the benefits of outdoor risky play in the early years and examines how such play aligns with the four purposes and Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) within the Curriculum for Wales, with a particular focus on Progression Step 1 (ages 3–5).

A substantial body of international research demonstrates that engagement in outdoor risky play contributes positively to children's holistic development. Risky play opportunities such as climbing, balancing, moving at speed and navigating uneven terrain have been shown to support the development of gross motor skills, physical strength and coordination (Beaulieu and Beno, 2024). Importantly, such experiences also allow children to test their physical limits in ways that structured indoor environments often do not provide.

Beyond physical development, risky play plays a significant role in emotional and psychological wellbeing. Dodd (2024) argues that exposure to manageable risk in early childhood supports emotional regulation, resilience and the development of coping strategies. Children learn to experience fear in controlled contexts and to manage uncertainty independently, which may contribute to lower levels of anxiety over time. These findings are consistent with wider research linking reduced opportunities for adventurous play with rising childhood mental health concerns in Western societies (Gray et al., 2025).

From a social perspective, outdoor risky play encourages collaboration, negotiation and shared problem-solving. McCrorie et al. (2025) found that children engaged in challenging outdoor play frequently engage in complex social interactions, using language to negotiate rules, assess danger and support peers. Such interactions are

essential precursors to communication competence and social confidence in later learning.

The Curriculum for Wales sets out four overarching purposes that all learners should develop towards. Outdoor risky play is strongly aligned with each of these, particularly in early years settings. The Health and Well-being places wellbeing at the heart of learning and explicitly recognises the interconnected nature of physical, emotional and social development (Welsh Government, 2022). Outdoor risky play directly supports this vision by promoting physical activity, motor competence and emotional resilience. Welsh Government guidance emphasises that children develop confidence and self-esteem when they are trusted to assess and manage risk rather than being shielded from it (Welsh Government, 2023). Through risky play, children develop independence, self-awareness and a growing understanding of their own capabilities.

The Curriculum for Wales prioritises curiosity, perseverance and learning through challenge over predetermined outcomes (Tinney, 2023). Risky play provides authentic contexts in which children can set their own challenges, experiment with strategies and learn from failure. Such experiences support intrinsic motivation and align with the curriculum's emphasis on sustained shared thinking and progression over time rather than attainment of fixed milestones.

The curriculum explicitly encourages learners to “take measured risks” and to think creatively (Welsh Government, 2022). Outdoor risky play offers open-ended environments that foster innovation, imaginative play and problem-solving. Gray et al. (2025) highlight those natural outdoor environments provide varied affordances that encourage creativity and adaptability far beyond what fixed equipment alone can offer.

Early engagement with risk supports children to develop responsibility, empathy and an understanding of boundaries. Through risky play, children learn to consider the impact of their actions on themselves and others, developing early ethical awareness. The Curriculum for Wales concept of *cynefin*—a sense of place and belonging—is also supported as children learn to navigate and care for their local environments through direct experience (Welsh Government, 2022).

Outdoor risky play supports learning across all six AoLEs. Within Science and Technology, children explore forces such as gravity, speed and balance through embodied experience. In Mathematics and Numeracy, children estimate height, distance and time while making risk-related judgements. Languages, Literacy and Communication are developed through the rich, contextual language associated with negotiation and reflection during play (McCrorie et al., 2025). Additionally, Expressive Arts are supported through imaginative movement and nature-based creative play.

Welsh guidance has consistently emphasised that outdoor learning is not an enrichment activity but a core pedagogy, equal in value to indoor learning (Welsh Government, 2023). This reinforces the legitimacy of risky play as a meaningful and intentional component of curriculum design.

Crucially, Welsh policy distinguishes between risk and hazard. Risk is viewed as an essential part of learning, while hazards are the dangers that children cannot do for themselves (Welsh Government, 2009). (1,095)

Methodological considerations

In this portfolio, qualitative research approach will be used to explore the children's perspective on outdoor learning and the impact it has on their development. Maynard et al (2023) believes that outdoor learning is beneficial for children to be able to develop to the best of their ability. The foundation phase framework (2015) advocates for experimental and play-based approach to learning outdoors. Charli et al (2022) believes that qualitative research is the most appropriate way of getting research for questions, it is primary data. It captures an in-depth understanding of the child's feelings, experiences and reflections. Similarly to Charli et al (2022), Tenny et al (2022) sees qualitative research as a study that helps others gather information on behaviour, experiences and perceptions. It answers the whys. Asks open ended questions instead of the quantitative data which gives numbers and surveys online. The study conducted will be focusing on children aged 6-11 years old from primary schools and involve 10-12 children. These ages have been chosen as this age range are cognitively and verbally able to express their opinions, Additional needs can use sign language or Augmentative and Alternative Communication

(AAC)/ communication boards to ensure that no children are left out and that every child have the rights to communicate their opinions (UNCRC 2019). The age range allows to explore the foundation phase and key stage two children, to gather the different experiences and showing the differences in engagement and opinion between both. 10-12 children have been chosen to interview and observe to allow individuals to be heard and listened too in small groups and more detailed. Larger number of children will require more time and resources and in some cases is not applicable. Nikolopoulou (2022) describes non-probability sampling as a method that uses a purposive strategy to ensure that children have direct experiences and provides meaningful insights into the outdoor learning. The two methods that will be used in this research is a semi-structured interviews and Non-participant Observations. The chosen methods have been chosen as in this research as it focuses on the children's own experiences and perspectives. It highlights the importance of children being able to express their own views on their learning. McVeety and Farren (2020) emphasises the importance of children having their own voice and own opinion in their learning and development. Overall, Charli et al (2022) and Tenny et al (2022) show that these methods show that qualitative data will be the most effective in the research as it will be child-centred to understand the children's feelings, experiences and reflections, semi-structured interview and open-ended questions will be used to gather data. Lewis-Beck et al (2004) describes semi-structured interviews as open, flexible and an interactive approach. It allows children to generate their own perspective, experiences, understandings and interpretations and in this case, it would be of the outdoor area. Interviews allow children to express their opinions in their own words. Williams (2025) describes nonparticipation observations as a qualitative research method of gathering primary data in this case the outdoor area without communicating with the children directly, it provides context, backs up interview data and it shows developmental impact with the children. Observations allow the interviewers to capture the children's interactions, behaviours and engagement in different activities which sometimes are not verbalised through interviews.

Interviews were chosen as the first method, as it provides opportunities for children to express their own thoughts and opinions in their own words. It supports the child-centred approach and allows us to ask those open-ended questions. Ponizonvsky-Bergelson et al(2019) believes that interviews are to produce data. They believe that

interviews have a view of letting children tell their own story. They state that when interviewing children, you must ensure that clear and understandable questions are being asked, ensuring your listening and showing interest in their answers and that the questions asked are age appropriate (Bergelson et al 2019). For example, open ended questions like 'Can you tell me what you enjoy doing outside?', 'What do you do outside?', 'How do you feel when you're playing outside?' and when they elaborate more questions like 'How did that activity make you feel?' or 'What happened next?' this is doing the semi-structured and open ended questions. O'Reilly and Dogra (2017) believe that there are some limitations of interviews when working with children such as ensuring that the children are aware of the interview and know what to expect as some children can get anxious. They believe that taking time and getting to know the children you will be interviewing is important but can be time limiting. O'Reilly and Dogra (2017) discuss the difficulty of some children having communication issues but important to get to know these communication issues as every child has the right to education. That could mean you might have to bring in someone who speaks in sign language, broaden knowledge on communication boards.

McFarlan (2022) describes non-participant observations as observing children without participating or getting involved in the child's learning. McFarlan (2022) believes that observing children get an overview of the child, which in this case would be the outdoor area. Observe how they play, what they like/dislike in area, who they play with, what do they avoid without interacting with the child. McFarlan (2022) states that observations should end once the answers have been found, which usually occurs when more of an understanding has been reached about the child/children. Windsor (2016) discusses the limitations that can occur when doing nonparticipation observations with children. Windsor (2016) explains that observations can be time consuming and can happen over a space of a long period of time which sometimes can be hard when working in a school with other things happening around. Windsor (2019) explains that Observations could lead to the Hawthorne affect, where we could see children acting differently as they know they are being observed which could lead to it being a limitation to the methods further down the line. Spencer and Mahtani (2017) describe the Hawthorne as people who begin to behave differently because they know they are being observed/watched, which could be a limitation when observing children. Children could change their

behaviour completely or act differently to how they normally would in the outdoor area. This could affect the observational data that is trying to be collected.

In this area triangulation in this qualitative research has been used as more than one methodology has been used. According to Carter et al (2014) triangulation in qualitative research is used to develop more of an understanding of the methodology. Delve and Limpaecher (2024) believes that Triangulation offers many advantages such as helping the person find a deeper understanding of what the research is, in this case it would be the child's perspective on outdoor learning, it helps us see the multiple methods and sources that will help lead to better answers and a conclusion. Delve and Limpaecher (2024) also believes that triangulation helps the accuracy and strengthens the methods and their findings and helps minimize incomplete information or data. Triangulation was used in this research as Interviews and Observations were chosen. Heale and Forbes (2013) argue that the purpose of triangulation is to improve the findings and collect information and data from more than one method. The interview side explored the children's perspectives, whilst the observation side explored children's behaviours and interactions whilst learning and playing outside.

Triangulation was needed in this research as it focuses on the children's opinions and development. Choosing just one method would not give the full understanding of the children's opinions, as some children tend not to answer through interviews but through observations you see the children communicate differently. Using both interviews and semi-structured observations has helped to gain more detailed data, improve the findings such as children could say they like a certain place in outdoor learning but when observing them you see that they do not engage in that area at all. Using the two methods helps and supports whether what we have found are consistent and relevant to the research question (Heale and Forbes, 2013).

In conclusion to the methodological considerations, this study was appropriate for exploring and identifying the children's perspective on the outdoor learning and the impact it has on the children's development. Qualitative research was conducted using Interviews and observations to help identify children's opinions, behaviours, experiences and interactions in the outdoor learning area. Limitations were identified, such as the Hawthorne affect when observing, challenges when interviewing children. The use of the triangulation was able to strengthen the findings by

comparing the data gathered in both interviews and observation evidence. The selected methods chosen to be able to conclude a better understanding of how the outdoor area is experienced and explored by children and how it has a major part in their developmental milestones.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are vital in this due to the involvement of children as participants in both interviews and observations.