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Part 1



An oak woodland at Pepperwood Preserve (Lavoipierre, 2008)

Part 2 – Learning story

Another practitioner and I took a small group of early years children to the woodland area within my picture; the children were aged four and five. For this learning journey I have focused on my interactions with one child, who I have referred to as Child A.

This woodland area allows children to investigate and develop their understanding of science and mathematics within this natural environment through exploration, curiosity and discovery. Children can identify and compare different textures of natural materials such as moss on the tree, bark and smooth or crunchy leaves. Observing the range of trees and plants encourages children to explore growth and living things and what they need to survive while searching for minibeasts can help children learn about habitats and life cycles.

The environment also allows children to recognise seasons and weather conditions and how they affect the woodland such as changes to the colours of leaves, leaves falling off the trees and changes to the ground after wet weather. Children can also investigate different sounds in the environment and lights and shadows.

During our visit to the woodland area, I observed Child A, aged four as they explored the area. On arrival I gave Child A the opportunity to freely explore the area and follow their own interests.

As Child A was exploring, they noticed that the bottom part of one of the trees was covered in green moss, while further up the tree there was only bark. Child A gently moved their hand from the bottom of the tree up to as high as they could.

Child A: "This bit is soft, but this bit isn't!"

Practitioner: "They do feel different, have a closer look, do they look different too?"

Child A investigated the bottom part of the tree closely

Child A: "This part is green and looks like grass"

Practitioner: "That looks like moss! I wonder why it's only at the bottom of the tree and hasn't grown further up?"

I gave the child the opportunity to think about the question and explore the bottom of the tree.

Child A: "Maybe because it's wetter at the bottom"

Child A touched the ground at the bottom of the tree noticing it was damp. I explained to Child A that moss often grows in areas where it is shaded and damp

and that rainfall can make the ground wet. I then encouraged Child A to explore the area and see if they could find moss growing anywhere else.

This links to the Science and Technology AoLE as Child A investigated the natural environment, observed the moss and expressed their thoughts. This experience supported Child A to develop an understanding of living things, plants, and what they need to grow as well as recognising the effect weather can have on this environment (Welsh Government, 2020a).

Child A continued searching for moss around the bottom of another tree, exploring beneath the leaves, twigs and bark on the ground. Child A noticed something crawling beneath one of the pieces of bark.

Child A: "I can see a bug!"

I joined Child A and encouraged them to look carefully at what they had found, giving them time to have a closer look.

Practitioner: "Wow! Where did you find that?"

Child A: "Under this piece of wood"

Practitioner: "Why do you think the minibeast was hiding under there?"

Child A: "Maybe he likes the wet floor"

I encouraged Child A to look carefully at the minibeast and tell me what they noticed about it; Child A tried to move closer to the minibeast.

Child A: "It's too small!"

I then introduced the minibeast magnifying pot that I had brought with me.

Practitioner: "I have brought something that could help us look at it more closely"

I supported Child A to carefully place the minibeast into the magnifying pot so they could observe it more closely.

Child A: "It's huge!"

Practitioner: "Wow! Can you show me?"

Figure 2: Bug Viewer (CoolThings Australia, n.d.)



Child A excitedly showed me the magnifying pot.

Practitioner: "Do you know what this little mini beast is called?"

Child A: "A beetle?"

Practitioner: "It does look like a beetle, doesn't it? this little creature is called a woodlouse. What do you notice about it now?"

Child A: "It has lots of legs, and it's grey"

Practitioner: "It does have a lot of legs, I wonder how many it has?"

Child A observed the woodlouse through the magnifier and tried counting its legs.

Child A: "There's too many and it keeps wriggling around"

Practitioner: "Let's count them together"

I encouraged Child A to count the legs with me, pointing to each one as we went along.

Practitioner and Child A: "fourteen!"

Practitioner: "Wow, they have seven on each side! do you think all minibeasts have 14 legs?"

Child A: "No, I know spiders have eight legs"

Practitioner: "Shall we find some more? Maybe we could come across some spiders!"

I then introduced a clipboard, paper and pencil for Child A to record their findings. With verbal support Child A drew a picture of a woodlouse and wrote the number 14 underneath to represent the number of legs. After Child A finished drawing the woodlouse, with support the woodlouse was carefully placed back where it was found.

Practitioner: "Shall we see if we can find another mini beast? Maybe one with a different number of legs?"

Child A continued searching the woodland area. Child A then noticed a ladybird on a leaf on the ground.

Child A: "Look, I found a ladybird!"

Practitioner: "How could we look closely at the ladybird without it flying away?"

Child A: "Put it in the pot!"

While Child A held the magnifying pot, I placed the ladybird inside.

Practitioner: "Let's look at this together, quickly, so we can let him fly away, what do you notice about this mini beast?"

Child A: "It's red, it has black spots, and it can fly!"

Practitioner: "What about its legs? Does it have the same number of legs as the woodlouse?"

I gave Child A time to observe and think; Child A counted the ladybird's legs independently through the magnifier.

Child A: "Six legs!"

Practitioner: "Amazing! Let's draw a picture of the ladybird on your clipboard"

Child A drew the ladybird and wrote the number 6 underneath before taking the lid off and watching the ladybird fly away.

This experience links to the Science and Technology AoLE as Child A explored living creatures, where they live and identified some of their features (Welsh Government, 2020a). The experience also provided opportunities to develop mathematical skills by counting the number of legs on mini beasts, comparing them and recording numbers. This links to the Mathematics and Numeracy AoLE (Welsh Government, 2020b).

As we continued exploring the area, Child A noticed leaves scattered on the ground, Child A noticed they were different colours.

Child A: "This leaf isn't green, it's brown!"

Practitioner: "Are there any other colours you can find?"

Child A gathered a collection of fallen leaves from all around the woodland area, they are a mixture of green, yellow and brown leaves.

Practitioner: "Do you know why the leaves are all different colours?"

Child A: "Do they come from different coloured trees?"

Practitioner: "That's an interesting idea! Let's have a look up at the leaves on the trees"

Child A: "The leaves up there are green"

I explained to Child A that during different seasons the leaves can change colour before they fall to the ground.

Practitioner: "Let's have a look at the leaves you've collected and see how we can sort them?"

Child A: "We can put all the same colours together"

Child A began grouping the leaves together based on colour. I then supported Child A to count the number of leaves in each group.

Practitioner: "I wonder which group has the most leaves?"

Child A: "Green!"

This activity links to the Science and Technology AoLE as Child A observed the different colours of the leaves and developed an understanding of how the natural environment can be affected by seasonal changes (Welsh Government, 2020a). This activity also links to the Mathematics and Numeracy AoLE as Child A compared the leaves, sorted the leaves into colour groups and counted them to identify which group had the most (Welsh Government, 2020b).

Part 3 – Risk benefit assessment

Experience exploring outdoor space in photograph	How will children 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)
Exploring the woodland area.	Children can explore their natural surroundings independently, encouraging confidence and curiosity. Moving around the woodland area can support children's physical development including balance and coordination. The woodland environment can give children opportunities to discover the natural environment and investigate plants, animals and natural materials. Supporting further learning in science and mathematics.	Tree roots, stones, fallen branches, <u>slippery or uneven</u> ground can increase the risk of tripping or falling. Low branches could cause minor injuries such as bumps or scratches to eyes or head. The area may contain broken glass, litter and animal faeces causing contamination or injury. As the public have access to the area, children may encounter unknown people or dogs.	Staff and children	Before children explore the area, staff must check the area for potential hazards such as low branches, broken glass, animal faeces and litter. Children are made aware of the boundaries of the area they can explore and are reminded to stay in this area. Children are to wear appropriate footwear and clothing and are encouraged to explore the area safely. Regular checks are to be made throughout the activity to ensure all children are present. Children are also encouraged to avoid unfamiliar people or animals. A first aider and first aid kit will be available throughout the activity.	Low

Exploring tree bark and moss.	Children can investigate and compare textures of tree bark and moss. This encourages them to explore natural materials. By exploring where the trees and moss grow, children can develop their understanding of how the environment can effect how and where plants grow.	Some areas of tree bark may be sharp or rough, which may cause splinters or minor scratches. Wet moss may create a slippery surface, and children may be exposed to areas or insects that could cause irritation to the skin.	Staff and children	Staff supervise this activity and remind children to handle the natural materials with care. Staff check the bark beforehand for any damaged areas that could cause injuries. Children are advised to avoid handling plants or fungi that are unfamiliar. Children are to wash their hands after the activity to avoid dirt and bacteria. There will be access to first aid if a child does get a cut or splinter while exploring.	Low
Searching for minibeasts and observing in a magnifying pot.	Exploring the area for minibeasts can encourage children's curiosity and develop their understanding of living things and their natural habitats. Observing the minibeasts encourages children to recognise different features, such as colour and number of legs. The magnifying pot gives children the opportunity to observe details more closely and supports children's scientific and mathematical development.	When searching, children could injure their fingers when moving bark, leaves or sticks. Exploring soil and handling minibeasts could result in contact with bacteria. Some minibeasts may bite or sting and could be harmed if not handled carefully.	Staff, children and minibeasts	Staff are to support children when moving or lifting natural materials. Children are encouraged to handle minibeasts carefully and use the magnifying pot safely. Minibeasts are only to be observed briefly before they are returned to their natural habitat safely. Children are to wash their hands following this activity.	Low
Collecting, sorting and counting leaves.	Children can explore the changes in seasons by identifying different colours of the leaves. Counting, grouping and comparing the amounts of leaves they have can support children's mathematical development. This also provides children with a sensory experience, through investigating textures, shape and colour.	When collecting leaves, children may encounter nettles or sharp twigs possibly causes cuts and scratches. Children may be exposed to plants or insects that could cause irritation.	Staff and children	Children are supervised by staff and are encouraged to be careful when picking items up off the ground. Children are encouraged to choose leaves that are safe to handle and to ask a member of staff if they are unsure. Children are to wash their hands after this activity and there will be access to a first aider in the event of a cut, scratch or irritation	Low

Part 4 – How adults in the early years can support children’s scientific and mathematical learning outdoors.

Learning outdoors can offer children valuable opportunities to experience scientific and mathematical concepts through exploration, play and practical experiences (White, 2020; Maynard and Waters, 2014). When given opportunities to explore the natural environment, children can make observations, discover their surroundings, and ask questions to develop their understanding of the natural world. Tunncliffe (2015) emphasises that exploration and investigation are important in supporting children’s scientific learning, allowing children to develop their ideas through investigation, observation and discussion.

However, access to an outdoor environment alone does not always provide children with opportunities to engage in meaningful learning (Maynard and Waters, 2014). Adults play an important role in supporting children’s mathematical and scientific development by providing engaging learning environments and building on the children’s natural curiosity. In addition to this, providing children with a variety of loose parts can encourage experimentation and exploration (Nicholson, 1971; White, 2020).

This discussion considers the role of practitioners in supporting children’s mathematical and scientific development through outdoor learning with an emphasis on loose parts, encouraging children’s curiosity and the enabling environment.

Loose parts

Practitioners can support children’s mathematical and scientific development outdoors by providing them with a variety of loose parts. Nicholson’s (1971) Loose Parts Theory argues that offering a wide range of materials can provide children with opportunities to explore and investigate their environment through play. Loose parts are adaptable materials that children can use in many ways within their play. Loose parts can include natural materials such as stones, sticks and pinecones as well as man-made materials such as tyres, ropes and planks of wood (Play Wales, 2017).

Through exploring loose parts, children can strengthen their mathematical skills and knowledge. For example, children can sort natural materials such as leaves and

stones by size and colour, count natural materials and make repeating patterns and explore measurements and capacity (Mudiad Meithrin, n.d.).

Through exploring loose parts, children can also strengthen their scientific skills and knowledge by investigating, experimenting and making discoveries. Children can explore characteristics of natural materials, investigate forces and movement by rolling and moving objects down pipes or planks of wood, and experiment with how water flows through different objects or structures.

Davies and Davies (2014) recognise the importance of children developing their scientific understanding through exploration and investigation. By observing children in their play, practitioners can identify ways to extend their scientific learning. This can be achieved by encouraging children to predict their own outcomes, introducing scientific vocabulary and asking open-ended questions to extend children's exploration and discussion. However, practitioners need to recognise when it is appropriate to intervene in the children's learning, as excessive adult involvement may restrict children's independence and limit their opportunities to investigate through their own play.

Gibson's affordance theory explains how children use loose parts within the outdoor environment. Gibson suggests that children may find different ways of using objects and materials within their surroundings (Gibson, 2015). For example, a tyre could be climbed on, rolled or stacked, or used within constructive play based on the child's own interests and imagination. Boulton and Thomas (2022) found that outdoor spaces provided children with the freedom to use loose parts independently, encouraging self-directed play and creativity. This shows the importance of adults supporting children's independent exploration by providing resources that children can explore and use in their own way during play.

Encouraging children's curiosity

Children can develop their knowledge and understanding of scientific and mathematical concepts by exploring, observing and investigating the outdoor environment through their natural curiosity (Tunnicliffe, 2015). Practitioners can support children's curiosity by recognising their interests and creating opportunities for them to further investigate and explore their own ideas. Practitioners can encourage children to think for themselves, discuss different explanations and share

their thoughts and ideas to extend their thinking rather than immediately providing answers. For example, if children are playing with water outdoors, practitioners can encourage them to choose their own objects and predict whether they will float or sink before testing their ideas.

Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development highlights the way practitioners can support children in developing their learning and curiosity. According to Vygotsky (1978), with appropriate support from adults or more capable peers, children can develop their understanding and achieve beyond what they could accomplish independently. Outdoor learning, therefore, provides practitioners with opportunities to support children in developing their understanding of scientific and mathematical concepts by using children's prior knowledge and interests to support further learning. For example, if a child is constructing outdoors, the practitioner could encourage them to search for more objects that could make their construction stronger and more stable. This allows practitioners to encourage problem-solving by investigating strength, stability and balance while also building on the child's interests.

However, it is important for practitioners to allow children opportunities for independent learning. Practitioners should consider how much support they should provide as excessive adult involvement can limit children's opportunities to investigate, problem-solve and make their own decisions.

Another approach practitioners can use to develop children's curiosity and extend their scientific and mathematical learning is sustained shared thinking. Sustained shared thinking occurs when practitioners and children explore ideas, share their thoughts and work together to solve problems (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008). Open-ended questions can encourage children to think independently, explore different ideas and discuss their ideas with others to develop their understanding (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008).

Practitioners can use open-ended questions within the outdoor environment such as "How could we make the structure stronger?", "How could we measure it?" and "Which one do you think is heavier?". This encourages children to discuss their ideas and explore a range of solutions. This approach can help develop children's scientific

and mathematical understanding by encouraging them to solve problems, make predictions and reflect on what they have found.

However, practitioners need to consider when questioning can extend children's thinking without interrupting their independent exploration (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2008).

Creating an enabling environment outdoors

Providing an enabling outdoor environment can support investigation, exploration and discovery which encourage scientific and mathematical learning. Practitioners can create engaging outdoor environments providing children with valuable opportunities to explore freely, investigate their surroundings and make their own decisions about their play (Bilton, 2010).

Giving children the opportunity to explore and discover within the natural environment can be linked to Froebel's approach to early childhood education. Froebel emphasised the importance of first-hand experiences and interactions outdoors to develop children's knowledge and understanding (Bruce, 2012).

When children directly interact with nature and the outdoor environment, they can develop their understanding of scientific concepts by exploring different materials, observing the environment around them and investigating plants and animals (Davies and Davies, 2014). Children can also develop their mathematical learning through counting and measuring objects they find outdoors, comparing different materials and recognising patterns (Mudiad Meithrin, n.d.).

Practitioners can follow Froebel's approach by allowing children time and freedom to explore their natural surroundings. Bruce (2012) recognises the importance of children having freedom to follow their own interests while practitioners observe and provide support when necessary. However, practitioners should not prevent children from exploring independently. Support should be provided without limiting children's freedom to investigate and make their own discoveries, as independent learning is a significant part of Froebel's approach to learning (Bruce, 2012).

The Reggio Emilia approach emphasises the importance of the environment and its role in encouraging children's learning and exploration. Within this approach, the environment is seen as a contributor to children's learning and is described as the

“third teacher” (Hall, 2010, p .77). This highlights the importance of how a well-planned environment can encourage children to explore their interests, investigate their ideas and discover new things independently.

Hall (2010) suggests that children should be able to access a variety of resources that encourage them to explore and investigate independently, highlighting that the resources provided within the environment can support children’s learning experiences. Within the outdoor environment, practitioners can provide a range of suitable resources such as natural materials, ropes, crates, tyres and planks of wood to encourage scientific and mathematical investigation. Using these resources, children can investigate balance and stability with crates and tyres, while ropes can be used to measure and compare the lengths of different outdoor resources.

An important part of the practitioners’ role is to provide and organise resources that will encourage independent exploration and learning. Practitioners can encourage child-led exploration by responding to their interests and introducing further resources when appropriate to extend their learning (Hall, 2010). However, Hall (2010) suggests that deciding children’s learning beforehand can restrict them from exploring their own ideas. Therefore, practitioners need to balance planning the environment with giving children freedom to explore independently.

Bruner’s Theory of Scaffolding

Bruner’s Theory of Scaffolding can be used to demonstrate how practitioners can support children’s scientific and mathematical learning outdoors. Smidt (2011) describes scaffolding as adults supporting children to develop their understanding when needed and gradually reducing their support as children become more able to manage their learning independently. This approach can support children’s learning while giving them opportunities to investigate and solve problems independently.

Within the outdoor environment, practitioners can scaffold learning by observing children during play and offering support when appropriate. For example, if children are gathering a selection of natural objects, practitioners could help them identify similarities and differences before encouraging them to group the objects based on shape, texture and size. Through this activity, children can develop their ability to sort and group objects while increasing their understanding of the characteristics of the objects they are sorting. As children gain confidence in the activity, practitioners

can gradually reduce their involvement, allowing children to continue independent exploration (Smidt, 2011).

Barriers and challenges

While outdoor learning environments can support the development of scientific and mathematical understanding, there may be barriers for practitioners when providing outdoor learning opportunities. Bilton and Waters (2017) identify several factors that can affect outdoor learning experiences, such as limited outdoor areas, weather conditions and a lack of suitable resources. As a result, these challenges may make it more difficult for practitioners to provide children with valuable opportunities for outdoor learning.

Children's safety must also be considered when practitioners plan outdoor learning opportunities. However, concerns regarding safety can sometimes limit children's opportunities to explore outdoors and take appropriate risks (Sandseter *et al.*, 2020). Practitioners, therefore, need to consider children's safety without unnecessarily restricting their opportunities to explore and investigate.

Through careful planning and consideration of children's safety, practitioners can manage potential risks while still giving children opportunities to develop their scientific and mathematical understanding.

Curriculum for Wales and the Rights of the Child

The Curriculum for Wales highlights the importance of providing opportunities for children to learn and explore outdoors. Welsh Government (2022) encourages practitioners to provide children with opportunities to explore their environment and investigate their interests while supporting their curiosity and allowing them to develop their understanding through hands-on learning.

Children can develop their understanding of mathematical and scientific concepts by exploring their environment, carrying out investigations and solving problems. Providing opportunities for outdoor learning links to children's rights in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31 states that children have the right to engage in play and enjoy recreational activities (United Nations, 1989). Practitioners can support this by providing children with opportunities for outdoor play, exploration and investigation.

In conclusion, supporting children's scientific and mathematical learning outdoors is an important role for practitioners. By providing an enabling outdoor environment and offering children suitable resources that encourage them to investigate and explore, practitioners can encourage children to develop their understanding by investigating and discovering for themselves. Allowing children to independently explore loose parts can strengthen their scientific and mathematical learning based on their individual interests. Practitioners can also develop children's learning by observing play, asking appropriate questions and using scaffolding to offer help when necessary. However, practitioners should ensure that the support they provide does not limit children's freedom to explore. Overall, outdoor learning provides children with opportunities to develop their scientific and mathematical understanding through play and investigation.

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