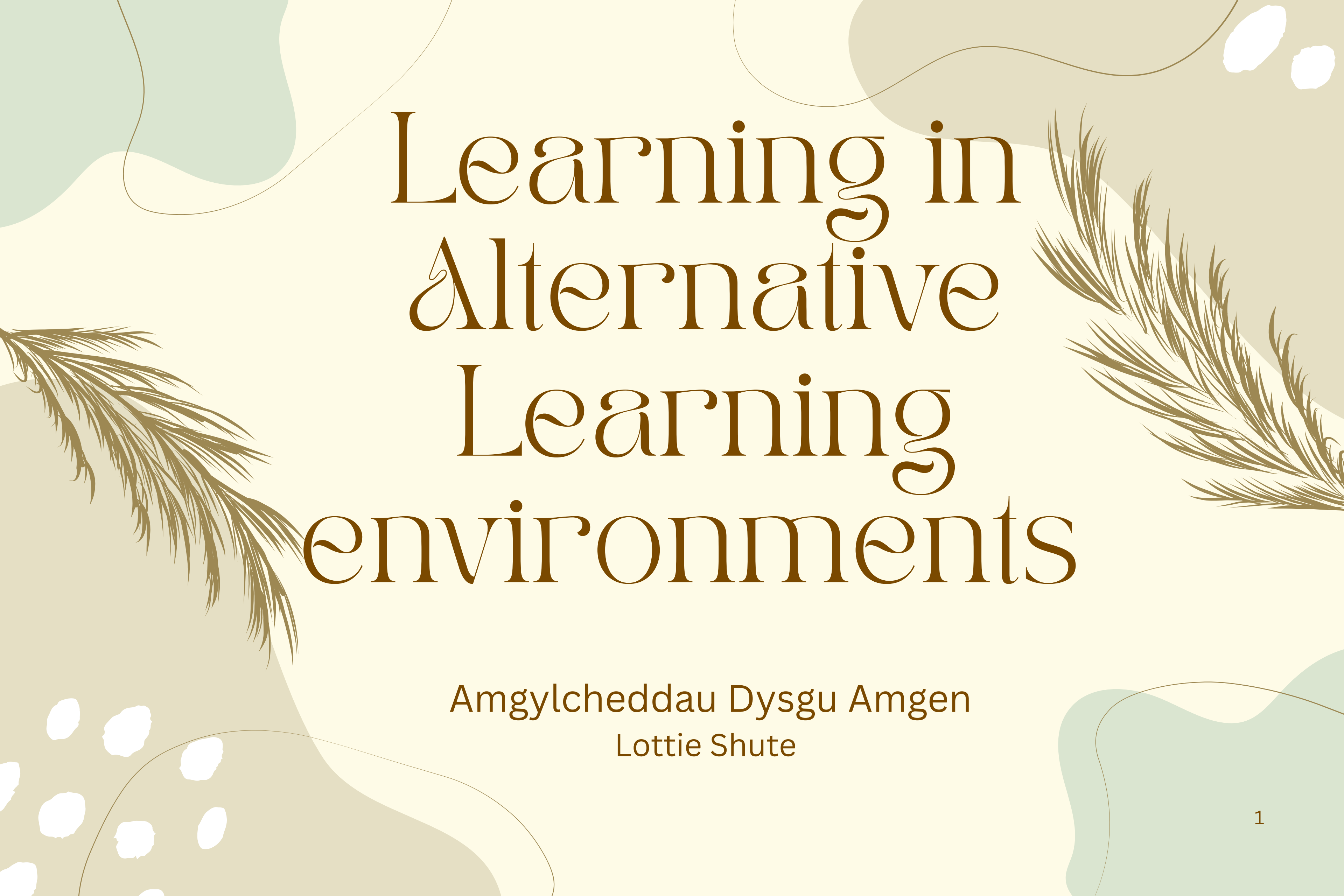


The background is a light cream color with several abstract, organic shapes in muted sage green and taupe. Two detailed illustrations of feathery plant branches, possibly eucalyptus, are positioned on the left and right sides. In the bottom left corner, there are several small, white, irregular shapes resembling holes or seeds.

Learning in Alternative Learning environments

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Introduction and overview

This portfolio examines learning in alternative educational settings, intending to critically assess a range of practical activities that illustrate how these environments may enhance children's development. Alternative learning environments represent educational settings and approaches that vary from conventional classroom instruction, providing more flexible, experiential, and child-centred learning opportunities. These environments could consist of outdoor settings, sensory-rich locations, and educational frameworks such as Montessori or holistic education. Forest School is characterised as an "alternative learning space" that significantly contrasts with traditional classrooms, facilitating child-led exploration and developmentally appropriate learning (Harris, 2025).

Alternative learning environments are progressively acknowledged as essential in education, since they facilitate children's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development in ways that conventional settings may not sufficiently address. Montessori asserted that interaction with nature "invigorates the child" and offers authentic experiences that enhance learning (Montessori, *Discovery of the Child*, cited in Teach Early Years, 2024). Outdoor and experiential learning have demonstrated the ability to cultivate independence, curiosity, and responsibility, providing significant opportunity for children to link abstract concepts with real-world experiences (Charles, 2024). These advantages illustrate the importance of alternate learning environments in fostering holistic development and promoting inclusive practices.

This portfolio will analyse various actions inside diverse alternative learning approaches. This covers Forest School activities like mini-beast habitat building; SEN-friendly initiatives such as sensory nature baskets; Montessori-inspired tasks like a pouring station; and holistic wellbeing practices such as a mindful listening nature walk. Each activity has been chosen to illustrate how alternate surroundings can facilitate diverse learners, foster independence, and create significant involvement with the natural world.

The portfolio is broken down into multiple fundamental areas. The evaluation starts with an analysis of essential terminologies, defining the concept of alternate learning environments and the theoretical foundations that support them. This is followed by an in-depth evaluation of each activity. The portfolio offers the following for each activity:

- an outline of the activity,
- its objectives and learning outcomes,
- appropriate theoretical connections (e.g., experiential learning, Montessori principles, holistic education),
- a thorough assessment of its efficiency, inclusiveness, and constraints,
- its functional application in early childhood or primary educational environments.

The portfolio closes with an overall conclusion of the significance of alternate learning settings in modern education, accompanied by a complete reference list.

Analysis of Key terminology

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is acknowledged as a fundamental theory in education, highlighting the significance of direct experience in information development. Kolb (1984) offers the predominant definition, characterising experiential learning as “the process through which knowledge is generated via the transformation of experience.” His four-stage cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation—depicts learning as an ongoing, cyclical process. This framework has been extensively utilised in educational settings and is essential for comprehending how learners derive meaning from experience.

Subsequent research by Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis (2000) elaborates on this notion by conceptualising experiential learning as a comprehensive model that synthesises experience, perception, cognition, and conduct. This expansive perspective underscores that experiential learning transcends mere “learning by doing” and involves a sophisticated interplay between action and reflection. Scholarly critiques contend that Kolb’s model may too reduce the subjective and social aspects of experience. Beard and Wilson (2006) assert that experience learning is influenced by emotional, contextual, and interpersonal aspects, indicating that it cannot be simplified into a universal cycle.

Notwithstanding these distinctions, definitions uniformly underscore the primacy of experience, the significance of reflection, and the proactive involvement of the learner. A precise definition of this portfolio is: experiential learning is a learner-centred process wherein knowledge is generated via active interaction, reflection, and application in significant real-world contexts.

Alternative learning environments

Alternative learning environments denote educational settings that diverge from conventional classroom arrangements in both format and instructional purpose. Coates (2023) characterises alternative learning environments as adaptable, community-oriented, or nature-based settings that contest traditional education by providing more responsive and child-focused methodologies. This description emphasises the structural and philosophical divergence from conventional schooling.

Policy-based definitions underscore the educational role of the environment. Education Scotland (2023) defines alternative learning settings as situations that foster creativity, wellbeing, and interdisciplinary learning, asserting that the environment itself plays an active role in the learning process. This corresponds with environmental psychology research, which posits that learning environments influence behaviour, engagement, and cognitive development (Barrett et al., 2015).

A third viewpoint emerges from research in outdoor and experiential education. Bentsen and Jensen (2012) contend that alternative learning environments foster autonomy, motivation, and comprehensive development by allowing learners to engage directly with natural materials and genuine challenges. This developmental emphasis underscores the significance of alternative venues in facilitating different learners, particularly those who may not excel in conventional schools.

Common themes throughout these definitions encompass flexibility, learner-centeredness, and contextual significance. The distinctions are based on emphasis: structural (Coates), pedagogical (Education Scotland), or developmental (Bentsen & Jensen). A precise definition for this portfolio is: alternative learning environments are deliberately constructed educational settings and methodologies that transcend conventional classroom paradigms to offer adaptable, experiential, and developmentally appropriate learning possibilities.

Outdoor learning

Outdoor learning constitutes a significant alternative educational setting; nonetheless, the language is expansive and lacks clear definition. The National Association for Outdoor Education describes outdoor learning as the attainment of educational goals through structured, experiential engagement with the environment, utilising natural resources as instructional materials (Harvey, 2011). This notion underscores the environment as an educational instrument.

Greenaway (2005), referenced in Harvey (2011), characterises outdoor learning as a comprehensive domain that includes adventure education, environmental education, and personal development. This underscores the variety of techniques and the experiential essence of outdoor education. Contemporary scholarship recognises the conceptual ambiguity of the term. Waite (2011) contends that outdoor learning can vary from outdoor curriculum implementation to transformative, nature-integrated educational experiences, contingent upon pedagogical objectives and environmental circumstances.

Notwithstanding these changes, definitions consistently underscore direct interaction with the environment, experience and active learning, and comprehensive growth. A comprehensive definition of this portfolio is: outdoor learning is an experiential educational methodology that utilises natural or outdoor settings as dynamic contexts for learning, fostering physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development through direct engagement with the environment beyond the classroom.

Forest school, Outdoor, experiential learning

Building mini-beast habitats is a Forest School activity generally conducted in early years or primary educational environments (ages 4–11). The activity occurs in a forested or outdoor educational setting where students cooperatively collect natural materials—such as twigs, bark, foliage, stones, and moss—to build houses for insects. Students investigate the environment, recognise appropriate microhabitats, and create buildings that emulate natural ecosystems. The activity is child-directed, investigative, and rooted in sensory interaction, consistent with the Forest School philosophy of sustained, long-term outdoor experiences.

The exercise cultivates a diverse array of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. Children cognitively participate in problem-solving, classification, and scientific reasoning as they contemplate the survival needs of insects, the functioning of habitats, and the appropriateness of various materials. These mechanisms facilitate early biological comprehension and ecological consciousness, aligning with the Foundation Phase's focus on experiential, inquiry-based education in Wales.

The activity fosters teamwork, communication, and collaboration, as youngsters negotiate roles, share resources, and co-construct their environment. Research on Forest School indicates that frequent outdoor experiences enhance confidence, resilience, and motivation, especially for children who may face challenges in school settings (O'Brien & Murray, 2007; Harris, 2026). The task's open-ended character enables learners to assume risks, make decisions, and cultivate independence.

The curriculum connections encompass the Curriculum for Wales Areas of Learning and Experience, specifically Science and Technology (comprehending living organisms and ecosystems), Health and Wellbeing (fostering confidence and resilience), and Expressive Arts (innovative creation utilising natural materials).

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

Kolb (1984) posits that learning transpires through a cycle comprising concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. The construction of mini-beast habitats closely adheres to this idea. Children acquire tangible experience through the manipulation of natural items and the observation of insects. They participate in reflective observation when evaluating effective strategies or the requirements of insects. Abstract conceptualisation transpires as individuals develop notions regarding habitats, ecosystems, and environmental interconnections. Active experimentation is demonstrated when they alter their structures in response to observations. The focus of Forest School on tinkering sessions enhances this cycle, facilitating profound learning over time.

Dewey's Experiential Learning

Dewey (1938) asserted that significant learning emerges from intentional engagement in authentic circumstances. The construction of mini-beast habitats exemplifies this principle, as youngsters acquire scientific knowledge not by theoretical instruction but via direct interaction with the natural environment. The activity contextualises learning within genuine ecological processes, rendering knowledge pertinent and memorable.

Vygotsky's Theory of Social Learning

Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the significance of social interaction and scaffolding in cognitive development. The collaborative aspect of the activity enables children to learn within their Zone of Proximal Development, aided by peers and adults. Discourse on insects, materials, and design selections serves as a mechanism for collaboratively developing comprehension. Research on Forest Schools indicates that outdoor environments inherently promote collaborative learning and the redefinition of teacher-student roles (Harris, 2017).



Advantages

Forest School pedagogy is acknowledged for its beneficial effects on children's wellbeing, confidence, communication, and problem-solving abilities (O'Brien & Murray, 2007; Harris, 2026). The construction of mini-beast habitats is notably beneficial since it combines ecological education, sensory discovery, and child-directed investigation. Studies indicate that outdoor learning spaces offer "distinct instructional settings" that foster interest and participation (Orion & Hofstein, 1994, cited in Harris, 2017). The exercise promotes holistic development, corroborated by data indicating nature-based learning improves wellbeing, motivation, and environmental connectedness (O'Brien, 2019).

Limitations

Practical constraints encompass reliance on weather conditions, accessibility of secure outdoor environments, and the necessity for qualified Forest School instructors. Inclusion challenges may occur for individuals with sensory sensitivities, mobility impairments, or entomophobia. Safeguarding and risk management are crucial, as youngsters interact with natural materials and navigate rough terrain. The Foundation Phase Outdoor Learning Handbook emphasises the significance of systematic risk assessment and meticulous preparation in Welsh educational institutions. Furthermore, not all learners may participate uniformly; some may necessitate supplementary support or different roles.

In a Welsh primary school, a teacher may present the activity as an element of a science unit on habitats. Students may commence by investigating the forested region, recognising insects, and deliberating on their requirements. The instructor would demonstrate safe material handling and guide group discussions while permitting children to direct the design and construction process. For SEN learners, modifications may encompass the provision of visual aids, the supply of gloves for tactile sensitivities, the utilisation of elevated planters for accessibility, or the assignment of responsibilities such as photographer or recorder.

Advanced learners may enhance the activity by assessing habitat success longitudinally or connecting it to sustainability concepts.

Research on Forest School underscores that sustained, long-term involvement is crucial for developmental advantages (O'Brien, 2019). Consequently, educators ought to frequently revisit the habitat, prompting students to detect alterations, contemplate results, and adjust their designs—reinforcing experiential learning cycles.



Montessori Approach, Child led, hands on learning

The Montessori pouring station is a fundamental Practical Life activity intended for children aged 3 to 6, usually used in early childhood environments or Montessori classrooms. Children utilise two small pitchers to transfer water between them, advancing to more intricate activities such as pouring into several containers, employing funnels, or pouring to designated levels (Montessori Portal, 2024). The activity is arranged on a child-sized table with a tray to delineate the area and contain spills. Children operate autonomously or collaboratively, selecting the timing and manner of their interaction with the materials, embodying the Montessori tenet of liberty within a framework.

The pouring station cultivates various cognitive, social, and emotional competencies:

- Cognitive and problem-solving: Children acquire ideas including volume, control, and cause-and-effect relationships. They must evaluate the quantity to pour, modify grip and velocity, and assess results—facilitating early scientific reasoning and executive function (E&O Montessori, 2024).
- Fine motor skills and coordination: Pouring enhances hand musculature and refines hand-eye coordination, equipping youngsters for writing and self-care activities.
- Social development: In dyadic or collective environments, children exchange resources, observe their classmates, and provide assistance, thereby cultivating collaboration and empathy.
- Emotional development: Success in pouring enhances confidence, but spills provide opportunity for resilience and self-correction—essential abilities for emotional regulation (Montessori Academy, 2024).

This activity corresponds with the Curriculum for Wales.

- Health and Wellbeing AoLE: fostering autonomy, resilience, and self-management.
- Science and Technology Area of Learning and Experience: investigating the characteristics of liquids and quantification.
- Mathematics Area of Learning and Experience: comprehension of amount, estimate, and comparison.



Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

Kolb (1984) characterises learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. The pouring station provides a concrete sensation via tactile interaction with water. Children contemplate spills or achievements, devise methods (e.g., pouring more slowly), and explore novel techniques. Repetition solidifies the cycle, facilitating profound and transferable learning.

Dewey's Experiential Learning

Dewey (1938) contended that significant learning emerges from intentional engagement in authentic circumstances. The pouring station illustrates this concept: youngsters participate in a practical activity with inherent significance (e.g., preparing beverages, irrigating plants), rendering learning genuine and pertinent.

Vygotsky's Theory of Social Learning

Vygotsky (1978) underscored the significance of social interaction and scaffolding. In Montessori environments, adults serve as facilitators, demonstrating pouring techniques and providing discreet assistance. Peer observation and collaborative practice enable youngsters to function within their Zone of Proximal Development, acquiring knowledge from peers and internalising competencies.

Advantages

Research substantiates the efficacy of Montessori Practical Life activities in fostering independence, focus, and motor development (Lillard, 2011). Pouring tasks are self-regulating; youngsters see and react to spills, fostering autonomy and intrinsic drive. The activity is inclusive, flexible, and developmentally suitable, particularly for early childhood learners. SENSible SENCO (2023) emphasises that Montessori's tactile, sensory-oriented methodology advantages children with varied needs, particularly those facing sensory processing issues or communication obstacles.

Constraints

Practical challenges encompass water leakage, cleanliness issues, and the necessity for continuous oversight, particularly with smaller children. Inclusion concerns may occur for children with motor impairments, visual difficulties, or worry over disorder. Safeguarding necessitates explicit boundaries—such as refraining from consuming the water—and secure supplies. Certain critics contend that Montessori activities may be deficient in explicit academic instruction, raising concerns in environments prioritising formal goals (Montessori Foundation, 2023).

In a Welsh nursery setting, a teacher might introduce the pouring station as part of a daily routine—e.g., preparing drinks or watering plants. Materials would be child-sized, with clear pitchers and a tray to define the workspace. The teacher would model the task slowly, then step back to allow independent exploration. For SEN learners, adaptations could include:

- Using coloured water for visual contrast.
- Providing tactile pitchers with textured grips.
- Offering alternative roles (e.g., drying spills, observing peers).
- Using visual prompts or step-by-step cards.

A real-world example is Ysgol Pen y Bryn, a Welsh primary school that integrates Montessori-inspired activities into its Foundation Phase provision. Teachers report increased engagement, independence, and emotional regulation among children using pouring stations and other Practical Life tasks (Ysgol Pen y Bryn, 2025).



Holistic and wellbeing approaches

A mindful listening walk is a wellbeing-oriented outdoor activity designed for children aged 3 to 11, usually conducted in early years or primary educational environments. This entails guiding children on a deliberate, unhurried stroll in a natural or familiar outdoor environment—such as a school garden, woodland path, or local park—prompting them to concentrate on the surrounding sounds. Children are encouraged to pause, shut their eyes, and discern sounds such as avian melodies, rustling foliage, distant vehicular noise, or footsteps. The stroll is supervised yet directed by children, allowing for subsequent reflection and conversation (NDNA, 2024).

This exercise promotes comprehensive development through the integration of cognitive, emotional, social, and sensory learning.

- Cognitive abilities: Children cultivate auditory discrimination, attentional regulation, and environmental awareness. They acquire the ability to classify sounds, formulate predictions, and contemplate sensory stimuli.
- Emotional wellbeing: Mindful walking alleviates stress, improves mood, and promotes emotional regulation (APA, 2023). Children acquire the ability to identify and regulate interior states via outward focus.
- Social development: Group walks foster communal experiences, empathy, and attentive listening. Post-walk dialogues foster conversation and the consideration of diverse perspectives.
- Resilience and confidence: Children develop assurance in articulating sensory observations and handling distractions, fostering self-awareness and coping mechanisms.

This activity corresponds with the Curriculum for Wales.

- Health and Wellbeing AoLE: fostering emotional control, mindfulness, and resilience.
- Science and Technology Area of Learning and Experience: cultivating sensory awareness and comprehension of sound.
- Languages, Literacy, and Communication Area of Learning and Experience: fostering expressive language and reflective discourse.



Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning

Kolb (1984) characterises learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflecting observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The mindful listening stroll offers tangible experience via sensory immersion. Children participate in reflective observation by perceiving and conversing about sounds. Abstract conceptualisation transpires when individuals associate sounds with sources or emotions. Active exploration ensues as they implement attentive listening in various circumstances (e.g., classroom concentration or emotional management).

Dewey's Learning by Doing Dewey (1938) contended that significant learning emerges from intentional engagement in authentic circumstances. The walk illustrates that toddlers acquire knowledge by direct interaction with their surroundings, comprehending the world via experience rather than formal teaching. The exercise cultivates curiosity, introspection, and personal significance.

Vygotsky's Theory of Social Learning

Vygotsky (1978) underscored the significance of social interaction and scaffolding. Throughout the walk, people direct attention and exemplify contemplative thinking. Peer discussion facilitates the collaborative development of comprehension. The activity functions within the Zone of Proximal Development, allowing children to enhance their sensory and emotional lexicon through collaborative experience.

Advantages

Mindful listening walks enhance attention, emotional stability, and sensory awareness. Studies indicate that mindfulness practices in educational settings enhance concentration, diminish anxiety, and promote wellbeing (Weare & Bethune, 2024). Outdoor environments amplify these advantages by diminishing cognitive burden and enhancing engagement (Reynolds, 2018). The activity is accessible, economical, and versatile for all age groups and skill levels. It facilitates comprehensive development, in accordance with Wales' child-centered curriculum and wellbeing objectives (Welsh Government, 2024).

Constraints

Practical issues encompass weather reliance, route safety, and worker ratios. Inclusion challenges may occur for children with auditory processing disorders, sensory sensitivities, or mobility problems. Safeguarding necessitates risk evaluation, oversight, and well-defined parameters. Certain youngsters may experience difficulty with quiet or silence, necessitating tailored assistance. The activity may prove less successful in the absence of structured reflection or subsequent follow-up.

A teacher in a Welsh primary school may organise a mindful listening walk as an element of a Health and Wellbeing curriculum. The route will undergo a risk assessment, and children will don high-visibility jackets. Prior to the walk, the instructor would elucidate the concept of attentive listening, demonstrate deep breathing techniques, and establish expectations. Throughout the trip, children would halt at significant locations to listen and contemplate. In class, they may construct sound maps, compose reflections, or craft nature-inspired poetry.

Adaptations for SEN learners may encompass:

Utilising visual cues or auditory cards.

- Supplying noise-cancelling headphones with customisable settings.
- Providing alternative positions (e.g., photographer, recorder).
- Utilising pushchairs or sensory mats for youngsters with mobility impairments.

An illustrative case is the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan in Wales, which advocates for inclusive, outdoor, and wellbeing-oriented experiences. Institutions like Ysgol Pen y Bryn have incorporated mindful walks into their Foundation Phase curriculum, indicating enhanced emotional regulation and engagement among students (Welsh Government, 2024).

Conclusion

This portfolio has rigorously analysed various activities—mini-beast habitat construction, Montessori pouring station, sensory nature basket, and mindful listening walk—each located inside alternative educational settings. These activities illustrate how child-led, experiential, and holistic methodologies can enhance development beyond the limitations of conventional classroom learning. Across all instances, some critical insights arise on the factors that contribute to the efficacy of activities in alternate settings.

Essential Attributes of Efficient Activities

Successful initiatives in alternate learning environments possess several fundamental characteristics:

- **Experiential engagement:** All activities entail tactile connection with objects, settings, or sensory inputs. This corresponds with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, wherein concrete experience and reflection facilitate enhanced comprehension.
- **Child-led autonomy:** Learners are granted agency in activities such as constructing habitats or deciding when to pour water. This fosters motivation, autonomy, and self-regulation—essential results in Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experiential learning.
- **Social collaboration:** Activities such as habitat construction and sensory exploration promote teamwork, peer learning, and collective problem-solving, embodying Vygotsky’s (1978) focus on social interaction and scaffolding.
- **Comprehensive development:** Emotional well-being, resilience, and sensory awareness are integrated into activities like the mindful listening walk. These results are frequently overlooked in conventional environments but are fundamental to alternative pedagogies.

Every activity exhibits robust alignment with the Curriculum for Wales, especially within the Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) pertaining to Health and Wellbeing, Science and Technology, and Expressive Arts. The exercises facilitate not only academic achievement but also personal development, emotional intelligence, and inclusive practices.

Advantages and Disadvantages Across Activities

The advantages of these methodologies are well-documented. Studies indicate that Forest School fosters confidence and ecological comprehension (O’Brien & Murray, 2007), Montessori activities promote concentration and autonomy (Lillard, 2011), and mindfulness helps emotional regulation (Weare & Bethune, 2024). The advantages are particularly evident for students who face difficulties in traditional educational settings, including those with special educational needs or behavioural issues.

Nonetheless, constraints must be recognised. Practical concerns such as meteorological conditions, oversight, and resource accessibility can impede outdoor or sensory activities. Inclusion issues emerge for those with sensory sensitivities, mobility disabilities, or anxiety disorders. Protection and risk mitigation are crucial, especially in unstructured or exploratory settings. Not all learners derive equal benefit from open-ended work; others may want more explicit teaching or structured assistance.

Conclusive Assessment and Connection to Portfolio Objective

This portfolio aims to critically evaluate how alternative learning environments enhance children's growth through practical activities. The evidence provided substantiates the idea that well-designed and inclusively implemented environments present abundant chances for experiential, social, and emotional learning. They cultivate individuality, curiosity, and resilience in manners that conventional schools may not. The efficacy of an activity in an alternate environment hinges on its capacity to reconcile freedom with structure, exploration with safety, and individual demands with communal experience. When these elements are present, alternative learning environments transform into potent arenas for development, inclusivity, and substantive instruction.

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