Can outdoor learning increase a Childs wellbeing?

This study is aimed to identify the benefits of children being outdoors, why being outdoors has a positive impact on children's mental health, wellbeing, and learning. It is increasingly recognised that play, including imaginary, creative, social, and outdoor play, offers a range of benefits to children's wellbeing and mental health. Article 31 of the UNCRC states that all children have the right to play (Unicef, no date). Outdoor play where children are provided with opportunities explore and connect with nature, be active, take risks are associated with positive health benefits both physical and mentally. This research will explore the decline in children playing outdoors and being active, the increase in children's poor metal health. The role of the environment and the different research methods used to include advantages and disadvantages. The methods used and why they were chosen. Why theorists believe outdoors is best and do practitioners agree? The study will follow a group of six nursery children over the course of 6 weeks. The sessions will be carried out in their local woodland area where they attend and engage in Foerst School sessions. Parents and staff have given signed consent and have been fully informed about their role within the research.

Literature review

Outdoor play is essential to children's learning development. Outdoor learning can lead to higher levels of wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence, and engagement levels. Learning outdoors supports children's social, emotional, and physical development (Welsh gov, no date). Forest schools provides children with rich learning experiences within the outdoors giving children unique opportunities to learn and explore through play. Theorists such as McMillan (1919) Piaget (1936) believed that children learn best through play and being outdoors. Recent research into the ecotherapy suggests that the outdoors can help manage stress, anxiety, and depression (Martin, 2021 & first discoverers, no date). Ecotherapy is a treatment that involves outdoor activities, exploring nature and social interaction (Mind, no date). Forest school helps children identify their boundaries and allows children to challenge themselves both mentally and physically. Engaging with risk to develop and learn new skills and challenge during outdoor. Hughes suggests that there are over 16 different types of play and children need to explore their boundaries in all 16 to grow and develop therefore children should be encouraged to take risk, allowing children to take risk helps build both resilience and confidence (Forest School Association, no date). Providing children with opportunities to challenge themselves discover their limitations and strengths whilst promoting and encouraging independence.

Physical play will also improve children's gross and fine motor skills through climbing, jumping, rolling, and running. However today children spend less time in nature a research project conducted by play coalition (2018) stated that children's outdoor play has decreased by 50% over the last ten years. A government study recently discovered that over 9 in 10 children had not visited a park, beach, or any other outdoor environment that year and that only 10% of British children have access to outdoor learning (Carrington, 2016). In addition to this a survey carried out by natural England revealed that 73% of children from homes with low income spent less time outdoors in nature compared to 57% of children from high income homes (Carrington, 2016). During the Covid 19 pandemic the environment was ranked the third most prominent issue facing the UK. 16% of families on low incomes did not have access to a garden or private outdoor space compared to only 6% of families on an income of over £50,000 a year. (Gov doc)

Barnardo's survey revealed that 37% of children felt more unhappy than they did before lockdown due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Young mind metal health statistics for July 2021, showed 83% of young people with mental health agreed that the Covid 19 pandemic increased their poor mental health with one in six children aged between 5 to 16 years identified as struggling with their mental health compared to 2017 were one in 9 children identified as having poor mental health (Young minds, no date).

A report published by Save The Children showed 27% of children said they regularly play outdoors compared to 80% of those aged between 55 – 64 showing the decrees in outdoor play over a few generations. (Save the children, 2022).

Research carried out by OnePoll surveyed 2,000 British children and parents found that two in five of Britain's youngest generation have never built a den or climbed a tree, which has showed to improve children's motor skill and physical development. Within that same research found that one in ten children would rather be indoors doing homework, playing video games, or watching tv than spending time outdoors in nature (Pettit, 20l8).

Children being outside is also the most effective way for children to get their vitamin D, vitamin D is needed for healthy bone development, muscles and strong teeth. It is recommended that children's bare skin is exposed to 5 to ten minutes a week two to three times. Lack of vitamin D can put children at a higher level of developing rickets (NHS, 2020).

With the decline in children accessing the outdoors with one of the reasons being the high rise in traffic that parent and carers feel its unsafe for children to play outside in the street. According to Jamshidian (2023) the Barry city council has proposed that all new housing development are to be built with more dead end and one-way streets to restrict the flow of traffic they have also agreed with the housing development to leave a patch of green for children to safely access to encourage outdoor games. This will also help with brining the community together thus being another way for children to gain a sense of belong linking again to the new curriculum for Wales (Welsh Gov no date).

“The outdoors offers limitless potential to young children. It becomes a place where they can go to relax their mind, to be inspired and to deep dive into the world of imagination. It is a place where they can design, create and explore. The possibilities are endless.' Angela Hanscom.

Methodology

The purpose of this research project was to look at the benefits of children's wellbeing being increased in the outdoors. The researcher chose to observe a group of 6 children aged 3 – 4 and observe them over a 6-week period, once a week during a forest school session. Forest school sessions should be child led aiming to provided children with hand on experience with nature through play exploration and risk taking (Forest school association, no date). The outdoors is regarded as being essential to a child's development both mentally and physically. The Foundation Phase (2015) regards outdoor play just as important as indoor play and that anything learnt inside the classroom can also be learnt outside. Looking after our wellbeing and mental health is more important now than ever according to the mental health organisation. They believe that being outdoors and connecting with nature is an effective way to support good mental health. Froebel valued outdoors and considered the outdoors the best place for children to learn and gain first hand experiences with nature providing children with opportunities to increase their curiosity to understand the world around them. A combination of quantitative and qualitive research methods were considered for this study. Quantitative research is a numeracy and mathematical approach used to collect data, whilst qualitive research provides the researcher with an insight of people's opinions and perspectives. An

example of this is an interview technique using open ended questions whilst the quantitative method might involve a questionnaire using a numeracy to gather data. When more than one method is used to conduct research its known as triangulation (Hassan, 2022).

For this research project the chosen methods include the mosaic approach both quantitative and qualitive. The named mosaic was chosen to represent the gathering of children's thoughts and ideas both individually and collaboratively to gain a better understanding of the world through the eyes of a child (Clarke 2011). Thus, also supporting article 12 of the UNCRC every child has the right to a voice. Using observations, video clips and interviews to gain the children's understanding and opinions of the forest school session. Children will be filmed and interviewed over the 6 weeks at the end of every session the child will be uniformly interviewed on what went well, what did not go well, how they felt at the beginning to how they feel at the end, how they managed risk as well as their social interaction. Children will be given the opportunity to reflect and contribute to the next weeks planning. This will allow responsibility and creativity over their learning supporting the new curriculum in addition to, promoting and encouraging child lead learning. For children to learn effectively children need to understand and feel understood, developing communication through listening understanding and speaking (New curriculum for Wales). Benefits of the mosiac approach is that children's voices are brought together to give their perspectives to form an image of the child's world, both individual and collective (Alison Clarke, 2011). Disadvantages of the mosiac approach according to Dr Brown (2011) is that it is less traditional than other methods and therefore can not be generalised accordingly.

For Children to feel accepted, valued, and respected, encouraging children to share and express their ideas and interests allowing children to contribute to the planning of the session by letting them choose what they like to explore or investigate further. This in turn will allow children to develop a sense of belonging which is essential to their happiness and wellbeing. The Leuven scale is a 5-point scale that allows practitioners to measure children's involvement and wellbeing using a quantative research. Number 1 being extremely low and withdrawn not wanting to engage to 5 displaying the highest levels of wellbeing and engagement levels. When a child is engaged in learning they will express elevated levels of involvement leading to higher levels of self-esteem and wellbeing. This from of research informs the practitioner where the child is at in terms of their wellbeing and allows the

practitioner to be able to better support that child. The Leuven scale has many benefits as it is observation based therefore putting the child at the centre of their learning. Observations has been shown to be the most successful and effective approach within the early years (learning journals, 2023). However, a draw back to the Leuven scale would be that is does not give a true reflection for children with additional learning needs. Often, the behaviours detailed within the scale are not realistic especially children who are non-verbal (Learning Journal, 2023).

A method of research that would not be used in this research would be a questionnaire. The reason for this is that according to Debois (2022) questionnaires can provide the researcher with dishonest answers especially in early years as the adults could influence the child's opinion when reading the question to them. Debois (2022) also states how questionnaires can be limiting due to the questions being adult led whereby an observation is reflective of the child and is more holistic.

Ethics

To ensure the research is carried out ethically consent must be given, all participants must be fully aware of what they are agreeing to and what the research is about its aim and outcomes. Participating is voluntary and participant can withdraw from the research at any time (Resnik, 2020). All data collected will comply with the general data protection regulation (GPDR 2018) Participants parents and staff have the right to any information concerning them throughout and after the study. All collected data can only be accessed through a security password system, once the research as ended all information collected will be shredded (Emrald Publishing, no date). According to City University of London (2023) children's names will not be used whilst being filmed and all written documentation will refer to the children in numbers 1 to 6. Patents and staff must be made aware of who will have access to the research and be fully informed of what and why it is taken place. Participants will be informed of any third party that might want to use research. To Prevent and limit any bias children will be selected at random children to allow for a broader range of children such as backgrounds and beliefs (Gov, 2019). This will prevent children being chosen who are more or less likely to get involve in outdoor learning being selected. Selecting children who enjoy the outdoors over those that do not, would not give a fair reflection of the study this will also prevent parents from feeling singled out or judged for how active their child is or how often they get to access the outdoors. Confidentiality is key when caring out any type of research

all information shared is kept confidential signed consent must be given by the school parent or career. Confidentiality is an agreement formed between the researcher and participant that all personal information opinions and views will not be shared or discussed with anyone outside the study (Gov, 2019). As this study is involving children who are not old enough to give consent, however they will still be given the option to attend the Forest school session and if they what to continue each week. Confidentiality will only be broken if a safeguarding issue need addressing. Safeguarding is in place to protect the welfare and safety of children, protecting children from harm. This may be a child, career or parent making a discloser concerning something they have seen heard or heard. Safeguarding is the action that is taken to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm and any types of abuse both physically and mentally. Ensuring children grow and develop in a safe and effective environment regardless of gender, disability, race, age, religion, and sexual orientation (NSPCC, 2023). Staff, parents, and carers will all be informed of what to do if they have any concerns about a child's wellbeing or safety. All research should conduct a risk assessment before it begins. As the research is taking place in a forest school a risk assessment will be done prior to any research taking place and will be available for all parents/ carers. The risk assessment will ensure all equipment used is in good condition and risks within the forest such as poisonous plants and species (Sheffield Hallam University, 2013). Risk to the participant welfare must be considered as an unfamiliar person could result in a negative impact in turn making the children reluctant to contribute to the research. To limit this the researcher would meet the children, parents, and carers prior to the research to become more familiar with the children and their families. This is also a good opportunity to build a rapor and answer any concerns they may have. The researcher will work closely with the nursery staff in order to familiarise themselves with the order of the day.

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