

Portfolio

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**ECIE6001: Moving away from the
traditional classroom: Outdoor education
and learning**

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Essay

Outdoor provision in education is becoming an essential element of education and holistic learning and wellbeing. “Outdoor learning refers to any structured educational experience that takes place outside the typical indoor classroom” (The Muddy Puddle Teacher, 2025). Outdoor environments can support cognitive development, social interaction, emotional regulation and physical health. Within Wales, policies such as the Curriculum for Wales (2022) emphasise experiential learning and the importance of environments beyond the classroom, “The outdoors is the ideal environment for experiential learning, because it offers unique opportunities to be creative, to move around, to be noisy and to take risks.” (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). This essay will critically compare and contrast the scope and approach of outdoor learning that is used, planned, and valued in primary mainstream school and ALN units. While both mainstream primary schools and ALN units utilise outdoor provision, the purpose, planning, and outcomes may differ significantly due to variations in needs, staffing, resources, and curriculum priorities.

While primary settings often use outdoor provision to enhance curriculum learning, ALN units may prioritise wellbeing, regulation and individualised support, demonstrating different pedagogical priorities. Outdoor provision is increasingly recognised as supporting physical activity, creativity & environmental awareness, programs such as Eco-Schools encourage sustainability education and outdoor engagement (Welsh Government, 2026). Outdoor provision is often highly valued in ALN settings because it supports emotional wellbeing, behaviour regulation, sensory development. For many learners with additional needs, outdoor environments provide reduced sensory demands and increased freedom of movement, which may improve engagement and learning. Welsh Government guidance and national outdoor learning initiatives stress that outdoor learning should be embedded within curriculum design to support wellbeing, creativity, problem-solving and cross-curricular skill development (Learning Through Landscapes, 2022).

Outdoor provision in mainstream primary education is frequently used to support play-based learning and cross-curricular activities. Activities may include playground learning, gardening projects, sports, and outdoor literacy and numeracy tasks. Outdoor learning significantly enhances engagement and motivation across the curriculum by effectively connecting educational experiences to real-life contexts, as outlined by the Welsh Government in 2009. This approach not only strengthens teamwork, communication, and collaborative learning but also fosters curiosity, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills among students, aligning well with experiential theories, such as John Dewey, who underscored the importance of learning through experience (Bates, 2019 p.20-21). The Curriculum for Wales actively promotes authentic contexts for learning, thereby establishing outdoor spaces as invaluable learning environments that provide ample opportunities for active learning across all Areas of Learning and Experience (AOLEs) (Welsh Government, 2016).

Outdoor provision in ALN settings often serves therapeutic, sensory and regulatory purposes alongside academic learning. Outdoor environments provide valuable opportunities for learners to develop sensory integration, emotional regulation and behavioural self-management. These approaches draw on developmental theory, such as that of Lev Vygotsky, which emphasises the importance of scaffolding learning within supportive environments (Bates, 2019, pp.48–49). For some learners, traditional classroom settings can

lead to sensory overload, therefore, outdoor environments offer alternative pathways for engagement and achievement, supporting confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, outdoor activities promote physical wellbeing by providing a constructive outlet for high energy levels and increasing motivation through meaningful, hands-on experiences. This reflects the principles of Friedrich Froebel, who emphasised the importance of children learning through play, movement and direct interaction with nature (Froebel Trust, 2024). Froebel argued that outdoor environments enable children to explore, develop curiosity and learn through real experiences with the natural world (Froebel Trust, 2024). Additionally, supporting the development of practical and vocational skills, such as horticulture, construction basics and outdoor maintenance, as highlighted by Ofsted (2011).

Outdoor sessions in mainstream settings may be scheduled on a weekly basis or integrated into specific subjects, fostering a cross-curricular approach to learning. However, outdoor provision can be incorporated into Individual Development Plans (IDPs) as outlined by the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. These activities are often customized to meet specific therapeutic or developmental objectives. The benefits of outdoor learning extend to both primary mainstream settings and ALN units. Nevertheless, the realization of these outcomes is heavily influenced by the quality of provision, staff training, and access to suitable environments. A critical comparison reveals that the benefits of outdoor learning are more dependent on the quality of facilitation rather than the mere act of being outdoors.

Despite these positive trends, planning for outdoor learning can often be constrained by time limitations, pressures from the curriculum, and staffing ratios, which can hinder the full implementation of these valuable activities. Practical challenges in outdoor learning environments often stem from limited space or facilities and poor resourcing, which can significantly hinder the effectiveness of educational programs (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016). Additionally, adverse weather conditions, staffing requirements, and health and safety concerns further complicate these initiatives (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016). It is essential to address the diverse needs of learners, particularly considering that some may prefer more sedentary activities due to a lack of confidence in outdoor settings or heightened sensitivity to stimuli, which can lead to sensory overload. In primary education, factors such as large class sizes, curriculum pressures, and risk-averse school policies can also limit the frequency and depth of outdoor learning experiences (Edwards, 2023), ultimately impacting students' engagement and learning outcomes. Conversely ALN units face unique barriers, including the mobility needs of learners, behavioral support requirements, and the necessity for specialized equipment (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016).

On-site provisions include playgrounds, school gardens, sensory gardens, and outdoor areas, which provide frequent access and minimize travel requirements for students. In contrast, off-site opportunities involve woodland environments utilized for Forest School, as well as local surroundings such as coastal paths, local parks, and environmental centers. However, travel for these off-site experiences can introduce challenges, including transport costs, staffing ratios, and safety considerations, specifically for ALN units, as travel may necessitate extra planning to accommodate students with specific mobility or behavioral needs.

Risk assessment is a crucial component of outdoor learning, particularly for off-site activities, as it ensures the safety and well-being of participants. However, it is important to strike a balance, as excessive concern regarding potential risks can significantly limit the opportunities for learning experiences and outcomes. Furthermore, aligning with the principles outlined in Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasizes “the right to be able to live in a clean and healthy environment” (UNCRC, 2023), it is imperative to utilize local outdoor spaces effectively. By conducting thorough risk assessments while embracing the benefits of outdoor learning, we can foster enriching educational experiences that promote both safety and environmental awareness. While both settings encounter logistical barriers, ALN units may face greater accessibility challenges, whereas primary schools often struggle with time pressures (White, 2025 & Edwards, 2023). As primary schools may access local community spaces more easily, ALN units may rely more heavily on specialised outdoor areas designed for accessibility and sensory learning.

Despite both settings recognizing the advantages of outdoor learning, its significance appears to be more pronounced within specialist settings, where the therapeutic and sensory benefits are prioritized (Estyn, 2024). Primary schools typically utilize outdoor provision to enrich curriculum learning and facilitate play, whereas ALN units often focus on achieving therapeutic, sensory, and wellbeing outcomes. Policies such as the Curriculum for Wales and the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales published by the Welsh Government emphasise the importance of inclusive and experiential learning environments. Curriculum guidance highlights that effective learning environments should include opportunities for play, exploration and learning outdoors, recognising the outdoor environment as central to authentic learning experiences rather than an optional enhancement (Welsh Government, 2022). Consequently, these policies suggest that outdoor provision should be considered a fundamental component of educational practice rather than an optional addition. Ultimately, effective outdoor provision requires thoughtful planning, adequate resources and trained staff, regardless of the educational context.

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Flyer

LITTLE EXPLORERS' SENSORY PATCH

Come and explore, relax, and grow together in the schools' sensory garden!

 **14th & 21st of April** **3:15 - 4pm** 

Support your child's emotional and sensory development
A calm, safe outdoor space designed to support children's wellbeing through nature, textures, colours, scents, and sounds.

Meet other families and be part of a supportive community!

Don't forget to dress for typical Welsh weather!



 All pupils and their parents/carers are welcome.
Siblings may also attend if supervised.
Any queries email: admin@school.org 

Risk Benefit Assessment

Location / Activity:	Blackberry picking along the coastal path	Date:	18/03/2026
Assessor:	Leah Hughes	Review date:	Next visit

ACTIVITY	How will young people 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
Walking along the coastal path	Develop physical health through walking on varied terrain - Improving balance, coordination and stamina	Trips & falls. Cuts, grazes & fractures / tissue damage.	Young people; adults	- Stay on marked coastal paths - Adult supervision at all times - Clear safety briefing before starting - Maintain safe distance from grass verge edges - Wear appropriate footwear with good grip - Walk at a controlled pace - First aid kit available with appropriate supplies for injuries - Ensure there's a fully charged mobile phone and a portable charger	Low
Picking the blackberries	Experience nature, supporting mental wellbeing and learn about seasonal food, plants, and the environment.	Cuts, scratches from thorns; minor injuries	Young people; adults	- Wear long sleeves and trousers where possible - Encourage careful picking techniques - Avoid overreaching into dense brambles - Only pick clearly identified blackberries - First aid kit available for minor cuts - Supervise young people while picking - Avoid berries near ground level (dog fouling risk) - No eating the berries until they have been washed properly once back on school site	Low

Literature Review

Outdoor learning has become increasingly popular, particularly as companies, parents, and educators realise the significant advantages of extending learning outside of the traditional classroom and becoming an essential part of modern education (The Muddy Puddle Teacher, 2025). As stated by The Muddy Puddle Teacher (2025) "Outdoor learning refers to any structured educational experience that takes place outside the typical indoor classroom". Examples include, forest school sessions, nature-based pre-school/early years provision, outdoor adventure learning, school grounds and community environment projects, curriculum lessons delivered outdoors utilising the uniqueness of the outdoor environment, play-based outdoor opportunities (The Muddy Puddle Teacher, 2025). On the other hand UK Youth (2023) "define outdoor learning as experiential learning within an outdoor environment" highlighting the importance of learning through indirect experiences in nature. The UK Youth (2023) definition reflects a broader and more flexible view that values exploration and personal development through experience, whereas the Muddy Puddle Teacher (2025) approach emphasises organisation and curriculum-focused teaching. This suggests that effective outdoor learning may involve a balance between child-led experiential learning and structured educational activities.

Outdoor education plays a vital role in the development of personal skills, facilitating exploration and discovery while fostering independence among learners (Learning Through Landscapes, 2022). Evidence shows that "experiences of nature help children acquire some of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors most needed in the 21st century." (Kuo et al, 2019). Learning through Wales (2022) claims that consistent outdoor education significantly enhances children's social, emotional, and intellectual development by fostering self-confidence, improving mental health, boosting academic engagement, and improving physical skills. Through engaging in team-building activities, students enhance their problem-solving abilities and build self-confidence, all while refining both gross and fine motor skills. This hands-on approach encourages effective decision-making and sparks creativity and imagination, promoting initiative and motivation. Communication skills are also nurtured in outdoor settings, as students socialise, collaborate and build connections (Very Well Mind, 2022). Furthermore, outdoor education provides concrete learning opportunities, allowing learners to acquire vocabulary in context, such as colours and smells, which is especially beneficial for students with additional learning needs (ALN). The Curriculum for Wales 2022 reinforces the importance of outdoor education in holistic student development by recognizing the significance of these experiences in alignment with the Welsh curriculum's four purposes (Welsh Government, 2019).

Research by Learning through Wales (2022) suggests that outdoor experiences can positively support social and personal development; however, these outcomes are not guaranteed and are strongly influenced by factors such as programme design, teacher facilitation and pupil engagement. Social and emotional barriers may limit participation, as some pupils experience anxiety or low confidence when engaging in unfamiliar outdoor environments, while peer pressure and group dynamics can discourage active involvement in group activities. Furthermore, issues of inclusion and accessibility may prevent all children from benefiting equally if activities are not adapted to meet diverse learning needs. Research by Papadopoulou & Vincent (2025) highlights that the pedagogical value of outdoor learning depends on how educators intentionally design environments and activities to make learning

opportunities visible and accessible to all children. In addition, motivation and engagement may vary between learners, as modern children are increasingly drawn to indoor and digital environments rather than outdoor experiences (Papadopalou and Vincent, 2025). Mart (2023) argues that this growing disconnection from nature can reduce children's willingness to engage with outdoor activities. Therefore, while outdoor learning has potential to develop personal skills, its effectiveness depends on inclusive planning, supportive facilitation and consideration of wider social influences.

Strong evidence base highlights the relationship between outdoor environments and improved mental health outcomes among children and young people, positioning outdoor learning as a potentially valuable pedagogical response to current wellbeing concerns. This is particularly significant in the Welsh context, where approximately 20% of individuals aged 8 to 24 were estimated to have a diagnosable mental health condition in 2023 (Cardiff University, 2023), indicating a substantial and pressing need for preventative and supportive approaches within education systems. Research increasingly frames outdoor learning not merely as an enrichment activity, but as an evidence-informed intervention that may mitigate rising levels of anxiety, low mood and stress (University of East London, 2025).

Complementing this, Tinney (2023) emphasises the social dimensions of outdoor play, arguing that it facilitates friendship formation, reduces social isolation and promotes a sense of autonomy and control, factors widely recognised as protective for both mental and physical wellbeing. These perspectives identify outdoor learning as a key contributor to children's mental health, although such sources often advocate strongly for its adoption and may therefore require critical consideration in terms of evidential balance. However, while such findings are promising, they also raise questions regarding the consistency of implementation and the extent to which these benefits are sustained across different contexts.

Literature also highlights a range of structural, social and individual barriers that complicate its implementation and impact. At a systemic level, Welsh NHS Confederation (2024) indicates that access to outdoor education is uneven and frequently constrained by practical factors, including financial costs, geographical location, transport, staffing capacity and competing curriculum demands. Particularly for disadvantaged families, reinforcing existing inequalities, as those who may benefit most from outdoor experiences are often the least able to access them (Welsh NHS Confederation, 2024). Furthermore, issues of inclusivity persist, as children with additional learning needs or disabilities may require adaptations that are not consistently available, illuminating a disconnect between policy intentions and educational practice (Welsh NHS Confederation, 2024). Alongside structural challenges, emotional and psychological barriers must also be considered, as not all children experience outdoor environments positively. For those with sensory processing differences, allergies, or Additional Learning Needs (ALN), such settings can be overwhelming. Unpredictable stimuli, including noise, textures, and environmental variability, may heighten anxiety and lead to dysregulation rather than improved wellbeing (Child Mind Institute, 2023). This challenges assumptions that outdoor learning is universally accessible or effective, and instead points to the need for more individualised and inclusive approaches.

On the same note, when appropriately supported, outdoor learning can contribute to the development of emotional regulation, which may in turn foster resilience and a greater

capacity for risk-taking in play (MacKenzie et al, 2019). From this perspective, exposure to manageable levels of challenge within outdoor contexts may support adaptive coping and developmental growth. However, this relationship is not straightforward, without careful scaffolding and support, such experiences may instead reinforce anxiety or exclusion for some learners. Therefore, while outdoor learning presents clear potential as a strategy to support health and wellbeing, the literature suggests that its effectiveness is contingent upon equitable access, inclusive practice and sensitivity to the diverse needs of children and young people.

Outdoor education plays a significant role in fostering sustainability awareness and encouraging meaningful engagement with the natural environment. A key aspect of this is its alignment with experiential learning approaches, where learners gain knowledge through direct interaction with nature. Activities such as gardening, wildlife observation, and ecosystem exploration allow students to experience environmental processes first-hand, making abstract sustainability concepts more tangible and relevant. This form of learning has been shown to enhance knowledge retention, increase motivation, and deepen environmental literacy. As Chawla (2018) argues, “direct experience in nature is a powerful pathway to developing environmental knowledge and concern,” emphasising the importance of experiential approaches. Furthermore, “students learn more effectively when they engage with real-world environments rather than abstract concepts alone,” reinforcing the value of outdoor contexts in supporting understanding (Chawla, 2018).

In addition to improving knowledge, outdoor education contributes to the development of environmental awareness and stewardship. Research indicates that participation in outdoor programmes can foster a sense of responsibility towards the environment and encourage pro-environmental attitudes among young people. This is supported by findings from the Children & Nature Research Centre, which state that nature-based learning “supports students’ academic, social, and emotional development while fostering environmental stewardship.” Moreover, students who engage with outdoor learning are “more likely to develop a sense of responsibility for the environment,” highlighting its role in shaping sustainable behaviours. These initiatives often involve collaborative, hands-on projects that help learners see themselves as active contributors to environmental protection, aligning closely with the goals of sustainability education.

While outdoor education can increase pupils’ awareness of environmental issues and sustainability, its overall impact may be constrained if these values are not reinforced beyond the school setting. Research highlighted by the Children & Nature Network (n.d) suggests that nature-based learning is most effective when it is embedded within a broader ecological and social context, recognising that children’s behaviours are shaped not only by educational experiences but also by their home and community environments. This is further supported by findings from Outdoor Play and Learning Practices from a comparative case study perspective (Mart, 2023), which emphasise the importance of contextual and cultural factors in shaping how outdoor learning is experienced and sustained across different settings. Although pupils may develop pro-environmental knowledge and attitudes through outdoor learning such as recycling, reducing waste, and caring for nature, schools have limited influence over whether these practices are sustained within the household.

Outdoor education demonstrates clear benefits for physical fitness, mental clarity, and the development of a meaningful connection with nature, while also fostering environmental stewardship. It supports the development of gross and fine motor skills and enhances social interaction, particularly for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), contributing to a more holistic model of learning and development. However, its successful implementation remains constrained by practical and institutional barriers. Without sufficient professional development and organisational support, educators may be unable to fully realise its potential. Embedding outdoor learning within the formal curriculum, rather than treating it as an occasional activity, is therefore essential to maximise its impact (Learning Through Landscapes, 2022). Furthermore, the field would benefit from more consistent and robust evidence to strengthen claims of effectiveness across diverse contexts (Lomax et al., 2024). Ultimately, while outdoor education holds significant promise, its long-term success depends on sustained institutional commitment and broader engagement from families and communities to ensure its benefits are both inclusive and enduring.

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