

Exploring the question; What are the Benefits of Outdoor Learning within a Nursery

Setting and Do All Children Thrive Outdoors?

Abstract

Within this research project there will be in-depth considerations around the question “What are the Benefits of Outdoor Learning within a Nursery setting and do all children thrive within the outdoors?”. Throughout this research project there will be methodological and ethical considerations such as, keeping confidentiality, how to know if the participant is feeling uncomfortable and keeping everyone safe during the project as a whole. To conduct this research there will be two methods used, interviews with practitioners within the nursery setting and observations of two different ages of children. The observations will be looked upon as children experience and explore the outdoors, throughout these observations there will be the research observer who will be conducting a running sample method which will be looked at every two minutes for two minutes. Both interactions will be produced in a qualitative way to guarantee a more in-depth and accurate purposeful answer for the question asked. The interviews will be taken by the same observer who will ask five different members of staff six questions to see different perspectives, while also learning through the Curriculum for Wales but also through play too. The reason this was the topic chosen is because this is a new regulation to the Curriculum for Wales, often children thrive and grow within the outdoors, however other children can find the outdoors intimidating and frightening. Due to the new policy, it is important to experience and see firsthand how the children are progressing throughout their learning adventures.

Literature Review

What are the Benefits of Outdoor Learning within a Nursery Setting?

Within this research project we will be indulging on planning to find out the answer to, “What are the benefits of Outdoor Learning and do all children benefit from this learning method?”. We will be planning to undertake observations and interviews with children and nursery nurses. This will help the observer see other professional’s points of views when conducting the research as well as the ethics we need to include before, during and after the project.

According to Tebbs, A. (2022), Outdoor Learning within a nursery setting can provide an independence to children at a young age, children can feel free, confident, and productive

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while building upon their knowledge and understanding. Learning Outdoors can encourage children to engage with peers and practitioners as they would within a classroom setting, children can sometimes use imagination within the outdoors to explore and accomplish fears in a wider environment.

For most children within a nursery setting, Outdoor Learning supports and motives confidence, social skills, physical skills, and knowledge and understanding of the world around them. Research conducted by T. Gill, O'Brien and Murray (National Literacy Trust, 2024) agrees that outdoor learning gives children the opportunity to work cooperatively, initiates communication skills and builds upon self-esteem through hands on learning experiences within the outdoors.

However, do all children benefit from learning outdoors? It is suggested that Outdoor Learning does not meet every child's individual needs. According to Landscapes 4 Learning (2022), outdoor learning does not benefit every child within an early years setting, this could be due to the dislike of weather change, fear of creatures, the unknown of the world around them and/or safety hazards as children can often be afraid to explore something new, children can also feel intimidated by the independence that outdoor learning brings.

Tovey, H. (2016) says that Froebel's Theory towards learning and being outdoors within an early years setting suggests that children should experience the outdoor learning environment on a daily basis. Froebel's view continued by saying the outdoors is an essential aspect of a child's life as they could appreciate and begin to understand the relationships between all living things. However, Froebel continues by announcing the early years settings should be offering and promoting potential areas for all learning indoors and outdoors, practitioners should encourage the children to explore and experiment within the natural environment when in their care.

However, Leaver's (2012) disagrees with Froebel's theory as they say the change of environment can be difficult for a child maintain the same focus and behaviour to what they did have before. Being outdoors and trying to achieve learning within the outdoor environments can interfere on a child's concentration skills. For example, noises, natural resources, bugs, and different textures can distract children to focus on the activity trying to be achieved. Children may often feel vulnerable within the outdoors due to fears of insects or sounds around them. Practitioners should give children time to explore and embrace the outdoor learning environment before trying to complete any learning tasks to help the focus of the children.

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HWB Welsh Assembly Government (2024) begin by saying within the new Curriculum for Wales, outdoor learning has been introduced to the values and is at the heart of the Curriculum which nurseries, primary and secondary school's follow on a daily basis. On this document, informing schools around the area they announce that outdoor learning plays a significant role in the health and wellbeing of the children and young people within their care. Outdoor learning, as a pedagogical approach has both physical and cognitive benefits since been established. Outdoor Learning usually involves designated areas within the community or within the nursery setting itself. The sessions are led by qualified staff as they introduce hands on learning as they indulge on the children's imagination and self-esteem. According to Gov.Wales (2024), outdoor learning defines adventure in education. Outdoor learning promotes a holistic education, to meet all needs of both children and practitioners within the settings around Wales.

Prince, H. E. and Diggory, O. (2023) suggests that outdoor learning involves playing, teaching and learning that takes place in natural environments for children within nurseries, and schools. Outdoor learning is supported by Government Policy as a whole and a regular part of the Curriculum. For example, Curriculum for Wales. However, they continue by saying outdoor learning can be incorporated beyond the curriculum in a school day. Outdoor learning can also be in play areas as well as forest grounds, grassed areas or areas formed by practitioners for a designated area.

Methodological considerations

What is quantitative and qualitative research methods?

Within a quantitative research method observers will be observing and measuring something by its quantity, rather than quality. Recording quantitative data would be recording the aspects of responses in numbers, metrics and numerical values. For example, height, age in years, and percentages. Within this research method, observers may be conducting a questionnaire to collect the data with “56% say...”.

Whereas qualitative research methods would be recorded in words, for example within this research project, the observer will conduct notes using words such as “...believes that”, “independence” and “outdoor learning is...”. Burgess (1984: 102) says qualitative research when interviewing is ‘conversations with a purpose’.

Within this research project, the observer will be undertaking both interviews with staff and observing children when experiencing indoor and outdoor learning. Both responses will be recorded in a qualitative way, the observer will be using words during the note taking of interview and when viewing the recording afterwards. The observer will also be note taking in a qualitative way when observing children within the setting. The qualitative way is ideal for these methods because the observer can capture the participants thoughts, perceptions, feelings and experiences within their own words. This helps the information given as factual and accurate information to support the project. Observations are also helpful while using qualitative techniques as first-hand experiences make the value intriguing and accurate. (Holloway, I. 2005).

Within this research project the setting will commence at a local nursery (Flying Start). This setting has been chosen due to the convince of the project itself, and the research observer does not have to travel to start the research, this will help time management and will allow more time for the research itself. The ages within a Flying Start nursery ranges from 0 years to four years old. The research project is aimed towards early years settings where children under three years old attend. The aim for this project was for young children, this enables the researchers to meet all criteria points of their project. This one setting was also chosen due to the convenience to the researcher to enable to meet the expected point of publication with the time limitations. However, this can be at a disadvantage to the research project as being local to the nursery can show a Hawthorne effect, the Hawthorne effect means children’s or the participants behaviour or character changes as a result of being observed. This can be at a

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disadvantage as if the nursery staff or children know the observer it can often change the child's approach to the situation. As a result of this, within this project the observations will be discreet to help the child become unaware of what is happening around them. This may suggest that children would act as they normally would around the professionals. (Persell, 2016)

Limitations. Limitations during research projects can vary due to having one researcher observatory and the number of staff and children they need to meet. This can be a negative aspect of using these research methods as with only one observer it can be very hard to see, hear and know all the aspects of the question asked, (what are the benefits of Outdoor Learning). A running record observation can also be at a disadvantage to this project as there are certain times you can write, therefore there are possibilities that the observer will miss a key area of learning. Aussie Childcare Network (2021). Due to these reasons, the researcher is going to observe two different age rangers at different times, three-year-olds and two years olds to calculate and evaluate the outcomes of outdoor learning within a nursery setting. The observations will last forty-five minutes each, this will total the observations to one and half hours. Interviews will then start with the participants chosen. Interviews can also be time consuming for the research interviewer, this is defined by the number of questions asked. Within this research project the interviewer will be asking six open questions to five different members of staff, these staff will be the manager of the nursery, two Flying Start Practitioners and two Flying Start Leaders. These interviews are estimated to last 30 minutes with each interviewee. Interviews will last approximately two and a half hours overall.

The six open questions that will be asked to each member of staff are as follows:

- What age of children do you work with, and how many children are in your care?
- How often do the children in your care undertake outdoor learning sessions?
- Does every child in your care thrive when outdoors? How?
- Do you notice any difference within the children themselves when outdoors, compared to indoors?
- In your opinion, what environment is more beneficial to the children in your care, indoors or outdoors and why?
- What are the benefits of Outdoor Learning?

All observations and interviews are done in a purposeful way. This is so the observer can see first-hand the strengths and weaknesses that outdoor learning brings to the children.

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Interviews are also a purposeful aspect of the project as the observer is able to ask direct questions to the participants and participants are able to share their own thoughts, feelings and perspectives on outdoor learning while taking the learning into consideration for the children's benefit.

However, observations and interviews are exceptional practice when asking the question "What are the benefits of Outdoor Learning", but this does not inform our question about every child, in every setting. This is a limitation of this research project, due to only have one observer and one setting that is being monitored does not mean all information will be agreed or completely factual for every child in the area. Another researcher may have different aspects of results due to seeing different things and having different perspectives on the topic. To help and support this aspect of the research, they have introduced triangulation to the project, triangulation in qualitative research is introduced to support systematic use of the sources of data and idea around the question being asked. The type of triangulation techniques being used within this project is data triangulation. This means like above we are going to investigate using two sources, interviews and observations to strengthen the responses and to give a in-depth, factual outcome to the project. (*Triangulation*, 2021).

During the observations of children, the observer will be producing notes with a pen and paper, the observer will be looking for beneficial evidence to show that the children are learning, enjoying and are happy within the outdoor learning. The observer will be looking for happiness, excited emotions, while watching all activities that are going on to see if the children are benefiting from the activities outdoors, the observer will be looking for engaged children and not engaged children, children who are listening, children who are distracted throughout. the observation method that will be used is a running observation. A running observation method works well as Bright Wheel (2024) says that this observation tool helps gain insight to a child's development, reaction and activity within one time. This technique provides a descriptive, unbiased record of facts including what the child is doing and saying at that time. The observer will be writing down what is happening every two minutes for two minutes, this will include what is happening, and how the children are reacting to the outdoors. This method will be a written report and will then be transferred to a digital copy, this will then be saved onto a memory stick. Names of children will be edited out and codes will be added. Children's names will not be known and will be replaced by a letter, for example "Purple Coat". This will hold confidentiality and names will not be disclosed outside

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of the setting. This was recommended by University of Bristol (no date). Before the observation is accepted the researcher will produce a letter of acceptance to the parents of the children that they are planning on seeing to ensure the parents/ cares are willing to consent before any observation takes place.

Within the interviews, as said above the interview will be asking five different members of staff six questions. This will be done on a one-to-one basis and will be digitally recorded by a camera. Interviews will take place by the same research observer and will start when practitioners are able. Before the interviews take place, the interviewer will inform the staff that if at any time they do not want to answer, or if they feel uncomfortable in anyway then they can stop the interview at any time by raising a hand, or by simply say that they would not like to proceed. As above, the names and surnames of the members of staff will be kept anonymous, to ensure this happens successfully names will be coded to keep confidentiality within the setting. To do this, like above, members of staff will code names that may include “Participant Red”.

Within this research project these the two methods fitted the situations the best for the one observer. The other methods were not considered because according to Patten, M (2016) say that the response rate to questionnaires can often be very low. Questionnaires can be forgotten about from the audience which means relevant information may not be shared. Questionnaires may not give an in-depth discussion about the audiences point of views. For example, it is often known that explanation boxes are normally not filled in with information needed.

When all observations and interviews are complete, the research observer will collect all data and write a final report answering and supporting with findings the question based around this project. This report will again, include code names, confidentiality and professionalism. After this report to release all data and notes made from the day will be stored online and a memory stick. There will be sensitive files put into place and saved and shared to the relevant people. This file will then be locked digitally and will not be shared to any irrelevant source or person. However, this information will be available to the participants if they were to ask for the information. Information spoken by them will be released to them as all other information will be edited out to keep General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Ethics

What is Ethical issues when working with children?

According to (BERA, 2011, p.5) Educational researchers should always operate within an ethic of respect to all people involved with the research project. All individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively and with dignity. There should be freedom from prejudice regardless of gender, age, race, class, partnership, disability or any other significant difference.

Before undertaking any observations with children or interviewing practitioners within the nursery, it is vital that the researcher has consent from all practitioners and parents/carers of the children involved. It is important to ensure that parents or participants do not feel pressurized or feel like they must take part in the research project. This is called Voluntary Informed Consent. Voluntary Informed Consent is one of the founding principles of the research ethics. This is to ensure that human participants can choose whether they are involved or not. If for any reason they decide to not participate, then they should feel free to not carry on with the project. University of Oxford (2009).

According to NSPCC Learning (2024), there are numerous tasks to think about beforehand, such as managing the risk of harm, obtaining all consent, and protocols for any concerns the observer may have about a child. Before entering the setting, the researcher must have written consent from the setting. The researcher must then have consent from parents, carers and practitioners that they are wishing to see. To do this, the researcher of the project must write a full information letter including the plans for the day they are there, what they wish to see, what they want to talk about and what they are going to do with the information gained after the day of completion. Within the letter it is important to address what is going to happen if you can see or if you are told that the participant no longer wants to continue. Within observations with children, if a child is looking or saying that they are uncomfortable then the observation will stop immediately. The observation will not continue until the child is either feeling comfortable to continue or the child is no longer part of the activity. Again, if practitioners no longer feel comfortable with the interview, then they can either say or to raise a hand which will gesture the feeling, this interview will stop immediately and all footage that the practitioner is a part of will be deleted. On the letter and consent for provided from the researcher the letter informed the participants about the question being asked and

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provided full information of the day they would arrive, the consent for then needed to be signed by the person consenting for this practice to take place.

As the research observer it is key that you show openness, questions will be granted and free to be answered at any time and children will be made to feel no different to any normal day.

The researcher will be engaging and calm to help the children embrace the outdoor activities.

As there will be note taking, it is important that all confidentiality is kept, and anonymity is held. As British Educational Research Association (2024) says it is important that researchers try extremely hard to keep confidentiality while undertaking ethic research. Researchers must comply with all legal requirements in relation to the storage and use of any personal data shown. Data Protection Act 2018 say that researchers should have explicit permission to gather, store and disclose their personal information to third parties and are required to ensure these parties are permitted to access any information and responses from the research.

Therefore, as said above all information will be kept in a locked file, digitally and only shared to relevant sources.

Within this research projects there can be a variety of risks that may arise. For example, whistle blowers disclosing information about participants personal details, disclosures from children during observations indicating safeguarding issues, the researcher asking controversial questions or questions that does not need to be shared for this project, ratios not being accurate or not following GDPR and University Data Storage Policy correctly and losing data. To ensure risks are reduced during this process procedures are put in place, such as;

- Whistle Blowers disclosing information about participants, following all policy and procedures to do the best we can for the children and practitioners.
- Disclosures from children regarding safeguarding issues, informing and passing on all details shared to the Safeguarding Officer within the setting
- Researcher asking controversial questions, making sure all questions asked are relevant to the topic and are “must know” answers to complete the question project
- Ratios not being accurate, connect CIW straight away to share concerns and worries for the children’s safety
- Losing data due to not following procedures, having a policy and risk assessment to ensure all rules are taken seriously.

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Unicef (2024) announces that within this research project children should feel comfortable and should always be at the heart in the project itself. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, articles three and twelve announce that all actions concerning children, the best interests of each individual must be at the consideration of all that the research entails. They continue by saying, children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to say and express all views that they have freely whenever they feel like it is affecting them as a person.

In conclusion to this, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, has conducted a Integrity Policy which ensures all research projects are findings are all truthful, all information gathered should be factual, integrated with Data Protection to ensure all information is kept anonymous to the public while safeguarding all children that the research may effect. All frameworks, policies and curriculum should be followed step by step when commencing research projects to ensure everyone involved has given consent, is safe and feels in control of all situations that they are involved in. University of Wales Trinity Saint David (2024).

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