

Module Title – Moving away from traditional education: Outdoor education and learning

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Student Number - 2506126

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Compare and contrast the scope and approach to outdoor provision in two types of setting.

Outdoor learning is a central feature of Early Years and Primary education in Wales, supporting children's physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. The curriculum for Wales emphasises active, experiential learning across a range of environments, positioning the outdoors as an integral context for exploration, problem solving and real-world engagement (Welsh Government, 2022).

Research highlights that outdoor environments offer rich opportunities for curiosity, wellbeing and collaborative learning, particularly when provision is designed to be open ended and responsive to children's interests (White, 2020). This essay examines the developmental, pedagogical and rights-based value of outdoor learning across both Early Years and Primary education in Wales, alongside examining the structural and practitioner level factors that shape its effectiveness.

Outdoor learning in Early Years settings is recognised as a key contributor to children's holistic development, supporting physical, emotional, social and cognitive growth in ways that indoor environments alone cannot (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). Welsh guidance emphasises that outdoor provisions should form part of continuous daily practice, giving young children regular opportunities to explore, move and play freely as an integral part of their learning (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). This aligns with Curriculum for Wales, which promotes experiential, authentic and developmentally appropriate learning across a range of environments, including the outdoors (Welsh Government, 2022).

The developmental aims of outdoor learning in Early Years are strongly supported by theory; Piaget (1952) forms the view that early learning is rooted in sensory exploration and physical interaction with the environment reinforces the importance of hands on, active engagement. This approach is underpinned by Froebel (1782–1852) whose principles emphasise the value of nature, freedom and the unity of the whole child, and contemporary interpretations emphasise the role of outdoor environments in nurturing curiosity, independence and emotional wellbeing (Early Education, 2021).

Outdoor environments support collaborative learning, enabling young children to develop communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills through shared exploration and open-ended challenges (White, 2020).

Research of this domain demonstrates the breadth of opportunities outdoor learning provides in Early Years. The British Children's Play Survey reports that children spend around half of their daily playtime outdoors, yet their freedom to explore independently has reduced across generations, making high quality outdoor provision in settings increasingly important (Dodd et al., 2021). Natural outdoor environments support

adventurous play, offering meaningful opportunities for children to assess risk, solve problems and develop physical confidence (Dodd et al., 2021). These experiences contribute to the aims of Early Years education by promoting resilience, autonomy, language development and social interaction through real world, play based learning.

Outdoor learning in Primary settings aims to extend children's understanding across the curriculum by connecting classroom concepts to real world contexts, reflecting Curriculum for Wales guidance that promotes active, experiential learning across a range of environments (Welsh Government, 2022). Outdoor provision in Primary schools can enhance pupils' engagement and motivation by providing meaningful, hands-on experiences, a benefit also recognised by student teachers who describe that outdoor learning supports curiosity, confidence and positive attitudes towards learning (Barrable et al., 2020).

This emphasis on collaboration and shared problem solving aligns with Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory, which highlights the importance of social interaction in developing higher order thinking. Outdoor learning in Primary education supports collaboration and communication through shared, real-world problem-solving tasks that develop teamwork and active participation (Welsh Government, 2022). Outdoor experiences also help children develop environmental awareness and sustainability values, with evidence showing that outdoor environmental education can strengthen children's environmental values and encourage pro-environmental behaviour (Johnson & Činčera, 2021).

Primary outdoor learning provides opportunities for physical activity, practical exploration and appropriate challenge, supporting children's confidence, resilience and independence (Estyn, 2023). These experiences align with the Curriculum for Wales by encouraging curiosity and a positive attitude towards challenge (Welsh Government, 2022). Regular contact with nature also helps children develop pro-environmental attitudes and a sense of responsibility for the natural world (Welsh NHS Confederation, 2024).

Early Years outdoor learning is delivered through a continuous provision model that reflects Curriculum for Wales expectations for active, experiential learning across indoor and outdoor environments (Welsh Government, 2022). This positions the outdoor area as a core learning space rather than an optional extension, enabling children to explore, investigate and develop independence through real world experiences.

However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on practitioner skill. Estyn highlights that high quality outdoor learning requires well planned environments and purposeful adult interactions that extend children's thinking, rather than leaving learning entirely child led (Estyn, 2023). However, the success of this approach varies across settings, as Estyn reports inconsistency in how confidently practitioners plan and facilitate outdoor learning (Estyn, 2023).

The Foundation Phase Outdoor Learning Handbook positions outdoor learning as a distinct pedagogical approach that values movement, creativity and sensory exploration (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). It encourages practitioners to design environments rich in natural and open-ended materials so that children can experiment, solve problems and engage in imaginative play (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). This approach is underpinned by Froebel (1782–1852) whose emphasis on nature and holistic development (Early Education, 2021) is supported by contemporary guidance showing that natural outdoor environments foster curiosity and independent learning (White, 2020).

Primary schools adopt a more structured approach to outdoor learning, using planned, curriculum linked activities to extend pupils' understanding across the Areas of Learning and Experience. Curriculum for Wales emphasises that learning should be active, authentic and connected to real world contexts, meaning outdoor environments are used purposefully to support inquiry, problem solving and the application of classroom concepts (Welsh Government, 2022). Teachers design outdoor tasks that build on prior learning, such as measuring distances in mathematics, investigating habitats in science or gathering vocabulary for descriptive writing.

Estyn illustrates that effective Primary outdoor learning is strengthened by whole school commitment, well organised outdoor spaces and staff who understand how to use the environment to enhance learning across the curriculum (Estyn, 2023). They also note that this level of practice is not consistent across all schools, with variation in how confidently staff plan and deliver outdoor learning (Estyn, 2023). Research also shows that teachers feel more effective when outdoor learning is well structured and purposefully planned, reinforcing the need for clarity and confidence in Primary practice (Barrable et al., 2020). This approach aligns with experiential learning principles, as outdoor contexts offer meaningful opportunities for active engagement, reflection and the development of deeper understanding (Parry and Allison, 2020).

Across both Early Years and Primary education in Wales, the effectiveness of outdoor learning is shaped by wider rights based and structural factors that influence how fully children can participate. The UNCRC (1989) states that education should develop children's "personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (United Nations, 1989, Article 29) and "children have the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities" (United Nations, 1989, Article 31). Recognising outdoor learning as a rights-based entitlement reframes it as a necessary condition for children's holistic development, rather than an optional pedagogical choice. These principles position outdoor learning as a core entitlement rather than an optional enhancement. Creating inclusive outdoor environments requires flexibility and responsiveness to diverse needs, echoing White's emphasis on multi-sensory, open-ended spaces that support different ways of being and learning (White, 2020). This aligns

with the ALN Code, which expects settings to remove barriers and ensure accessible, equitable learning environments for all learners (Welsh Government, 2021).

However, research by Barrable, Touloumakos and Lapere, (2020) highlight persistent challenges across Early Years and Primary settings, including variation in staff confidence, concerns about managing behaviour outdoors and inconsistencies in planning for progression. Furthermore, limited space, resourcing pressures, weather constraints and shortages of experienced staff can further restrict opportunities (White, 2020). Yet these challenges are seen to be outweighed by the evidence that outdoor experiences promote wellbeing, resilience and pro-environmental attitudes (Dodd et al., 2021).

Overall, outdoor learning in Early Years and Primary settings offers rich developmental, pedagogical and rights-based benefits, but its effectiveness depends on confident practitioners, purposeful planning and equitable resourcing. Strengthening professional learning and whole school commitment is essential to ensuring all children experience high quality, inclusive outdoor provision.

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Teddy Bears Picnic for Little Learners and Their Families!

Bring your teddy, your picnic blanket, and your biggest smile — it's time for a magical afternoon of outdoor fun, learning, and laughter, inspired by Froebel's belief that nature is a powerful teacher (Froebel, 1826).

Who's Invited?

Nursery children aged 3
Parents and siblings' welcome
Family-supported event with staff supervision

Held in our nursery garden a safe, enclosed outdoor space for playful learning and nature discovery

What to Bring

Teddy bear or soft toy
Picnic blanket
Water bottle
Sunhat or raincoat
Optional: small snack to share

These activities help children:
Build confidence and friendships
Develop speech and storytelling skills
Move, dance, and explore the outdoors
Discover nature and seasonal changes
Express themselves through music and art

 Friday 8th May 2026
 1 o'clock in the afternoon
 Nursery Garden
 Message us on Class Dojo

Activities Include

- Teddy Bear Hunt
- Storytime under the trees
- Nature art with leaves and twigs
- Sing-along circle
- Teddy Bear Dance Party
- Sensory play: mud kitchen, water trays, natural textures
- Children will explore natural materials like leaves, twigs, water, and mud — no extra supplies needed.

Come Along and Make Memories!
Celebrate learning, nature, and
togetherness with your child and
their favourite teddy.

Fröbel, F. (1887) *The Education of Man*. Translated by W.N. Hailmann. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Location / Activity:	Redevelopment and use of outdoor learning space behind the nursery	Date:	24/04/26
Assessor:	Kelly Stead	Review date:	1/09/26

The boxes in the table below will expand as you type into them; pre-entered text is simply for illustration. You should delete irrelevant items and replace with text relevant to your circumstances.

Your overall risk rating – Low, medium or high – is based on your judgement about whether the BENEFITS of the activity or opportunity outweigh the RISKS.

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
Exploring and playing in the outdoor area	Children build confidence, balance, and a sense of space and movement. They learn to assess risk, make choices, and connect with nature. Supports wellbeing, resilience, independence, and physical development.	Slips, trips, uneven ground, wet surfaces, loose materials or uneven surfaces that might not be seen straight away.	Children and staff	Staff sweep area before use; clear boundaries marked; children reminded of safe zones; suitable footwear required; supervision at all times; qualified First Aider present; first aid kit accessible.	Medium
Gardening and planting with staff and families	Encourages teamwork, responsibility, and care for living things. Links to science and wellbeing through sensory exploration and understanding of growth cycles.	Allergies, insect bites, minor cuts from tools.	Children and staff	Allergy information checked; gloves provided; child safe tools used; handwashing after activity; adults model safe tool use; tools checked regularly.	Low

Family help days (e.g. tidying, building bug hotels, clearing space)	Strengthens community bonds and gives children pride in their environment. Encourages collaboration, shared ownership, and intergenerational learning. Builds confidence and responsibility through real world tasks.	Manual handling, trip hazards, weather exposure.	Children, parents, and staff	Safety briefing at start; tasks matched to ability; weather monitored; water and rest breaks; PPE used where needed; tools checked and stored safely; supervision maintained throughout.	Medium
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Literature review - 'The role of Outdoor Education'

Outdoor education has become an increasingly important aspect of contemporary pedagogy, offering a meaningful alternative to the constraints of indoor, classroom-based learning. It is commonly defined as purposeful learning that takes place beyond the traditional classroom, using natural and built environments to support children's holistic development (Becker et al., 2018). Related terms such as outdoor learning, outdoor play and experiential education emphasise slightly different dimensions, but all highlight the value of direct engagement with the outdoors as a context for curiosity, wellbeing and connection (White, 2020).

Outdoor learning in Wales aligns closely with the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises supporting children to become healthy, confident individuals and ethical, informed citizens (Welsh Government, 2022). Within this wider vision, the Welsh Government's learning resources on Cynefin describe it as a Welsh word meaning "habitat" or "place of belonging" (Welsh Government, 2025). This understanding complements the curriculum's focus on helping learners develop a strong sense of place, identity and connection to their local environments. Outdoor learning therefore becomes not simply an enrichment activity, but a pedagogical approach that supports children in developing meaningful relationships with the places and communities that shape their lives (Davy, 2019).

Building on this curriculum context, research further highlights the educational value of outdoor learning. Becker et al. (2018) argue that outdoor education offers a purposeful and structured alternative to indoor, classroom-based instruction, enabling learners to engage physically, socially and emotionally with their surroundings. Such approaches are associated with enhanced wellbeing, increased motivation and deeper experiential understanding, particularly when children are encouraged to explore, take risks and collaborate in real world contexts. These benefits align closely with White (2020) emphasis on outdoor environments as rich spaces for curiosity, autonomy and holistic development, reinforcing the view that outdoor learning is not simply an add on, but a recognised and purposeful pedagogical approach.

A substantial body of research highlights the positive impact of outdoor learning on children's physical and mental well-being (Jimenez et al., 2021). Becker et al. (2018) emphasise that outdoor environments provide opportunities for movement, exploration and sensory engagement that are often restricted within indoor classrooms. Further evidence shows that spending time in natural settings can improve children's attention, mood and social interaction (Tillmann et al., 2018).

These experiences support children's physical development through active play, risk taking and interaction with varied natural features, contributing to improved motor skills,

coordination and overall health (Becker et al., 2018). White (2020) states that time spent outdoors promotes emotional regulation and reduces stress, noting that natural settings offer calming, restorative qualities that help children feel more settled and focused. This pattern is reinforced in studies showing that nature-based interventions can reduce stress in children and families (Razani et al., 2016). Recent evidence shows that outdoor experiences can strengthen children's nature connectedness, emotional wellbeing and resilience (Moula, Palmer and Walshe, 2022).

From a health perspective, UNICEF highlights that many children do not meet recommended physical activity levels. They recommend at least two hours outdoors each day is needed to achieve 27% moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, this in turn will support children's physical and mental wellbeing (UNICEF, 2025), thus demonstrating the wider value of outdoor environments. Moreover, exposure to natural light also supports healthy daily routines and contributes to Vitamin D synthesis, further reinforcing the health value of outdoor experiences (NHS, 2020).

Kolb (1984) explains that outdoor learning is strongly underpinned by experiential learning theory, which emphasises that children construct understanding through active engagement with their environment. In outdoor contexts, learning becomes embodied as children climb, balance, manipulate natural materials and respond to real-world challenges that cannot be replicated indoors (Kolb, 1984; Becker et al., 2018). These authentic experiences require children to problem solve, assess risks and make decisions, supporting deeper cognitive processing and the development of autonomy (Kolb, 1984; Becker et al., 2018).

Becker et al. (2018) argue that such hands-on engagement strengthens children's physical, social and emotional learning because outdoor environments naturally invite exploration, collaboration and curiosity. Similarly, White (2020) highlights that outdoor spaces promote intrinsic motivation, as children are drawn to investigate natural phenomena and follow their interests in ways that are less easily facilitated indoors. This aligns with Dewey (1938) view that meaningful learning arises from interaction with the world, where experience forms the basis for reflection and new understanding. Through these processes, outdoor learning becomes a powerful pedagogical approach that supports holistic development and encourages children to take an active, self-directed role in their learning.

Outdoor learning also plays a significant role in supporting children's understanding of sustainability, environmental responsibility and their relationship with place. Within the Curriculum for Wales, learners are encouraged to become "ethical, informed citizens" who recognise their impact on the natural world and understand their responsibilities within it (Welsh Government, 2022). This aligns closely with the Welsh concept of *Cynefin*, described in national learning resources as a sense of belonging, identity and connection

to one's environment (Welsh Government, 2025). When outdoor learning is framed through Cynefin, it becomes a way of helping children understand themselves in relation to their local landscapes, histories and communities, rather than simply an enrichment activity.

Research suggests that outdoor experiences can meaningfully shape children's environmental values and behaviours. Johnson and Činčera (2021) found that programmes which involve direct interaction with natural environments are more likely to foster pro-environmental attitudes, particularly when children are encouraged to reflect on their experiences. They highlighted that programme outcomes were shaped by how children's pre-existing environmental values interacted with the instructional strategies used, meaning that children with stronger initial values responded more positively to the programme (Johnson & Činčera, 2021).

Davy (2019) emphasises that mindful, sensory engagement with outdoor environments helps children develop a strong sense of place and ecological identity, which in turn supports long term environmental responsibility. This perspective reflects wider European trends, where outdoor learning is increasingly shaped by environmental and sustainability agendas, with many programmes aiming to develop children's ecological understanding (Becker et al., 2018). These studies collectively suggest that outdoor learning is most effective when it enables children to form meaningful, reflective relationships with the natural world, rather than simply participating in surface level activities (Becker et al., 2018; Davy, 2019; Johnson & Činčera, 2021).

A rights-based perspective further strengthens the argument for outdoor learning; The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) states that education should promote "the development of respect for the natural environment" (UNCRC, 1989, Article 29) and that children have the right to "rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities" (UNCRC, Article 31). In Wales, these rights are given legal force through the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011, which requires Welsh Ministers to have "due regard" to the UNCRC when making decisions affecting children.

Outdoor learning directly supports these rights by providing opportunities for exploration, play and meaningful engagement with the natural world (Welsh Government, 2011, Section 1). This aligns closely with the Curriculum for Wales, where the concept of Cynefin encourages children to develop a sense of belonging to their local environment and to understand their place within the wider world (Welsh Government, 2022).

Outdoor learning however, is not without its challenges, several authors caution that rights-based aspirations do not always translate into everyday practice. Christie, Beames and Higgins (2016) note that school structures such as rigid timetabling, limited curricular flexibility and established classroom centred cultures can restrict teachers'

ability to embed outdoor learning meaningfully, even when policy frameworks encourage it. Barrable, Touloumakos and Lapere (2020) found that many student teachers feel underprepared to manage risk or design purposeful outdoor experiences, suggesting that training and professional development remain uneven across settings.

Access to suitable outdoor spaces also varies significantly; UNICEF (2025) highlights that children in urban or disadvantaged areas frequently lack safe, high quality outdoor environments, creating inequalities in who can benefit from outdoor learning. Becker et al. (2018) similarly argue that organisational constraints, including staffing ratios and safety concerns, can restrict opportunities for regular outdoor provision. These challenges indicate that while outdoor learning aligns strongly with children's rights, its implementation is shaped by wider social, cultural and structural factors that require sustained attention (Christie et al., 2016).

Much of the existing evidence focuses on immediate or short-term outcomes such as wellbeing and engagement (Becker et al., 2018), while far less research examines the longer-term developmental impact of sustained outdoor learning. Studies exploring environmental attitudes tend to report short-term shifts in children's values, with limited evidence of longer-term behavioural change (Johnson & Činčera, 2021). Research specific to Wales is also limited because the Curriculum for Wales only became statutory in 2022, meaning there has not yet been enough time for researchers to evaluate its long-term impact on outdoor learning practice (Welsh Government, 2022). These gaps indicate a need for more longitudinal and context specific research.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that outdoor learning offers a powerful and multifaceted contribution to children's development, supporting physical health, emotional wellbeing and deeper experiential understanding. Research consistently highlights that outdoor environments provide opportunities for movement, exploration and sensory engagement that are difficult to replicate indoors, contributing to improved attention, motivation and resilience (Becker et al., 2018; White, 2020).

The literature highlights that outdoor learning offers children experiences that classroom environments cannot replicate, supporting wellbeing, curiosity and deeper experiential understanding (Becker et al., 2018). These benefits align closely with the Curriculum for Wales and the concept of Cynefin, which emphasise belonging, identity and ethical citizenship (Welsh Government, 2022). When viewed in this way, outdoor learning becomes a meaningful pedagogical approach that helps children connect with themselves, their communities and the natural world (Davy, 2019).

Yet some of the reviewed literature highlights a clear gap between policy ambition and everyday practice. Structural pressures, limited teacher confidence and unequal access to high quality outdoor spaces continue to restrict opportunities for many learners (UNICEF, 2025). These challenges suggest that outdoor learning requires more than

enthusiasm; it needs sustained professional development, supportive leadership and equitable access to safe outdoor environments.

Looking ahead, research in this area would benefit from more longitudinal and Wales specific studies to understand how outdoor learning shapes children's development over time. With the right investment and commitment, outdoor learning has the potential to become a consistent and transformative element of children's educational experiences.

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