

An investigation to determine how the introduction of outdoor education supports learning in Key Stage One

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses upon the effectiveness of outdoor education on primary school pupils in Key Stage One; regarding their engagement and behaviour. In addition to this, this study will consider to pedagogical strategies that are adopted by the teacher during the delivery of outdoor lessons. Mixed methods of qualitative data collection were employed to evaluate the aim of this research. The findings of this study support the view that pupils can benefit from a different learning environment in obtaining group work skills, a difference in behaviour, more enthusiasm and a higher motivation. The strongest outcome of this research depicts that common misconceptions of outdoor education from practitioners are often what hinders pupil engagement in lessons taken outside. If teachers lack an understanding of how to promote effective outdoor lessons, it raises the question of whether this approach of education is beneficial at all.

Introduction

With technological advances and new teaching strategies captivating primary education, are we losing sight of an essential resource that lies right outside of our doorsteps – the great outdoors? This research project offers an explanation to how the introduction of a creative outdoor environment can support pupil's learning in Key Stage One. The research takes place in a primary school in North Wales that does not have a qualified forest school leader. This point serves the necessity of this research, due to the fact that it is beneficial for educators to be aware of how outdoor education can be successful without specialist knowledge.

Children are often associated with outdoor play, which is deemed to be highly beneficial to many aspects of their lives (Ridgers et al, 2012). This research will determine whether the significance of outdoor play can be applied in schools for educational purposes. In recent years, there has

been an augmented approach to the involvement with children and nature in education. It is suggested that being outdoors is beneficial to child development as it challenges a number of issues in traditional pedagogy, such as freedom, risk and safety (Maynard and Waters, 2014). As well as this, outdoor education is thought to inspire children to take an innovative outlook towards their learning and play (Knight, 2016).

The work of Forest School practitioners such as Sara Knight, has been key to laying the groundwork of interest for this study. It is depicted that an outdoor learning environment can be used with a variety of age groups and for different purposes (Knight, 2014). Consequently, providing a reason regarding why an investigation into outdoor educational practices is appropriate.

Outdoor education and previous research

Underpinning this study is an extensive literature review of existing research regarding this topic. The significance of the environment in relation to the child's learning is depicted by Titman (1994), with the idea "stereotypical school grounds are a wasted resource" (p. 13). This is stressed further by Clark (2010), as it is argued that a large extent of children's attitudes in school are determined by the design of the school environment and the way in which it is managed. Forest school replaces the traditional methods of teaching with the emphasis on risk, challenge and play (Titman, 1994). It is suggested that children thrive in environments that are a place for 'doing', for an extension of skills (Titman, 1994). This is prioritised by Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers (2012), who encourage children to climb trees and face their fears in order to become enriched with a range of skills for their future. It was essential to be aware of the current literature that is available in order to set the groundwork and identify why introducing different learning environments should be considered.

As well as respecting that all children will learn in different methods, it is inevitable that children will also present alternative opinions regarding their preferred places in school. Listening to children's favourite things to do allows them to grasp an aspect of self-concept (Tatlow-Golden and Guerin, 2010). Children's enjoyment in activities must not be dismissed, but instead encouraged, as children are more likely to thrive in an environment where they seek enjoyment (Waite, 2011a). It is possible to base individualised learning on children's interests (Waite, 2011a). This can be achieved by observing children's interests and introducing this into lessons. Waite (2011a) discusses method of including children's interests into their own learning, which stemmed from the observation of a young group of boys' enthusiasms in trains.

Finally, it is essential to consider the teaching methods and how this may or may not facilitate individualised learning for children. When thinking about the teaching standards of young children, the Reggio Emilia approach must be discussed. This approach values the importance of social relationships and exploration for children's learning and dismisses the need for the presence of a formal curriculum (Solly, 2015). This teaching strategy differs from those that are commonly used within schools as it equips children with problem solving skills and the ability to gather a sense of themselves (Krechevsky, 2013). The Reggio approach to teaching must nurture children's curiosity and

increase their confidence in overcoming issues (Krechevsky, 2013).

Methodology

This research is a case study of a rural primary school in North Wales. The term case study is often associated with qualitative data collection methods (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), which lies with the belief that case studies are indicative of a contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 2018). In this particular instance, the choice to favour quantitative methods is due to the fact that participant viewpoints were essential for this project (Bryman, 2012). The aim was to investigate the outdoor environment as an effective space for learning in Key Stage One. This would be determined by analysing the difference in the pupil's behaviour, group work, enthusiasm and motivation depending on whether they were indoors or outdoors.

Participants

The method of sample selection that was tested was convenience sampling (Bryman, 2012), which is defined as selecting any members of the population who are readily available (Rodgers-Holmes, 2014). It is a conventional type of non-probability sampling because it is the most manageable for the researcher (Elliot et al, 2016). Twenty year two pupils (ten boys and ten girls) from a mainstream classroom with mixed learning abilities participated in the study. The pupils had previous experience of outdoor educational activities, each Friday all the pupils participated in an afternoon of lessons that were taken outdoors named 'Foraging Fridays' by the school.

Research methods

This research was carried out using observation, document analysis and focus groups.

The range of data collection methods is highly appropriate as it heightens the reliability, which is something that is an issue with this case study as it has a lack of generalisability (Denscombe, 2014). The use of multiple methods assists in data triangulation and to confirm the findings and interpretations (Bell, 2010).

Observation

Observations are effective in providing groundwork for what is to come during later investigations, as there is opportunity to gain a familiarisation of the environment (Clark and Moss, 2005). Twenty children from a year two class were observed in a mathematics lesson indoors and outdoors. Indoors,

the lesson focus was money and outdoors the lesson focus was sorting. The pupil's motivation and group work were assessed when they took part in the indoor lesson in groups of ability and as a whole class during the outdoor lesson. The type of observation that was used was overt non-participatory observation (Bell, 2010). The data collection was carried in each learning environment in the same way. The researcher was uninvolved in each of the stages of observation and took notes on the behaviours that were displayed by both the children and the teachers. Controlling the consistency of the research methods will increase the extent to which the study can be deemed reliable (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Document analysis

In a further attempt to control the variables that could result in inconsistency of the results was the inclusion of the lesson plans. These documents have been written in conjunction with the standards of the Foundation Phase Framework (2015). Lesson plans were gathered for indoor and outdoor lessons to see if practitioners differentiated between the two environments. It is also beneficial to look at if the desired outcomes have been met for each environment. The documents were analysed by looking for similarities and differences between them.

Focus groups

Pupil's enthusiasm for learning outdoors was examined in a child-led tour around the school's outdoor environment. The pupils were told the aim of this section of the research was to find out their opinion on their outdoor area in school, and that they had full control in their choice in how this information will be delivered. The pupils chose to take the researcher on a child-led tour and draw their favourite place to learn outside. After the children led the researcher, they sat outdoors and drew their interpretation of their favoured area. Allowing children to draw their feelings is an effective way of empowering their voices, due to the fact that it reflects their thoughts at that particular time (Clark and Moss, 2005).

It was essential that the voices of the children were perceived in the data in order to perceive their own opinions about learning outdoors. Following the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018) each child completed an ethics form (see figure 1).

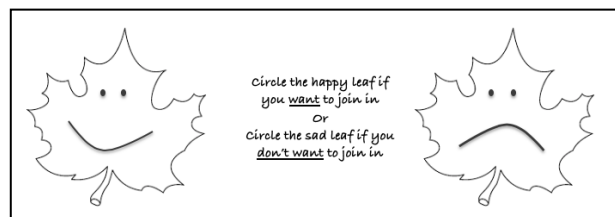


Figure 1: Ethics form

If the participants are unable to give informed consent, an attempt must be made to explore alternative ways that consent can be given (BERA, 2018). The children were given a child participation sheet whereby they circled their agreement or disagreement in taking part. Lundy (2007) provides an insight into pupil voice and how its mis-conceptualised within schools. There were precautions taken during this focus group in order to attempt to avoid this. Children have the right to be given an opportunity for involvement in decisions that implicate them (Lundy, 2007). Consequently, Hart's Ladder of Participation (1997), is essential to consider, in order to be aware of the appropriate child participation methods that are necessary to ensure that children's voices are respected during research.

Data Analysis and Findings

Behaviour

It was apparent that both child A and B responded well to praise and attention from the practitioners when they took part in both indoor and outdoor lessons. Young children display attention seeking behaviours in order to seek validation from the adults around them (Gerwitz, 1954). In particular with child A, the attention seeking behaviours were much more apparent in lessons carried out indoors. These behaviours were destructive and resulted in the teacher's intervention. Children are impressionable and learn from other individuals around them, which is what is determined as social learning theory (Bandura, 1997). It is clear that when indoors, child A focuses his efforts into seeking attention from adults, whether this be positive or negative attention. This could be deemed to be due to boredom or the inability to complete the work.

When child A was outdoors, he was observed telling his peers, "do not pick! She said not to pick!". In comparison from the behaviours that were displayed indoors, the child is seen listening and responding to instructions given to him, and additionally telling other members of the class to listen to these instructions. It is clear that in terms of behavioural differences, in this particular instance child A is much more motivated to follow

instructions when he is outdoors. Solly (2015) defines an outdoor learning environment to be rich with opportunity and open-ended experiences that can be tailored to every child's needs; which is something that is not always possible in other environments.

This difference between indoor and outdoor lessons can be further comprehended with the lesson plans. The lesson plans present an explanation to why there were differences in the children's behaviours. The lesson plans indicate that there are ability groups during the indoor lessons but not in outdoor lessons. This immediately demonstrates that when outdoors, there is less pressure on the children as they are not divided into groups based on skill. Ability grouping is a controversial topic in education as it is argued that it will impact child self-esteem levels, which therefore questions whether it is necessary for teaching (Kulikand and Kulik, 1987). As well as esteem levels, classifying children into groups could impact children with higher abilities, as they may feel the pressure to perform to a certain level. Kelly (1990) expresses that ability grouping is a flaw of the National Curriculum and questions whether there is evidence to highlight their effectiveness within education. Marks (2016) argues that the term 'ability' is difficult to define, due to the fact that that it is based on the opinion of what is deemed to be successful and what is not. Consequently, the presence of ability groups in schools (whether the classification of the children's ability is clear in the chosen group name or not) means that children are aware of their grouping and will be impacted by this (Marks, 2016). This demonstrates how outdoor education challenges some of the functions of conventional practice in education. Ability groups exist because there are still teaching standards that practitioners must follow, due to the fact that there is a substantial focus on raising educational standards in schools (Hallam et al, 2002). It is considered that grouping children based on ability allows children to discuss their shared aims and goals (Hallam et al, 2002), this is challenged by the information that was gathered, which demonstrated the children's enthusiasm in working together and out of the constraints of their ability groups. Marks (2016) discusses that teachers will carry social beliefs about grouping; however, these are not reflected in practice due to teachers following standards and potentially disrupting strongly embedded systems. This suggests that a shift in attitudes could be achieved if teachers thought strongly enough to make a movement.

Group work

It was also evident that the pupils were enthusiastic about working with their peers. The children's enjoyment in lessons is essential due to the fact that emotional context increases the chance of memory (Waite, 2011b). Thus, providing a reason for endeavouring children's pleasure in the lessons they participate in. Children have the ability to learn from their peers, especially when they are outdoors due to the aspects of nature that can be discovered and discussed amongst each other (Knight, 2016). The lesson that took place outdoors was much more unstructured than one that would take place indoors. The pupils enjoyed their group work and they held positive attitudes towards each other while learning outdoors. They were independent and relied less on the confirmation from their teachers.

The success of the indoor lessons should not be diminished because of the data that was collected that supports the outdoor learning environments. During the indoor lesson, the children enjoyed being able to physically handle the money. This is something that can be deemed to be because of children's individual learning styles (Reid, 2005). There are many different types of learning styles, meaning that it is certain that every child in the class will not learn in the same way. Reid (2005) takes into account the children's different personalities to express that every child will learn differently. This raises the point that all the children in the class will thrive in different environments, and no learning environment in the school should be dismissed because of the differing way that all children learn.

Common practitioner misconceptions

A critique of outdoor education is placed with some practitioners who fail to facilitate it appropriately. Leather (2016) proposes that it is possible that practitioners follow outdoor education practices without understanding why it is necessary. Leather (2016) constitutes that teachers are too focused on the curriculum to be able to promote an alternative method of teaching. This demonstrates the criticality of teachers gaining an understanding of what they are teaching before a lesson takes place. This is especially essential with outdoor education as it is a method of alternative education, and therefore should bring something different to learning.

Additionally, teacher's attitudes to outdoor education are an implication to taking pupils outdoors to learn. The concept of outdoor education is commonly misconstrued. In order for children to benefit from outdoor education, the activities in

place must differ from what is available for children indoors. One prominent factor during the data collection was the practitioners' lack of understanding of effective outdoor practice. The school that the data was collected had no registered Forest School leaders. Consequently, the rural Welsh school adopts their own individual approach to outdoor education. Due to the bad weather on the day of the observations, the class teacher postponed the lesson until the next day rather than going outside. Knight (2016) voices that there should be no excuse for bad weather in outdoor education, instead the blame should be placed upon unsuitable clothing choices and uneducated teaching practices. Taking children outside in bad weather could help their understanding on concepts of the world (Smidt, 2013).

During the focus group, one child discussed how he enjoys climbing trees when he is outdoors. When this opinion was explored further it was depicted that it this is a behaviour that is prohibited in school. Solly (2015) explains that all children need to have to opportunity to experience challenge within their learning, and for many children this is self-initiated. Every child has a different limit to their abilities, therefore the extent to how far a child will push themselves will also differ (Solly, 2015). It is clear that the young boy in the focus group thrived on pushing himself and being able to achieve new abilities, which is a trait that is disapproved by the school rules. It can be argued that allowing children to master new skills such as tree climbing will cause concerns for safety, however with the instinct of well-trained practitioners this would be achievable (Solly, 2015). Consequently, suggesting a benefit of having trained Forest School leaders within the school to promote this sort of practice. Ridgers et al (2012) express a concern that children are becoming disengaged with nature, initiated with the fact that there is a lack of opportunity to explore the natural environment. Introducing methods such as Forest School could improve the chance of children being able to build new skills such as tree climbing.

During the observation of the outdoor mathematical lesson, the class teacher brought laminated pieces of paper outside to begin the activity. The children were asked to match up the mathematical words to the symbols, which were placed in various areas outside. Although the class teacher demonstrated good use of the outdoor space, it is apparent that this activity could easily have taken place indoors. This meant that the children will not gain anything different from being outdoors. Outdoor practice is intended to offer children a unique experience of learning (Knight, 2016). It is suggested that taking mathematical

lessons outdoors and making use of the natural resources can provide children with the possibility to explore other means of problem solving.

Motivation

As this research was an analysis of the year two children's learning, a conscious effort is made to ensure the children felt included during the methods of data collection. This began with the child participation form that was handed out before any of the data collection took place. This was in order for the children to feel included in decision making and motivated to take part. As well as increasing motivation, respecting the pupil's voices was in order to avoid a tokenistic approach. Tokenism is the act of carrying out a negligent approach towards the inclusion of minority groups in order to create a false illusion of inclusiveness (Thompson, 2015). Lundy (2018) articulates the fact that it can be used to manipulate children during decision making in order to gain the most desired outcome. Tokenism is also illuminated by Hart (1997) as a form of non-participation in child participation theory. This is due to the fact that it does not fully take in account the children's voices in accordance to decisions being made about them. It was clear that the class enjoyed having the opportunity to do this give their consent. It was something different to their normal routine and could have possibly of prompted their motivation in the research as they felt that their voice was necessary to the research. Every Child's Right to be Heard (2011) is an act of legislation that has been passed in order to introduce improvements in education that ensures that children's views are respected. Giving the children a voice in their participation could have been significant to their participation in the focus group.

Furthermore, carrying out a focus group provided an opportunity to observe the children's reaction to having their voices respected. During the focus group, the children were given the opportunity to express their favourite place outdoors in any way they wished. The most common favourite areas that were chosen by the children are reflected in the figure below. It is clear that the most preferred area is 'the shed', followed closely by the outdoor classroom. Upon reflection with the children, it was verified that the shed was the latest area to be introduced to the school grounds. The shed is placed on the Astroturf and is filled with resources that are to be used in conjunction with natural objects found outdoors. Items that were found in the shed include wheelbarrows, baskets, plastic guttering, shovels and brooms. The items in the shed have no specific use, and the children can choose to use them how

they wish, meaning that the children took part in activities that were probed by their imagination.

Figure 2 demonstrates the children's favourite spaces outdoors.

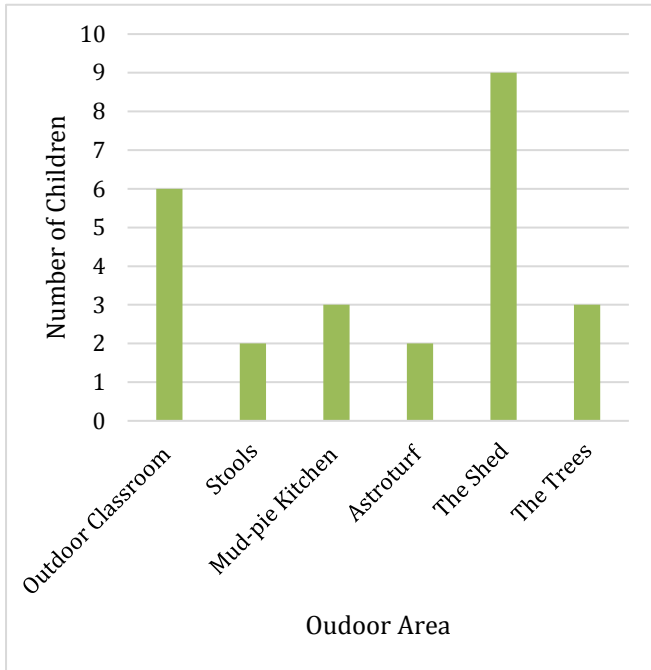


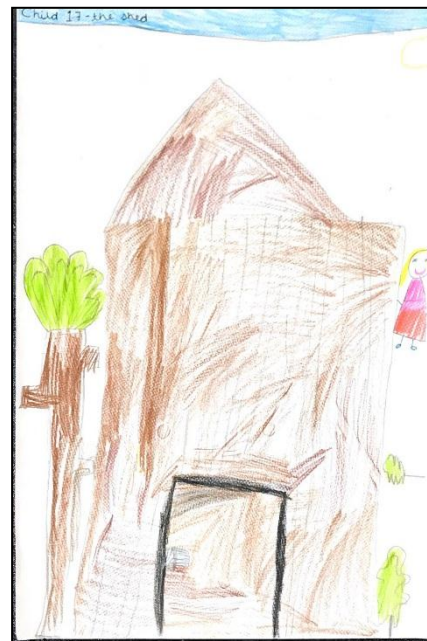
Figure 2: A graph to show children's favourite places outdoors

Enthusiasm

Overall it was clear that the enthusiasm levels were raised with the majority of the class when they took part in their lesson outdoors. Two children (one boy and one girl) displayed the most distinctive changes depending on the environment they were in. Both children make the most of the opportunity of having the space to be free outdoors. In an activity where the children were instructed to find green and brown items of nature, child A lifts logs and searches underneath them to find more unique items. As well as this child B works hard to find "lots of little sticks", to try and collect many items for her group. Giving children the opportunity to be able to explore is essential, as there is a need for young children to discover the outdoor area in order to develop their understanding of the world around them (Knight, 2016). Moreover, both children enjoy having the prospect of being able to speak loud to their peers. Knight (2016) proposes that nature exploration and connection to nature are key for developing relationships and increasing levels of communication between others. Moreover, Maynard and Waters (2014) connote that the open air is the greatest environment for children's well-being and happiness. The outdoor woodland area is rich with "raw material for experience and experiment" (Maynard and Waters, 2014, p. 26). It

was clear that both children were enthusiastic about learning outdoors, which solidifies the point that the experience that the children gain outdoors is valuable to their education.

Clark (2010) gathers children's perspectives on new spaces in their environment. It includes a study that incorporates a child-led tour of areas within the school, it was clear that the children in this study took much pleasure in taking the adults to the new areas in their school. The aim of this study was to gather the children's perspectives regarding the spaces, in order to come to a conclusion on what children think about improvements to their existing places (Clark, 2010). Taking this into consideration, this study can be used as a way of understanding the children's enthusiasm towards the shed. The shed is

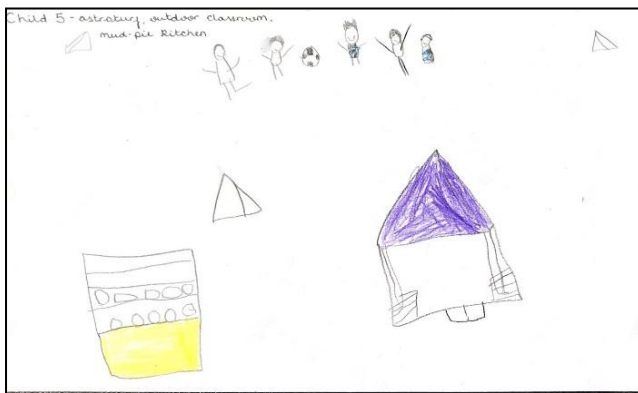


a different approach to the majority of the other areas outside and this is clearly noticed by the children. It is also a new resource on the playground. The shed is filled with natural resources and random items with no definitive meaning, the children are able to choose any item and use it however they wish. White (2008) depicts the benefits in using natural resources for children's learning, as children's learning should promote exploration and experimentation in order to draw upon conclusions. The resources used outdoors must be able to emphasise what the open air has to offer that indoor lessons cannot (White, 2008). After asking the children about the shed, one child described that they are "allowed to play with everything in it" connoting that there are no restrictions to the children's access of the items. Ridgers et al (2012) states that children's learning should be intriguing and self-directed, meaning that children are given the freedom to choose how and where they wish to learn. This is something that is promoted with the introduction of the shed and could provide a reason for why the children expressed so much interest in this area. Furthermore, the enthusiasm for the shed is

demonstrated in the detailed picture and the addition of the self-portrait within it. (See figure).

Tatlow-Golden and Guerin (2010) believe that the draw and write method has the power to be able to reflect the child's experiences and views. It is thought that a detailed and descriptive drawing reflects a child's positive thought processes (Tatlow-Golden and Guerin, 2010). Allowing children to draw their feelings is an effective way of empowering children's voices, due to the fact that it reflects their thoughts at that particular time (Clark and Moss, 2005).

When the children were asked to choose their favourite place, one particular child struggled to define one and drew three places (see figure below). It is assumed that children are able to express their social self-concepts with the use of 'draw and write' methods (Tatlow-Golden and Guerin, 2010). Evidently, this individual was enthusiastic about multiple outdoor areas within the school, which he wished to express within his work. Comparably to an investigation by Clark (2010), it was clear in the current study that children commonly identified social spaces when they were asked to present their favourite area. These are areas that were recognised as places that the children associate their friends with. It is demonstrated from all but one of the drawings that the children have illustrated themselves and their friends.



This is something that was commonly seen the study conducted by Clark (2010), as when the children were asked to identify their favourite space, a large quantity of them often referred to who they like to play with in the area. During the focus group, a young girl expressed that she plays 'holidays' with her friends as well as another child who mentioned the importance of the presence of her friends when describing her favourite place, which was the trees. This depicts the importance that children place on their relationships, as it clearly has an influence on

other aspects of their lives. The reason for the association between friends and favourite spaces outdoors could be due to the fact that there is more opportunity to spend time in groups. This idea is discussed previously in this chapter, when the children's enjoyment in working together is observed.



Social spaces are used for an array of different purposes that are discovered by the children, which are often a reflection of their imaginations. It is proposed that an outdoor learning space is valued for having resources with no distinct meaning to them. This means can lead to the discovery of imaginative games and a sense of involvement in the playground area (Waite, 2011a).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sets out to evaluate the specific approach to outdoor education that takes place in a rural primary school in North Wales. As this was a small scale case study, the results that have been produced are unique to the school and cannot be generalised. Thus, conclusions must be drawn to evaluate the methods of this research project.

This study works in agreement with wider literature, supporting that outdoor education to inspire children to take an innovative look towards their learning (Knight, 2016). There is a demonstration of the creative methods that children used to express their voices. Furthermore, the fact that outdoor education challenges a number of issues in traditional pedagogy, such as freedom, risk and safety (Maynard and Waters, 2014), is represented with the discussion regarding one child's want to climb trees.

There is a significant amount of data that supports the success of respecting the children's voices. Collaboration with children has been credited for its benefits for both the adults and children involved (Franks, 2011). It is clear that the children enjoyed having the opportunity for their opinions listened to by the researcher. They displayed great enthusiasm in helping to contribute

to a research project. Despite the success of working with children in this way, it could be difficult to use this approach often within teaching. Nevertheless, the children's reaction to helping with this project should not be disregarded in schools. This information could be used when carrying out class projects with children, in order for children to feel in control and important.

This study observes children in two different learning environments. On a whole, the school's approach to outdoor education was effective in promoting the children's enjoyment in learning. This is demonstrated with the clear difference in child A and B when the lesson was taken outdoors. Enjoyment in their lessons is beneficial to children as they are more likely to retain information in a positive environment that stimulates memory (Waite, 2011b). Although there are advantages to outdoor educational practice, Reid (2005) highlights that every child will learn differently, therefore this environment will not always be appropriate.

It was clear that the outdoor lessons were enjoyable for children in the year two class. However, the possibilities to take the lessons further with practitioner training cannot be ignored. Moreover, it should be questioned whether children will still be engaged in outdoor lessons further on in their school. During the research it was indicated that the teaching methods could have been revised to adopt an environment whereby children are challenged. The outdoor environment is rich with opportunity that can be tailored to each child's learning style (Solly, 2015). This is something that should be explored by the school and could be facilitated with further training in order to gain relevant information to provide effective outdoor practice (Leather, 2016). It was clear that the class teacher felt that taking lessons outdoors improved the children's communication and provided them with more space to explore. Therefore, adopting a method that uses all aspects of the outdoors would be suggested to improve the school's approach to outdoor education. This would provide the chance for providing children with the opportunity to take risks in their learning, which is valuable for their development (Ridgers et al, 2012). It is essential to consider the improvements that could be made to the current study.

In theory, if this research took place in a Forest School it could have been easier to relate the findings to the large amount of literature regarding Forest Schools. As well as this, it could have been useful to gain access to a registered Forest School in order to make a comparison to the data collected for this research. As well as this, it could have been useful to extend this research project to include a

comparison of work produced indoors and outdoors over a longer period of time. This would enable an in-depth understanding of the children's learning over time in the different learning environments, from this a more valid comparison could be made.

Finally, this report could be valuable for schools that wish to provide alternative learning environments for their pupils. This report analyses an approach to outdoor education that could be revised; however, the success of the method cannot be denied. Consequently demonstrating that even a small shift in attitudes towards the provision of alternative education can have a positive impact on children.

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