



**Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network: Third Call for Student Papers –  
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<b>Student Name</b>	<b>Amy Stevens</b>
<b>Name of Institution</b>	<b>Warwick University Centre for Lifelong Learning</b>
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<b>Tutor name and signature</b>	<b>Dr Sarah Cousins</b>

In this essay I will look at the role of the outdoor learning area within year one. I will consider whether it can provide an area to enhance the learning experience of children in the early years.

From my perspective as a teaching assistant, learning through play is an essential part to a child's development. According to Gopnik (2016: 20), 'our job is not to shape our children's minds, it's to let those minds explore all the possibilities that the world allows'. In my

experience children have the freedom to think and expand their knowledge without constraints when outdoors.

From a historical perspective, the outdoor environment played an important role in my own childhood. I remember being outside for extended periods, exploring, being adventurous and learning about the trees, plants and wildlife near my home. In my lifetime I have benefited from being surrounded by nature. It helps me to think clearly and feel less stressed.

According to Public Health England (2016), 10% of children aged between 5-16 years old in England suffer from a form of mental health illness. Knight (2011) indicates that MIND, a leading mental health charity in the UK, has identified the healing power of nature. I believe that children in Year One (aged 5 and 6) should continue to have access to an outdoor learning environment in school.

From my experience, children benefit from the freedom to explore their own learning in a natural environment. Fisher (2013) suggested that children thrive when they have greater freedom to observe living things and explore. The National Trust (2012) introduced initiatives to encourage more children to participate in outdoor activities. My own children found this very enjoyable. They participated in activities such as geocaching, fire lighting and kite flying. However, for social and economic reasons, these types of initiatives are not always accessible to all families.

A number of children at my setting do not have access to open outdoor spaces at home. Some parents have concerns about their children playing outside, particularly in a culture of vigilance. According to Whitebread (2017: 167) 'the area where children are allowed to roam unsupervised around their homes has shrunk by 90% since the 1970s'. Children are not as free as when I was a child. Indeed, I do not allow my children the same freedom that I was granted due to my concerns about safety.

Having restricted access to free play outdoor opportunities could limit a child's ability to develop their gross and fine motor skills and develop the same physical strength as their peers. According to Papatheodorou and Moyles (2012), a child needs many things to develop, including fresh air and physical exertion. In my experience I have noted that several children in my setting lack the motor skills required to complete tasks such as writing, threading, climbing and balancing. I propose that the outdoors is important for developing gross and fine motor skills in children.

According to Tovey (2013), the possibilities for outdoor play are endless, from developing independent choice, to respecting and valuing the world in which we live in. Froebel suggested that ‘the child who has cared for another living thing...is more easily led to care for his own life.’ (cited in Tovey, 2013: 63). From this perspective, there is a connection between appreciation of living things and respect for the environment and a caring, considerate disposition. Louv (2010) proposes that we live in a generation of children who suffer from nature deficit disorder. Brooker et al (2010) propose that outdoor learning promotes social and emotional aspects of development and should be included in all early years settings. I suggest that helping children to appreciate nature and the outdoors could form part of a more holistic approach to the curriculum and enhance their overall development.

I work in a setting with an outdoor space. It is functional and compact. However, it does not have any natural features. The children use the outdoor space to move freely, dance, run, skip and jump. They use large construction materials to make obstacles to climb onto and over. The children develop the skills needed to be able to manage their own risks safely, under supervision. Many of the children use the gardening area to grow herbs and vegetables using the appropriate tools. The children explore the mud kitchen after getting fully prepared with the appropriate messy clothing. The more versatile the environment the more body awareness a child develops. According to Penn (2014), Vygotsky believed that children’s play allowed them to invent their own rules and draw on their own experiences. From my observations this appears to be the case. In the mud kitchen, for example, children recreate real life experiences through their play, making mud pies, cups of tea and pancakes.

In my setting lack of time often limits opportunities for children to be outdoors. The children have formal learning of literacy and mathematics in the mornings, with a short break in the main playground. During the afternoon the children are able to use the outdoor area, but are called in to complete certain tasks, often indoors. The children are often interrupted, and their natural flow of play is disrupted. According to Piaget’s constructivist theory, it is important that children have hands-on meaningful experiences to embed knowledge and understanding (cited in Arthur & Cremin, 2010). In my experience, meaningful play in Year One is very difficult to achieve due to the constraints of the curriculum.

The demands of the curriculum and summative assessments such as the phonics test are such that the opportunities for a less formal pedagogy are minimised, thereby reducing the

possibilities of utilising the outdoors area. According to Hood and Mitchell (2017) the early years phase has moved away from formative assessment. They state that over the last ten years a neoliberal approach towards summative assessment and league tables has become more prevalent in early years. This approach may be to do with the government's emphasis on school readiness. This is supported by Brooker et al (2010) who states the 'effects of assessment are felt to change from positive to negative, and formative to summative, as children move closer to year one, and are assessed against criteria associated with school curriculum' (p.2). Children face a significant transition when they begin Year One. This includes adult led learning, a significantly smaller adult/child ratio, a more formal curriculum and timetabling. I feel the transition into Year One should be less formal and more aligned to the early years ethos.

One contemporary approach is forest schooling. Forest schools were first introduced in the United Kingdom (UK) around 1995 so that children could fulfil their potential through the enjoyment of being outdoors (Knight, 2011). This idea motivates me as a practitioner. Instead of having indoor learning taken outside, the whole curriculum is designed around the outdoors. Another advantage, according to Knight (2011), is the significantly higher ratio of teaching practitioners than a formal based setting due to the nature of risk based activities. However, from a school's perspective the initial cost of set up, resourcing, training and staffing would be significant. There may also be some resistance from parents.

There are risks and hazards to consider outdoors. According to Waters & Begley (2007) risk has been widely viewed as negative. I believe that children benefit from exposure to such risks in order to learn to overcome them. A child in my setting who lived in ground floor accommodation and has not used stairs extensively was unable to negotiate climbing on and off building crates in the outdoor area. The child needed to practice climbing, balancing and learning to lift each leg individually to master this skill. According to The Foundation Phase Framework (2015) in Wales, children should have access to risk indoors and out, to become confident within their surroundings. Connolly & Haughton (2015) argue that there is an absence of risk because parents are too over protective. Louv (2010) suggests that the epidemic of obesity and attention-deficit disorder could be attributed to children spending considerably less time outside compared to a generation ago. For these reasons I feel that the more time children spend outdoors, encountering risks and hazards, the better equipped they are to assess and manage these safely. Of course, I do not want children to hurt themselves,

but I feel it is important that they have the opportunity to negotiate something new and work things out for themselves.

In conclusion I believe that the outdoors needs to be an integral part of a child's life and schooling experience. I have learned that the current summative assessment requirements in Year One can impose some restrictions on this. At the same time, I still feel it is important to expose children to the risks and hazards the outdoors learning environment can offer to support their physical, emotional and social development. This is challenging due to time restrictions, parent and teacher beliefs, safety concerns and the governments political driver of the summative assessment process. Louv (2010) challenges us to consider whether children have nature deficit disorder or forest schooling is the solution. Perhaps as practitioners we could make small changes in our practice to help expose children to nature and our environment.

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