

International Perspectives of Outdoor Play: what are practitioner perspectives
on early years outdoor play and Forest School provision in the UK, Canada and
New Zealand?

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List of Abbreviations

BERA	British Educational Research Association
DfE	Department for Education
ELECT	Early Learning for Every Child Today
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
FS	Forest School
MoE	Ministry of Education

Research Aims

The proposed research project intends to investigate four perspectives of outdoor play on an international level in order to gain further knowledge on the approaches adopted in England, Canada, New Zealand and the Forest School approach in the UK. This small-scale research project intends to gain knowledge by sending qualitative surveys to early years settings in the aforementioned countries and compile the responses in order to learn more about each approach. Therefore, the principle research question asks:

“International Perspectives of Outdoor Play: what are practitioner perspectives of early years outdoor play and Forest School provision in the UK, Canada and New Zealand?”

Outdoor Play

The outdoor environment, both the natural world entirely or artificial to some extent, can be seen as high quality provision to promote children’s play, learning and development through an assortment of spaces, experiences, resources and materials (Muela et al, 2019). Fruin (2020) highlights that children are spending increased time in confined spaces away from nature as a result of schooling, parental commitments and technology and that using the outdoors as a play and learning context will increasingly become a rare experience for children. Bonnell et al (2019) argue that today’s generation of children spend 20-50% less time outdoors than previous generations have done. Stone & Faulkner (2014) discuss that adults of today’s society have many memories of playing outside as children, with Sandseter et al (2020) highlighting that safety concerns may have caused this decline in outdoor play in some circumstances. The increased call for health and safety regulations and parental concern for safety (Sandseter et al, 2020) has mainly emerged in more recent years,

particularly for children who have grown up in the 2000s have greater restrictions (Sharpe et al, 2020).

Resources in Outdoor Play

There is a common misconception that equipment and play resources should be new, shiny and expensive. However, in some cases the best resources are those that spark imagination and curiosity (Ouvry & Furtado, 2020). McClintic & Petty (2015) highlight that the outdoor environment offers children freedom to experience elements and feelings that they may not be able to indoors. Natural materials such as sand and mud are able to be brought indoors to some extent but experiencing them in their natural habitat can provide many learning opportunities for children. They allow children to reconnect with the natural environment, using their senses to interact through symbolic play, connecting with its properties (Mycock, 2019).

According to Jeavons (2017) sand is a fundamental element of play due to its versatile properties and the developmental benefits it provides on its own and when resources are added such as water and buckets, it can bring sand into a new dimension (Giles & Tunks, 2017). Physical development can be promoted through the grasping and manipulating movement of wet sand (Dinkel et al, 2019) scooping, scraping and pouring actions as hands move differently as to what they do when using other resources , manipulating and developing different muscles in the hands (MacRae, 2020). Imaginative development may be promoted through sand as children use resources to build structures and role play using bowls and spades. Sand promotes social development through building cooperation skills for example playing together and sharing resources. Language development can be

promoted as a result having conversations with others and listening to specific vocabulary such as “soft” or “gritty”. This can also promote sensory development through feeling and looking at the changes in texture and listening to noises made when the substance is moved (Jeavons, 2020).

Mud is a popular resource, perhaps due to the “endless opportunities to touch, feel, smell, see, hear” (Baker, 2017: 77). The texture provides a soothing and calming resource for children, allowing them to squeeze and squash to the extent they feel necessary. It also promotes physical development as a result of grasping and manipulating the texture, developing muscles in their hands. Mud can promote imagination and symbolic play, particularly within a mud kitchen by using it to make tea’s and soups using additional resources such as bowls and cups. Additionally, mud can promote scientific development, allowing children to learn about fertilisation, the need for mud in the growth of flowers and plants and the beings which may live in mud, such as worms (Godfrey, 2018).

Dinkel et al (2019) states that portable equipment such as bikes, trikes and scooters promotes gross motor skills, the large muscles on the body such as arms and legs. In order to develop these muscles children should be provided with opportunities to manipulate them such as throwing, catching and peddling (Ardini et al, 2019). Evidently, these resources promote physical development, as well as sensory development, for example riding bikes or rolling balls through water can make tracks or splashes, allowing children to recognise marks. Collective ball games and racing bikes and scooters can promote cooperative play in children, particularly encouraging working in teams which in turn promotes social skills which are essential for future social connections (Kajanus, 2019).

Swings or hammocks can be used however the child feels necessary (Rotas, 2019), for example therapeutically soothing themselves by gently rocking back and forth and observing their surrounds in a calm manor, promoting emotional development (Rhea & Nigaglioni, 2016). They may also swing at a significant speed, allowing them to use their muscles to manoeuvre, increasing their excitement levels when going at a fast pace.

The simplicity of a large grassed or concreted area can provide learning opportunities for children such as imaginative play (Morrissey et al, 2017) providing opportunities for children to develop play however they wish (Kaarby & Tandberg, 2017). The large spaces can be used for group activities, promoting social development or free movement activities, which could promote gross motor skills (Brussoni et al, 2017). Harris (2016) echoed this, highlighting that a large space allows children to use their whole body to investigate and play, without space or noise restrictions. An large outdoor environment allows children to experience weather on a whole new level. Seasonal changes transform the environment, providing children with learning opportunities as a result of the range of resources such as, wind, rain and snow. For example, wind blows leaves off the trees which can be used for creative purposes or chase them around (Ronney, 2018).

Outdoor Play in England

Outdoor play in England has been present for some time, the first nursery school in England, established by the McMillan sisters in 1914 predominantly focused on outdoor play. Since the 1990s, national strategies and policies have been put in place to encourage the provision of outdoor play for children in the early years. The Early Years Foundation Stage

(EYFS) published by Department of Education is the mandatory framework highlighting the standards for the care, learning and development for children aged 0-5 years is transparent that it is expected outdoor provision is provided and accessible for children (Parsons & Traunter, 2019).

The EYFS (DfE, 2017) states there are seven areas of development: communication and language, physical, personal, social and emotional development, literacy, mathematics, understanding of the world and expressive arts and design. The EYFS Framework (DfE, 2017) highlights that practitioners are required to provide outdoor spaces that are safe and suitable and accommodate children's age and stage on a daily basis. Children should be encouraged to "explore the natural world around them" and be able to "understand some important processes and changes in the natural world around them" (DfE, 2020: 15).

The Forest School (FS) approach originated in Scandinavia in the 1950s and made its way to the UK in 1993 following an exchange visit to Denmark by early years practitioners of Bridgewater College (Smith et al, 2018). The visitors from Bridgewater were astonished to observe children being provided with constant outdoor access, regardless of the weather (Knight, 2017) and integrated the approach in their practice upon their arrival home. The approach has gradually been adopted into UK mainstream provision, particularly in primary schools, with more than half of primary schools featuring FS sessions as part of children's learning (Knight, 2017).

Although there is no evidence of a government curriculum, instead identified as an "inspirational process" (Knight, 2013:16), the Forest School Association, sets out six

principles that settings are encouraged to meet (Murphy, 2018). Firstly, frequent visits are essential in order for FS to be valuable, practitioners should observe the learner and plan accordingly for the next session in order to demonstrate a clear progression of learning. Secondly, FS should take place in a natural or woodland setting to enable the learner to develop and maintain a connection to the natural world. Principle three aims to promote holistic development, including ‘traditional’ skills such as mathematics and literacy as well as personal skills such as confidence, independent and resilience. The fourth principle highlights the importance of the learner undertaking supported risks, which must be appropriate for the child’s age and stage of development. Principle five highlights that qualified FS practitioners should lead sessions, in order to effectively plan activities consistent with the approach and have knowledge on children’s care, learning and development (Waite & Goodenough, 2018). The sixth principle highlights that FS sessions should adopt learner or child centered practices, responsive to each individual child’s needs and interests. It is the responsibility of practitioners to reflect on each child’s development and devise activities that promotes areas of development through individual learning styles (Knight, 2013).

Outdoor Play in Ontario, Canada

The governing body in Ontario, the Ministry of Education (MoE) published *The Kindergarten Program* in 2016. The document sets of expectations and approaches for all Kindergarten programs to follow, promoting quality learning through looking at the individual child’s strength and needs (MoE, 2016). Prior to this, the government implemented *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings* in 2007 (ELECT), the framework sets of six principles which is expected to underpin practice in early years

settings. ELECT sets out the areas of development for practitioners to promote in their practice, these include; social, emotional, communication, language and literacy, cognitive and physical. Within each developmental area are a set of domains and skills alongside the indicators of skill and interactions that practitioners can encourage in order to promote the skills. The Kindergarten Program (MoE, 2016) discusses the importance of the environment and that the resources provided should reflect the child's development. The framework discusses the importance of allowing the environment to let in plenty of light with a view of the outdoors and if possible access to the outdoors.

Outdoor Play in New Zealand

Early years settings in New Zealand are required to follow the early childhood curriculum called '*Te Whāriki*', published by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in 1996. A fundamental element is the bi-cultural approach, incorporating Māori values in early childhood care and education, which at the time of the original publication was ground breaking (Haggerty et al, 2020). The Māori values continue to be incorporated within the revised edition of the framework, published in 2017 (Alcock & Ritchie, 2018). The Te Whāriki framework is a metaphor of a 'woven-mat' with the four overarching principles being empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships, woven in with the five strands of learning; well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration (MoE, 2017). The five strands of learning should be seen by practitioners as types of learning experiences that should be adopted to promote the development of young children (Terreni, 2016). Alongside the principles and strands are learning outcomes which align with children's development and includes examples of how practitioners can promote these learning outcomes (Haggerty et al, 2020). Strand 5 of the framework; exploration, discusses

outdoor provision and the need to encourage children to connect with the Māori tradition of exploring and maintaining a relationship with the environment. In order to develop the relationship with the environment and exploration, practitioners should encourage children to experience challenging and risky yet safe activities and “observe nature without harming it” (MoE, 2017: 48). Bateman et al (2017) argues that in New Zealand, practitioners believe in the importance of children regularly experiencing outdoor provision and by providing children with these opportunities, children are able to learn about the natural world and the importance of caring for it, learning from it and maintaining a close spiritual relationship (Alcock & Ritchie, 2018).

The primary mode of assessment used in conjunction with the Te Whāriki framework is learning stories. Practitioners use learning stories to document children’s goals and achievements over a period of time and interpret them using the learning goals highlighted within the framework (Reese et al, 2019). These documentations provide a storyline of a learning process, making learning visible (Carr & Lee, 2012). Reese et al (2019) argues that practitioners can use observations and text for learning stories but also use photographs, allowing learning to be depicted through the use of visual images (Harrington, 2020) which can then be shared with the children themselves and their families, creating a communication link between the child’s home and educational environment.

Study Design

Qualitative research methods are believed to highlight social complexities and provide meanings to different groups and individuals (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett, 2019). Within educational research, qualitative methods, particularly in the last 30 years, are the most

popular approach (Harreveld et al, 2016) and although the acceptance of qualitative research has grown, it is still yet to be properly accepted as a research method (Kerrigan & Johnson, 2019). By investigating perspectives using the interpretivist approach, researchers may be more likely to guarantee a comprehensive understanding of the research subject due to the depth of knowledge provided by the amount of participants (Tranh & Tranh, 2015). Qualitative research is the chosen methodology for this project in order to gather the perspectives of practitioners and information about the approaches they employ.

The chosen method for this study are surveys, to highlight the qualitative approach taken, the questions will be open-ended. Benefits of online surveys include the simplicity of completion and returning the surveys in efficient time as well as the cost, seemingly that there is very little or virtually no cost in creating a survey document through an online platform or word document and sending it out through email or social media (Bryman, 2016). With the facilities online surveys provide, researchers are able to gain a further reach of participants, such as a larger number or a diverse spread from various geographic locations (Roberts & Allen, 2015). Online surveys can be sent, perhaps completed and returned within the same day in some circumstances (Bryman, 2016). All of the participants invited to complete a survey worked in the early years sector in their own countries. In order to ensure a response from each country, three surveys were sent out to separate settings, with one completed survey chosen from each country used for the purpose of the research.

Ethical Considerations

For the purpose of this research project, the British Educational Research Association 2018 Framework (BERA, 2018) was adhered to. BERA (2018) highlight that the guidelines are in

place in order to ensure ethnic respect is applied to all involved in each study. Ethical consent was gained from FACE Ethics prior to undertaking any research to assess any ethical implications that may arise from the research and how these can be minimised or eradicated. In this research project, consent forms were included in the invitation to participate, including one for the participant and one for the organisation to sign. An information sheet was sent to participants in order to ensure participants were fully informed of the research, their rights and what was required of them in the study.

Within research, confidentiality is a fundamental component in ensuring an ethically conscious study, and should be considered the norm (BERA, 2018). In terms of this research project, confidentiality will be adhered to throughout the entire research project in order to ensure the well-being of all participants. Within the study, participants, their institutions and any other identifiable features will not be named in any part of the writing. The consent forms which will contain information such as the names of participants and their institutions will be kept in a locked document that only the researcher can gain access to.

In order to ensure confidentiality, rendering participants anonymous provides an opportunity for researchers to retain identities, removing any chance of identification (Cohen et al, 2018). The customary strategy to ensure anonymity is pseudonyms. In this research project, participants will be identified as an early years setting within the [appropriate] country. Evidently, there are a number of early years settings within the countries chosen for the purpose of the research, thus there is less of a possibility that they will be recognised. The ethical guidelines by BERA (2018) will be a fundamental element of

the entire research project in order to ensure all procedures are followed correctly, to ensure the safety, wellbeing and dignity of all involved within the research process.

The following responses are from early years practitioners who completed a survey after signing a consent form themselves and the head of their setting also signing a consent form to state that they had read all of the information about the project and were happy to complete the survey. There is one consistent survey to each country/approach throughout the questions.

Question 1: Do you follow a particular curriculum or framework to promote children’s development?

The English setting stated that they follow the Development Matters Framework which helps to “gain a greater understanding of each child’s individual development. To help give them the best start possible”. The Development Matters Framework (DfE, 2012) highlights that young children develop quickly in their early years and it is the responsibility of practitioners to support and promote children’s development and ensure they “have the best possible start in life” (DfE, 2012:1). The framework lays out seven areas of development and it is the role of the practitioner to use this as a guide to make judgements as to whether children are making progress and showing signs of typical development for their age stage and provide support for the child if this is not the case (DfE, 2012).

The New Zealand setting stated that they follow Te Whāriki, the official New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum, using learning stories “to relate back to the five learning strands in Te Whāriki” which they go on to identify as: communication, belonging, well-being, exploration and contribution. In the framework the strands are highlighted as characteristics that are

“conducive to learning and development” (MoE, 2017: 22). Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) highlights that early childhood settings in New Zealand are required to implement the framework and its guidance. The framework discusses the importance of taking the “specific learning needs of individual children” into account when implementing Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) and in accordance with the literature, the individual learning goals of children should be valued and responded too (Johnson, 2018). Learning stories are highlighted in Te Whāriki as a means of assessment planning and evaluation in the form of a portfolio. By showing each child’s development through a story, practitioners are able to follow the child’s progress while noting their interests and identifying themes which each child has shown in their play such as a certain area (MoE, 2017).

The Canadian setting use the Kindergarten Program Document and Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) if needed. The respondent stated that they “look at where our students are at, and use their interests along, with their strengths and needs, to support where they’re going next”. The Kindergarten Program Document (MoE, 2016) should be adhered to by all kindergarten’s in Ontario and sets out expectations for practitioners, including implementing a child centred approach, informed by evidence such as a interests (MoE, 2016). ELECT (MoE, 2007) sets out six principles used to guide practice, providing a “shared language and common understanding of children’s learning and development for early years professionals” (MoE, 2016: 4). Providing a framework for a communal understanding, practitioners are able to work together and with other professionals to support children with their development.

The FS setting stated that they “definitely [do] not” follow any framework, asserting that all activities are driven by the children’s interests first and foremost but are also influenced by the environment and the seasons. In accordance with the literature, there are no official frameworks for the FS approach, however one of the principles set out by the FSA highlights the need for a child-centered curriculum that is responsive to each child’s individual needs and their interests. Coates & Pimlott-Wilson (2019) highlight that the FS approach predominantly consists of a play-focused approach which is driven by the child and their interests at the time of play.

Question 2: What kind of activities are provided for outdoor play?

<u>Activity/Resource</u>	<u>Country/Approach Response</u>
Sand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • England • New Zealand
Large Equipment: Trikes/Scooters/Bikes/Push Prams/Stairs/Slides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • England • New Zealand
Large open space (grass/concrete)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • England • Canada
Hammocks/shelters/dens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest School in the UK
Mini-Beast Exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest School in the UK
Tools: saws, hammers, axe, fire lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest School in the UK
Mud Kitchen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • England

The resources/activities in the table were all identified by the early years practitioners who completed the survey and then grouped together for the analysis, depending on which ones were highlighted by the practitioners in each country. The sand area can promote development in areas such as physical, sensory and imaginative as highlighted by Jeavons (2017) and MacRae (2020) but with resources such as buckets, spades and moulds, sand

play is brought into a new dimension (Giles & Tunks, 2017). The sandpit provides children with many developmental opportunities, for example physical development through grasping and manipulating wet and dry sand and scooping, scraping and pouring actions (Dinkel et al, 2019). As highlighted in the literature, sand play allows children to develop their imagination by giving the sand a role and using resources for role playing purposes such as pretend food. Additionally, sand allows children to develop communication skills due to the range of language it offers, for example using words such as “soft” and “gritty” gaining a realistic perspective of what these words mean (Jeavons, 2020).

Wheeled vehicles such as trikes, scooters and prams allow children to promote their physical development as these resources allow children to manipulate the muscles in their body, thus develop physical skills and building fitness (Ardini et al, 2019). The literature states that large equipment such as stairs, slides and large boxes allow children to develop gross motor skills, which is essential in manipulating large muscles on the body such as the arms and legs which children should be given the opportunity to develop in order develop these skills for later life (Ardini et al, 2019). Large portable equipment such as bikes, cars, push prams and balls, can promote gross motor skills due to the manipulation of muscles the actions provide such as peddling with their legs, pushing the prams and walking or running with the pram and as a result of throwing and catching balls (Ardini et al, 2019).

According to Morrissey et al (2017), a large field space can provide children with lots of opportunities, particularly imaginative play due to the freedom the space offers, allowing children to use the space however they feel necessary. Children may use the space to role play socially in a group or to run around playing team games, promoting gross motor skills

(Brussoni et al, 2017), to relax by sitting down or free movement, such as walking without space or noise restrictions (Harris, 2016). An open outdoor space provides opportunities for children to experience natural materials such as rocks, sand and woodchips in their natural environment and rawest form, encountering them in forms they may not be able to indoors (McClintic & Petty, 2015).

The FS setting identified hammock building, mini-beast exploration, small world play and tool use such as “fire lighting, knife work, axe and hammer and sawing” as some of their resources highlighting the use of the natural environment surrounding the child in a FS session. In accordance with the literature, building hammocks can provide children with opportunities to observe the nature surrounding them in a calm manor through observation (Rhea & Nigaglioni, 2016) or use them as a den, a fortress or swing on them quickly (Rotas, 2019). Tanner (2017) highlights that mini-beast exploration allows children to investigate different insects living under logs, in the soil and on shrubs, encountering new language such as ‘slither’ and ‘crawl’ and categorise them in accordance of their characteristics.

In accordance with the literature, the mud kitchen is a popular resource due to the endless opportunities it provides, allowing children to touch, smell see and even hear textures, benefiting physical, sensory and scientific development, looking at different mini-beasts in the mud and the role it plays in plant growth (Jeavons, 2017). The English setting highlighted that they provide appropriate clothing when children are playing in the mud. The importance of appropriate clothing such as waterproof suits is highlighted by Bento & Dias (2017) who discuss that the correct clothing should be used in order to ensure safety, allow

children to gain the full experience of playing in the mud without parental concerns over safety and clothing issues.

Summary

Upon conclusion, the research shows that the four approaches; mainstream England, Canada, New Zealand and Forest School in the UK approach outdoor play with individual elements to suit its implementation according to the country or approach. As highlighted by Ourvy & Furtado (2020: 24) the outdoor environment holds “value to the growing and learning child” in order to nurture their mind and body, which all of the participants appear to consider as a result of the provision they provide for the children in their care. Looking at the responses from the participants, the time, resources and activities they provided in their settings allow children to experience the outdoors promoting learning and development through an assortment of spaces, experiences, resources and materials (Muela et al, 2019).

The responses from the early years practitioners in England, New Zealand and Canada provided insight into how they provide outdoor provision in their setting. Although some responses were individual to a certain approach, some key themes came across as a result of more than one approach highlighting their importance. Upon reflection, the research project did not include as much personal perspective from the early years practitioners as there could have been. Nevertheless, the research project proved informative as it provided first-hand accounts of outdoor provision from four individual approaches which detailed each approach well in order to build an informed perspective. By building on informed perspectives and the relevant literature, I have been able to learn about outdoor provision and the opportunities it can provide for children’s care, learning and development which I

hope to include in my future practice and I extend my thanks to all participants involved in the study.

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