

# **International Comparisons: Exploring Outdoor Play in Wales and Denmark.**

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The rights of children is an important entity in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). However, a child's ability to actualise or exercise rights independently is limited. Therefore, provisions are in place to ensure a holistic approach is adopted when considering the child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states in Article 31 that every child has a right to play (UNICEF, 2011). Articles 28 and 29 also acknowledge children's right to an education that explores their personality whilst promoting physical development (UNICEF, 2011). Looking specifically at ECEC, intentions for this essay will be to compare and explore the implementation of outdoor education in both Wales and Denmark. Over the last decade, there has been a substantial amount of evidence concerning the importance of outdoor learning (Rea and Waite, 2009). The outdoors is considered an all-inclusive environment that caters to the individual needs of children (Bilton, 2010).

Wales is one of the four countries that form the United Kingdom (UK). It is situated southwest of Great Britain and accounts for 5% of the population in the UK (CIA, 2020). 20% of the population speak Welsh (ibid). The language is taught as an academic subject in bilingual schools (Welsh Government, 2015). In Wales, the Foundation Phase is a developmental curriculum that sets the standard of education and care for children aged three through seven years old (Ibid). ECEC settings include nurseries, registered childminders, pre-school, playgroups, and schools providing non-compulsory Foundation Phase early education (Dallimore, 2019). The 'childcare offer for Wales' allows parents to claim up to 30 hours per week of childcare or early education (Welsh Government, 2020). A programme called the 'Flying Start' concerns children from birth to three years old. It aims to promote positive outcomes for children and their families in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Wales (Welsh Government, 2014).

Denmark is located in northern Europe and is a Scandinavian country. Denmark has an estimated population of 5.8 million people (CIA, 2020). There are various types of ECEC settings; nurseries (vuggestue), Kindergarten (børnehave), Integrated institutions (aldersintegrerede daginstitutioner) and Home-based provisions (dagpleje) (European Commission, 2020). The Danish curriculum incorporates the 'social pedagogical traditions' and describes the core values of Danish culture. There is an understanding that environments should naturally support children's wellbeing, learning, development and formation (European Commission, 2018). The curriculum emphasizes general development as opposed to school-based learning. The curriculum strives for a system that is well rounded in supporting children's understanding of the world (Bertram et al., 2016).

In terms of education in Wales, the devolution (1999) was a pivotal point leading to a significant divergence in education from neighbouring countries in the UK (Georgeson and Payler, 2013). The government took a play-centred approach to learning for children up to seven (Clark and Waller, 2007). Jane Davison (The Minister of Education and Lifelong learning) explains although Wales share similar learning outcomes with other countries, their policy directs them on a unique route to achieve them (NAfW, 2001). Wales has been described as the UK's leading example of exemplary outdoor education (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). The Welsh government strived for a curriculum that has children's best interests at the centre of all decision making, resulting in importance being placed on outdoor learning (Maynard and Waters, 2007). However, across the UK a prescriptive curriculum has caused outdoor learning to become less prevalent in recent years (Rea and Waite, 2009).

Similarly, Denmark has also been recognised as the primary reason for the development of forest schools in the UK (Maynard, 2007). Forest schools originated in Scandinavia and are associated with Danish early years programmes (Ibid). Motivated by Froebel (1782-1852), Danish nurseries stress the importance of play, movement and fresh air (Joyce, 2012). Friluftsliv (Fresh air life) is a concept securely embedded in Danish culture. Therefore, being outside in open spaces is integral in many ECEC settings and is a normal part of young children's lives (Maynard and Waters, 2014).

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Generally, children experience risk in many aspects of play which contribute healthily to personal development and growth (Wyver et al., 2010). Outdoor learning seems to associate itself with risk play as it naturally provides children with the opportunity to try things out, as a form of self-expression through learning (Tovey, 2007). Injury prevention organisations stress healthy play often results in painful injuries (Wyver et al., 2010). However, these injuries are beneficial to children as it makes them aware of their surroundings. In line with this, Denmark's Forest School ethos encourages minimal adult intervention and allows children to participate in discovery-based learning in nature with risks. This concept is heavily integrated into every ECEC setting in Denmark (Maynard and Waters, 2014).

Attitudes around the practicalities of risk differ massively in Wales and Denmark. It is argued that the Danish forest school ethos cannot be mirrored in Welsh settings due to restrictive safeguarding measures (Obee et al., 2020). For example, the Foundation Phase (2015) states for children to personally develop, they must learn through first-hand experimental activities that involve risk in the outdoors (Welsh Government, 2015). However, the framework also states that good practitioner management means enabling children to take 'appropriate' risks (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). The term 'appropriate' is misleading as what is considered appropriate is not outlined in the framework. This leaves it open to individual interpretation as practitioners will have different opinions on what they perceive as safe whilst playing outside; thus why outdoor learning in Wales appears different in each ECEC setting (Tovey, 2007).

The cultural norm in Denmark is that children should have regular access to the outdoors (Obee et al., 2020). Although the Foundation Phase explains that risk should not be eliminated from outdoor play (Welsh Assembly Government, 2015), Denmark is considered less risk-averse in comparison to Wales (Obee et al., 2020). This is because all practitioners in Denmark have a common understanding that risky play proves only beneficial in outdoor education (Andkjaer, 2012). It has been argued that Danish parents and practitioners better understand the capabilities of children; this is reflected in practice as children are allowed to be near campfires, knives and other potentially dangerous elements (Obee et al., 2020). This highlights what is considered culturally appropriate in Wales differs drastically in Denmark. The developing culture of 'protectionism' in the UK alongside strict safeguarding measures in Wales limits the implementation of risky outdoor play in ECEC (Wyver et al., 2010; Backett-Milburn and Harden, 2004).

Furthermore, Danish children start school at six whereas the starting age in Wales is four years old (MfCSA, 2017; Welsh Government, 2015). Despite the unspoken competitive international comparisons of children's academic achievement (Ringsmose 2017), both Denmark and Wales curriculums outline that assessments are not necessary in ECEC (Welsh Government, 2015; Karila, 2012). However, there is concern that the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) has led to a decline in outdoor education in Wales (OECD, 2014; Davies and Hamilton, 2018). The LNF Framework has caused teachers to feel pressured to regularly assess children, despite the Foundation Phase stating that the curriculum should not be driven by assessment but through active learning (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). In comparison, a traditional day in Denmark is distinguished by free-flow learning with no assessments, this leaves more time for outdoor play and child-initiated play (MfCSA, 2017).

Despite Denmark being acknowledged for children spending most of their time outside (OECD, 2000), growing cities, living conditions and noise complaints have been acknowledged to contribute towards the reduction of outdoor learning (Bentsen et al., 2010). A report found that ECEC settings in Denmark need to improve the use of both indoor and outdoor activities by a way of reducing the noise in settings, as it has been reported that noise levels were relatively loud

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during the day. It has been argued that this is due to poor management from professionals (OECD, 2000).

It is important to note that professionals in Denmark are not referred to as teachers, the word teacher is not used to eliminate the perception that adults are in control, as opposed to children being leaders of their learning (Ringsmose, 2017). However, in UK countries like Wales, there is a perception that good quality ECEC involves an equal mixture of both adult-led and child-led activities (Fisher, 2016). Though in practice, curriculum requirements take precedence which limits child-initiated activity in Wales (Davies and Hamilton, 2018). Whilst it is clear that both countries value the concept of child-initiated learning, Denmark appears to be more relaxed when it comes to practitioners leading activities (Ibid). Wales places more importance on academic attainment as opposed to explorative learning, whereas Danish government push for children's independence and states for every theoretical taught lesson, a child must be allowed to physically do it (Howard, 2015)

In Denmark, the government states that children should spend a minimum of 45 minutes outside a day, as it supports 'hard to reach children from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular boys (Howard, 2015). However, in Wales the time spent outdoors is determined by the weather; if weather conditions are wet children may not be allowed outside (Maynard and Waters, 2007). A study found that Welsh parents have repeatedly raised concerns about children having wet socks and dirty clothes (Ibid). This makes practitioners feel reluctant to allow children to participate in outdoor education (Copeland et al., 2011). In contrast, Denmark considers all weather conditions as an important lesson in outdoor education (Knight, 2013). Both parents and practitioners feel "there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing", and therefore dress their children in accordance to the weather (Knight, 2013 p.2). In contrast, it has been reported that Welsh ECEC settings do not have suitable clothing that shields children and practitioners from wet weather conditions (Davies and Hamilton, 2018). Similarly, in Wales the Foundation Phase (2015) states for children to understand the world, they need to explore how weather conditions change environments (Welsh Government, 2015). However, parental disapproval results in children spending less time in the outdoors (Maynard, 2007).

Conversely, to overcome this, Danish practitioners educate parents on why seasonal weather is beneficial to children's development; good communication is the foundation for effective parent and practitioner partnership (Knight, 2013). When compared to Wales, the trusting environment created in Danish ECEC settings allows practitioners to explore the outdoors with children freely, this is due to fewer limitations of parental disapproval (Obee et al ., 2020). It is important to note that Forest schools in Wales are outside during all weather conditions, and sometimes are accompanied by Welsh schools during some sessions (Maynard, 2007).

In line with seasonal weather, the physical environment in which outdoor learning takes place is crucial (Tovey, 2007). Depending on the location of an ECEC setting, its local outdoor environment will naturally attach itself to different variations of outdoor learning (Bentsen et al, 2010). It has been heavily researched that urban environments prevent children from engaging freely in the outdoors (Francis and Lorenzo 2006). By a way of minimising this, the Welsh Government gave a grant to unmaintained sectors on the basis that they would upgrade their outdoor equipment. Despite this, it has been found that the grant did not cover all expenses, therefore many settings still need assistance in redesigning their outdoor space (Taylor et al., 2015).

Similarly, Denmark also places importance on the layout of outdoor spaces. However, a fairly recent form of outdoor education called Udeskol stresses the importance of utilising nature's natural resources to support children, as opposed to spending money on outdoor equipment as Wales have done in recent years (Bentsen et al., 2010) In comparison, although the Welsh Flying start programme outlines that the type of stimulating activities should vary indoor and outdoor (Welsh Government, 2014), Welsh settings often take indoor activities outside and label this as

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outdoor learning. This has been criticised for not being useful in supporting children's engagement levels as natural resources are not being used to their full potential (Maynard and Waters, 2014).

Before 2014, outdoor learning in Denmark was labelled as a 'grassroot initiative', as the implementation of outdoor education relied on the enthusiasm of practitioners. However, the Danish government has supported the cause and has since reduced the number of subjects in the curriculum, leaving time for outdoor activities. A programme called 'Haver til Maver' which translates to 'gardens to tummies' encourages children to grow, cook and eat organic vegetables by applying a hands-on approach. This allows children to take complete ownership of their learning experience. The programme has been highly successful and therefore has been funded across the whole of Denmark (Howard, 2015). School gardens have recently become popular within the UK, however, it is often led by volunteers and is run as an extracurricular activity as it is not considered an integral part of learning in Wales (Ibid).

To conclude, understanding cultural differences is important when deciding what might otherwise be considered normative. It is evident that both countries place importance on outdoor education, however, impetus placed upon safety is paramount in Wales, causing limitation to its practice when compared to Denmark. Cultural differences result in a variation in how outdoor education is achieved in both countries (Maynard, 2007). Although Wales is considered to be self-governing in terms of education (Clark and Waller, 2007), Scandinavian countries are often seen as 'countries of reference' for good examples of outdoor learning (Bentsen, P. et al. 2010).

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