A Comparative Study of Outdoor Learning between the Early Years Foundation Stage and Year 1.
Abstract

This research study considered teachers’ opinions on the importance of outdoor learning and compares outdoor learning experiences from Reception to Year 1 in a sub-urban infant school. The study used a comparative case-study research to explore the comparisons of outdoor learning between these two year groups. The researcher was an active listener throughout the study and the children’s voices were considered vital, therefore qualitative focus groups were planned with Reception children and quantitative Likert Scale questionnaires were distributed to Year 1 children. The researcher also interviewed two full-time teachers, separately, in a semi-structured interview. In this particular school, outdoor learning is offered less often to Year 1 children than to Reception children. This could be the result of the pressures teachers are experience, in terms of accountability, progress, achievement and attainment.

Chapter 1.0: Introduction

The motivation for this study is developed from a variety of sources. Firstly, the researcher has a personal desire to develop a greater understanding of the nature of outdoor learning and the impact it has on children’s development. The importance of outdoor learning is significant in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Consequently, the fundamental purpose of the research is to establish a comparison of outdoor learning within the Early Years Foundation Stage to Key Stage One, focusing on two specific year groups; Reception and Year One within a sub-urban infant school. This will be presented in a comparative case study.
Chapter 2.0: Literature Review

The pioneers of early childhood education, including Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori and Margaret McMillian, expounded the fundamental and crucial role nature and outdoor experiences have in the developmental maturation of human beings (Bilton, 2002; Pether, 2012). The EYFS practice guidance firmly places a high value on outdoor provision, insisting that children must have daily opportunities to be outdoors (DfE, 2015; Ryan, 2016). However, this is framed within a set of early learning goals that establish expectations for most children to meet by the end of the Reception year (DfE, 2014). The EYFS recognises the positive impact which outdoors has on children’s sense of well-being, identifying how it supports all aspects of children’s development and provides children with the opportunity to develop a sense of self-worth, identity and confidence to discover and learn in secure and safe, yet stimulating spaces (Ouvry, 2000; DfE, 2014).

The EYFS is a statutory play-based early learning framework for maintained and independent schools and early years providers (DfE, 2014). It sets out standards for learning and provides an entitlement to play-based experiences and ensures children gain outdoor learning experiences from an early age. However, as children move into statutory schooling, their educational experiences are guided by the requirements of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014). As the demand for academic attainment appears to increase opportunities to learn experientially outside become restricted as increasingly teacher-directed lessons focus on prescribed learning outcomes (Waite, 2010).

Furthermore, as children begin their education following the National Curriculum, it would seem that getting them ready for Year 2 is one of the principle aims of Year 1 and so on throughout their schooling (Waite, 2011). The EYFS states that, wherever possible, there should be access to an outdoor play area; this is the expected norm for providers (DfE, 2008). Nutbrown, comments, ‘the best way to help children to get
ready to be 5-year-olds is to allow them to be 3 when they are 3 and 4 when they are 4’ (2006, pg. 124). Whilst Reception children are found to be engaged in playful and active learning following their own interests and preoccupations indoors and outdoors, Year 1 children are frequently found sitting passively on carpets listening to the exposition of their teachers, following careful and detailed planning (Fisher, 2010).

2.1 A Brief Overview of Play

Play has been a fundamental aspect of child development for centuries with many revolutionary thinkers identifying the significance of play including Plato, Froebel, Vygotsky and an abundance of writers have since contributed to the field of play (Dombey and Martin 2002; Santer, Griffiths and Goodall, 2007). Educationalists have changed their views of the importance of play in EYFS education significantly; in recent decades, play has been considered a crucial aspect of education, especially in the EYFS, correspondingly, it is now enshrined in government policy documents. There is a general consensus amongst educationalists and policy makers that play is fundamental for the development of young children enabling them to learn about each other, how people live, have fun, make friends and learn and understand about the world around them (Ouvry, 2000; DCFS, 2008). Research has identified that play for its own sake is irreplaceable in a child’s life (Ivonne, 2009). It can be one of the most productive methods of early education, and it is an essential requirement for
the growth of a child’s spirit, and so play should require no further defence; it defines childhood (ibid).

Play has been defined in many ways and is seen to be an umbrella term that cannot be pinned under one definition, even though play is something everyone has experienced and knows something about, it is very hard to provide clear or reliable definitions of play and to agree exactly what play is (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Bruce, 2005). Play has no external goals set by adults and has no adult imposed curriculum, instead it is an activity which is pleasurable and sustains children’s interests over substantial periods of time. Although, adults usually and may perhaps be involved, the child should take the lead and adults must respond to cues from the child, they should build on children’s interests and introduce the children to new learning opportunities, by providing the space and resources for play whilst allowing the child to maintain control and give direction to the play (Santer et al, 2007; Goouch, 2008; Hope, 2008).

Play can occur in many different scenarios and can promote various developments and skills, children use the imaginary world of play to ‘try on’ different identities accordingly developing an understanding of the world and themselves in it, exploring cultural differences and the different kinds of relationships, which they repeat, renew and recreate in their imaginative play (Ouvry, 2000; Lindqvist 2001). The ideas of ‘progress’ and ‘accountability’ usually rest on the defined or implicit outcomes that teachers and settings have for Year 1 children and so their play experiences have been recognised to be controlled over the ‘intended learning outcome’ therefore, ceasing it to be play (Ouvry, 2000; Lindqvist 2001; Dubiel, 2016).

This could be correct, as play is magnificently unpredictable and full of surprises, nevertheless, those surprises are outside the core skills and concepts that children are expected to be learning in Year 1 and Year 2 (Fisher and Julie, 2010). Instead, it becomes an adult-initiated activity with the use of play resources, not allowing children the opportunity to discover, investigate and create in the uninhibited means
that play should offer. In addition, children should also know how to tidy up, they must be taught the correct methods with given time to become proficient, by doing so they learn to respect each other and their school and to be responsible and made aware of using resources (Bilton 2010; Fisher and Julie, 2010). Furthermore, attention has been drawn to how well-designed processes do not necessarily result in achieving the intended outcomes, yet recognising the gap between what is offered and what is received, is fundamental (Dickinson 2005; Humberstone and Stan, 2009).

2.2 The Fundamentals of Learning Through Play

Children develop imperative skills such as imagination, communication and problem solving as they take part in group activities, puzzles, dreaming, exploration, creating stories and imaginary worlds in play by supporting children’s learning (Broström 1997; Early Childhood Education Forum, 1998; Department of Education cited in Samuelsson 2006; Hope 2008). Perhaps the experience of the teacher is the central factor; a teacher who is not familiar with learning through play may inhibit the children from expressing their ideas and playing out particular scenarios (Van Oers, 2003). On the other hand, the more experienced teacher will extend the learning through play using effective teaching which will promote acquisition of new qualities through personally meaningful learning and development of the child (ibid). It is perhaps debatable how often this kind of successful intervention and scaffolding of children’s learning takes place when considering a Reception classroom for example, which has one teacher and one teaching assistant to maintain order in a classroom which has above twenty pupils, whilst simultaneously encouraging effective learning for each pupil (ibid).

The outdoor learning environment is a particular area for promoting and enhancing learning through play which had been subject to varying degrees of praise in the literature and appeared to be an interesting topic to research. Yet, possibly one of the most fundamental assumptions in regards to the value of the outdoor environment, is that effective learning only happens when children are still, quiet and calm, with pencil and paper to hand and with a teacher nearby to offer instruction. (Ouvry, 2003). However, this assumption underestimates the
importance of outdoor learning and it has been noted that if no valuable learning is taking place outside, then it is likely to be the result of poor planning, and clear aims for the children’s outdoor learning from the practitioner (Ouvry, 2000; Truelove, Vanderloo, and Tucker, 2016).

Schools which encourage outdoor exploration and believe that a certain amount of dirtiness is necessary or at least tolerable in children, may be in disagreement with certain parents who put a high value on hard work, cleanliness, obedience and may not warm to the sight of their children splashing in puddles. Children may spend their day in the outdoors, making sense of their world with their friends but if they sense a parent’s negative comment about the outdoors being a waste of time, they can become confused (Ouvry, 2000). Tension can arise, for those children who enjoy the outdoors but their parents are paranoid of them getting dirty. This is a parental view which is immersed in social attitudes to the outdoors about what constitutes ‘learning’. Therefore, it is vital that practitioners do not let these negative parental attitudes be the reason as to why children stay indoors, and instead they explain the benefits of outdoor learning to these parents (Ouvry, 2000). In addition, the term ‘helicopter parents’, defines those parents who are found hovering possessively over their child, prepared to leap in and rescue them at the initial sign of distress and deny them free rein to thrive or fail on their own (Mercogliano, 2007).

From 1996, the DfE focused on increasing the reputation of outdoor play; numerous documents were given a greater interest from the government, consisting of; Learning through Landscapes, Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto (DfES, 2006) and Play England. In light of this, in a foreword by Edward Balls, a member of parliament (MP) (2005-2015) who also served as the Secretary of State for Children,
Schools and Families (2007-2010), believed that fun and exciting opportunities to play are at the heart of a happy, healthy and enjoyable childhood. Yet, children are losing childhood because they are not given the gift of time to play (Ivonne 2009). Enhanced outdoor play opportunities are good for children, families and communities, they may be the one place where independence orchestrate their own negotiations with the physical and social environment and for children to gain the clarity of selfhood necessary to navigate later in their life (Perry, 2001; DfE, 2008).

The implementation of the Play Strategy (Gleave and England, 2009) which was led locally by Children’s Trusts had a clear vision to make sure that every residential area had a variety of high-quality places for all children to play safely and free of charge. This is a direct response to demands from children, young people and their families for better play facilities in every area; which was backed by an investment of £235 million (DfE, 2008). By April 2009, every local authority received at least £1 million in funding which was to be targeted at those children most in need of improved play opportunities. Play England was the national delivery partner within this scheme and it significantly expanded their capacity; they provided all local authorities with access to expertise, planning advice and guidance (ibid). Investments were made in the early years and school provision through awarding local grants. Moreover, their long term objective, was for all children and young people to have access to world-class play and recreation spaces which are child-friendly and near to where they live by 2020 (Gleave and England, 2009).

It is crucial for the outdoor environment to be considered in as much depth as any other area of provision, for outdoor play to be a success, the whole curriculum can and should be available outside; it is a complete learning environment (Bilton, 2002; White, 2011). Therefore, the outdoor environment requires as much, attention, effort and commitment when compared to the indoors, in order to maximise its value and accessibility by children and adults. The indoor and outdoor area must be used as a whole, and on odd occasion children are unable to go outside, it will be far outnumbered by the times children do enjoy continuous free movement between the areas (Ouvry, 2003; Fisher and Julie, 2010; White, 2011). Children have a devolved interest whilst playing with peers to stay ‘in’ the game, at the same time they learn such challenging and demanding strategies to co-operate and prevent aggression (Pellegrini, 2005). Play is the most significant outdoors activity for children and the
most relevant way of offering learning outdoors, fulfilling children’s needs for all types of play, learning through first-hand experiences and cooperating with others (Ouvry, 2000; White, 2011).

2.3 The Transition from Reception to Year One

Drawing on two studies funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (Rogers and Evans, 2007; Waite et al., 2008) the researcher will now consider how continuity and progression in the vital transition period between Reception and Year 1 can be mediated by pedagogies commonly adopted in contexts outside the classroom. In 2009, two major reviews of the English National Curriculum took place. This advocated greater continuity between the Foundation Stage and National Curriculum to encourage children’s engagement with learning and less attention to testing and more to the development of positive attitudes towards learning dispositions (Alexander, 2009; Rose, 2009). Many early years teachers have long regarded outdoor play as an integral part of the curriculum within the Foundation Stage (Waller, 2007). Likewise, unstructured, child-centred play has many benefits for children and these benefits cannot be tested against benchmarks testing (Ivonne, 2009). In addition, children learn by association and hands-on action, therefore, testing at such a young age does not encourage the child to become a critical thinker (ibid). Moreover, Fisher (2009) states how often in transition studies the sound of the plaintive voice of the child saying, ‘We used to play in Foundation… it was more funner’ (Fisher, 2009, pg. 131). Acknowledging, how children grieve for the loss of play and play resources in their more sterile and formal Year 1 classrooms (Sanders et al., 2005). In more recent years, the idea of an official ‘Baseline Assessment’ was unexpectedly resurrected by the DfE in 2013 in conjunction with the development of the new National Curriculum. The assessment has a ‘formative’ role in identifying children’s areas of strength and development in both curricular and dispositional aspects to facilitate a smoother and more effective transition for the children into Year 1 and for the teacher to plan provision, support and challenge accurately (Dubiel, 2016). The purpose of the reception baseline is to support the accountability framework and help assess school effectiveness by providing a score for each child at the start of reception which reflects their attainment against a pre-determined content domain (STA, 2014).
2.4 Child Development

The significance of outdoor learning and the philosophy that it contributes to children’s development, dates back to Rousseau, 1762, and Froebel, 1826. There has been exploration and in depth research with innovative emphasis being placed on forest schools. Outdoor learning theories tend to focus on the natural environment and how this affects children’s development (Frost, 1992; Fjortoft, 2001; Bilton, 2004; Lester and Maudsley 2006; Forest Education Initiative, 2007; Tovey, 2007; White, 2008). Importantly, the cognitive, physical, emotional and spiritual growth in a child, must develop alongside one another, in order for alternative opportunities to occur within the outdoor environment when compared to the indoor environment (Boorman, 1998; White, 2011). The Play Strategy drew attention to playing safely, to time and space as a fundamental aspect to their ambition to make England the greatest country in the world for children and young people to grow up in – it is vital for children’s physical, emotional, social and educational development, likewise with a clear link being established between play and children’s personal, social and emotional development (Whitehurst, 2001; DfE, 2008).

Correspondingly, the outdoor environment offers emotional support; it allows children to express themselves, giving them independence, self-organisation, participation, empowerment and a feeling of tranquillity (White, 2011). All areas of learning and development can be readily supported outdoors with hands-on experiences, such as
literacy, mathematics and science, to work on a larger scale in ways which are bigger, bolder, messier and nosier (Gould, 2011). Mathematical language, so essential for combining ideas, will be used all the time outdoors by children; bigger, longer, faster, more or less- all are used in the right context to be understood. Children use blocks to build, at the same time discover geometric shapes and simple physics to enable their structure to stand up (Ouvry, 200). Children, also benefit from the fresh air and develop a healthy body alongside a healthy mind, they are able to move around vigorously and be energetic (Plaisted 1909, Holmes and Davies 1937, de Lissa 1939).

2.5 Risk and Challenge

There has been growing concern on risk within the outdoors, for several reasons; educational trends and fears over health and safety, that children are missing out on vital learning that can only be obtainable by the outdoors (Gill, 2009) the lack of these opportunities can result in what is termed ‘nature deficit disorder’ (Louv, 2009). Certain types of risk help children to understand how to manage risk safely and keep themselves safe and learn through the acquisition of practical skills, which has also been described as an intelligent behaviour. It is the practitioner’s role to assess risk and ensure a safe environment (Edgington, 2004; Santer et al, 2007; Gill, 2009; Ryan, 2016).

Children have a natural appetite for risk which should be catered for through educational and free play opportunities, whilst avoiding exposure to unmanaged risk (Gill, 2009). Children build their unique personality and character through risks, resilience, and adventurousness and ultimately they learn to deal with risk, feel comfortable in their own body are an essential part of living a meaningful and nourishing life (Greenland, 2006; Gill, 2009). The outdoor environment is able to provide children with greater opportunities for independence rather than adult-defined and indoor, controlled spaces (White, 2011).

Children frequently pursue opportunities to be engaged in risky play (Anon., 2014). Risky play can be defined as a stimulating activity that comprises a risk of physical injury, and play that offers experiment, challenge, enjoyment, excitement, achievement and an opportunity to explore boundaries (Sandseter, 2007; Coster and Gleeve, 2008; Little and Wyver, 2008; Anon, 2014). Risky play allows children to
extend their limits and learn life talents. Achievement and failure offer children the enthusiasm to master a new challenge, and the excitement which is felt when the challenge is learnt (Stephenson, 2003; Tovey, 2010).

Risk-taking during play has become progressively controlled and managed and to some extent thought to be removed all together (Tovey, 2010; Anon, 2014). It is presumed that by eliminating risks, children will be able to play in harmless situations. However, this attitude fails to recognise risk-taking as a constructive feature of children’s play and education (Tovey, 2011; Anon, 2014). A safety-obsessed society may result in children whom are less physically fit, having little control over motor skills, and are less able to cope with risk (Sandseter, 2010). It is crucial to be able to balance the requirement for safety with the need to provide physical challenges (Wainwright, 2001; Truelove, Vanderloo, and Tucker, 2016). Researchers have argued that traditional local parks do not provide sufficient risky play prospects for children (Little, Wyver and Gibson, 2011; Anon, 2014). However, Sandseter (2009) disagrees, by suggesting researchers fail to acknowledge that children will search out risky play opportunities in any play environment (Anon, 2014). Teachers regularly control outdoor activities that they perceive as risky; and so children are made to feel disempowered and unable to solve risky situations for themselves (Stan and Humberstone, 2011). Tovey (2011) revealed that while some teachers support and inspire risky play, many feel apprehensive and unwilling to permit children to take risks for panic of accidents (Anon, 2014). The limitations put on children’s play are frequently based on adults’ perceptions of what is dangerous or risky (Sandseter, 2011), rather than individual abilities, being adventurous, giving children the independence to judge circumstances for themselves (Ouvry, 2000).

Research demonstrates that risky play increases children’s physical and gross motor skills for their intellectual development (Sutcliffe, et al., 1987) and for those children who are permitted to take risks are likely to become more resilient and therefore more able to cope with difficulties which may arise in their lives at a later age, and to value the freedom of not having to sit still: risky play is an irreplaceable part of childhood (Gillham and Reivich, 2004; Fjortoft, 2010; Anon, 2014; Inter IKEA Systems B.V., 2015). However, some children may not choose to play outside when given the opportunity, as they are extremely anxious regarding the potential dangers outside which they have been warned about from adults (Children’s Play Council,
2003; Thomas and Thompson, 2004; Dillon et al, 2006; Bilton, 2010). If a teacher believes they lack the proficiency to organise children in the outdoors, or if they feel being outdoors is not in their comfort zone, then it is of little astonishment that some teachers use escaping tactics (Waite, 2011).

Teachers should encourage all children to be involved in risky play, regardless of age, ability or gender, by using affirmative language when accidents arise, and adapt activities to suit a range of abilities to ensure all children are involved in risky play to some extent and support those who may appear anxious (Anon, 2014). Furthermore, risk-taking may perhaps be perceived differently depending on the gender of the child (Morrongiello, Zdzieborsky and Normand, 2010). Suggesting, that girls feel less confident in risky play and a reason for this may perhaps be due to the responses of others, therefore teachers must take care to encourage risky play to ensure adult assumptions are not blocking opportunities for any child (Ouvry, 2000; Anon, 2014; Jarvis and Holland, 2016).

2.6 Freedom

An outdoor environment should offer children freedom to explore, be physically active and exuberant; it provides distinct features when compared with indoors, whether this be an extension of what they have indoors or possible experiences which are very different (Waite, 2011). Children are able to move around in a bigger space, they have permission to be energetic, boisterous and to feel uninhibited about action, noise, dirt and spillage, allowing them to be released from the constraints that their way of learning necessitates indoors (Waite, 2011; White, 2011).

Commonly, all children feel this sense of freedom outside, but some children visibly change once outside; it could be thought that they have two personalities- one for inside and one for outside (Bilton, 2010). Accordingly, the inside persona may be quiet and acquiescent with little interaction with others, whilst the outside child becomes vocal and keen to cooperate with children and adults (ibid). An outdoor area can be a place where high-energy and boisterous play is likely to predominate; the needs of many children may not be met, and so, some children may not enjoy
the outdoor area (White, 2009). Consequently, it is vital to provide a space for calm, peacefulness, and reflective play away from others; an ideal to offer an attractive quiet place where children can feel more at peace from the active activities, is by encouraging children to plant flowers (Ouvry, 2000; White, 2009; Bilton, 2010).

### 2.7 The Environment

Children need to be in an environment which has the spirit of the zone of proximal development, one which is captivating, where children recognise that if things get tough they can struggle, but when things get too challenging they can return to the adult to seek help, guidance and support, instead of being controlled by others (Vygotsky, 1978; Bilton, 2010). Children gain an additional sense of space outdoors when compared to the space indoors; it can be explored upwards, downwards and sideways, children can be at different levels, with the ability to see things from a range of perspectives; the dimension of ‘up’ becomes much more apparent, children are able to be up high, gaining new perceptions and looking down on others, they can limit their ‘roof’ as the sky (White, 2011). A child’s early experience of exploring large outdoor spaces may be critical to the development of spatial abilities, however this space can be a small area, which will still allow and encourage the child to relive their experiences through their most natural channel: movement (Ouvry, 2000; Baldock, 2011). The outdoor environment is able to offer opportunities for other valuable and more self-directed forms of learning, which make it feel very different from indoors, from the lighting, air movements and natural temperatures (Rogers and Evans, 2007; Garrick, 2009). In addition, children benefit from exploring and playing with natural materials outdoors such as sand and soil, wood, plants, seeds and shells (White, 2008).

Children who are capable of walking unaided should be physically active for at least 180 minutes daily, in order to nurture their mind-body growth, therefore going outside to explore and play cannot be perceived as something that is only appropriate during the summer (Ouvry, 2000; Varney et al., 2014). A growing body of research indicates a direct connection between an ongoing access to outdoors, which significantly raises individual health, including increased attention, improved fitness and lower sickness rates (Doherty and Whiting, 2004; Gleave and Cole-Hamilton, 2012). There are a number of researchers who have demonstrated that outdoor play, especially in
more natural environments, gives children a sense of freedom, healthier personal development, increased learning, improvement of mood, and opportunities for self-discovery (Blakemore and Firth, 2005; Pretty, et al., 2009).

2.8 Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a valuable pedagogical tool which is used throughout the primary phase and beyond. The rich multi-sensory nature of outdoor experiential learning can be seen as a valuable opportunity, particularly for children with special educational needs such as visual impairment or profound and multiple learning difficulties, as they incorporate a range of sensory inputs, complementing this, are the opportunities to support children’s learning styles and schemas (Athey, 1990; Waite, 2011). The role of the teacher is to produce a play environment where children can participate in movements that fulfil their sensory needs (Brearley, 1969; Greenland, 2006). Each child is different and unique with their own set of abilities, created for a special purpose. Play brings joy, contentment, and detachment from the troubles of the day, which is why children learn best through playing; every child should have the right to play (Ivonne, 2009).

Active play is the most common type of physical activity children take part in, occurring when there is a positive association between time spent outside, unstructured play and physical activity (Biddle et al, 2007; BHF 2009). The outdoor environment is able to support physical activity as there are usually fewer rules, more space, and running and shouting are not frowned upon (Stephenson, 2002). Additionally, children engage in active play-based learning in the Foundation Stage, which ideally should be continued into Year 1. However, as children move between two significant phases of education from the Foundation Stage to Year 1, the reduction of playing and learning outside possibly could be an indication of wider differences in the learning and teaching which they experience in Year 1 (Davis et al., 2006; Waite and Davis, 2007). Children in Year 1 learn most effectively when they engage in playful, active learning, therefore it is crucial that the classroom environment promotes this way of learning (Fisher, 2010). Most significantly, active learning requires space and the best way to provide space is to provide an outdoor learning environment (Fisher and Julie, 2010).
Unfortunately, the reduction in opportunities for learning outside the classroom in Year 1 is noticeable, approximately one-third of the time in Foundation Stage is spent outside, compared to around ten percent in Year 1 (Ouvry, 2000). This gives a clear indication of reduction in outside learning opportunities for children over this transitional period (ibid), supporting findings of a decline in the use of the outdoors between nursery and infant school (Waite, 2011). For this reason, the researcher decided to compare the differences of outdoor learning experiences in Reception to Year 1 in a sub-urban infant school.

Chapter 2.0: Discussion and Analysis of Findings

2.1 Introduction to the Data Analysis

This chapter presents the discoveries of the research, and considers the identifications that the researcher has made with clarifications of what they mean in relation to the study. The researcher chose a ‘Holistic’ approach to present the data, whereby the findings are shown and conversed together, as opposed to being in single sections (Burton, 2008). This approach allows the reader to understand the links which have been made between the research findings and the researcher’s interpretations of them.

The researcher distributed 28 Likert Scale questionnaires to a Year 1 class, receiving all of these back and completed (Appendix 14), marking these with a code; ‘M’ for male, ‘F’ for female. In addition to this, the researcher interviewed two members of staff; a Reception Class Teacher and a Year 1 teacher in a semi-structured style of interviewing which was digitally recorded (Appendices 11, 12, 13). Likewise, 4 focus group, all of which comprised of 5 children at a time from a Reception Class were organised, which were all digitally recorded too (Appendices 16, 17, 18, 19, 20).

The researcher, entered all of the data into Excel, creating a Pie Chart for each question, displaying all of the participants’ answers and their gender, this way, the researcher was able to easily identify differences and/or similarities in the participants’ answers. The four most reoccurring themes were used to enable the
researcher to triangulate all findings and correlate these to the literature, developing a clear representation of outdoor learning within the school which emphasised correspondences, so that the researcher had words/phrases that were agreed on (Appendix 21).

- Results discovered that nine females did not mark the ‘neutral’ box on any of their answers, with six of these females all giving the exact same answers for every question. There was only one female participant, who marked every answer in the neutral box, showing uncertainty.
- Eleven male participants all responded exactly the same to every question, further scrutiny was taken by the researcher and remarkably, these matched with the six girls whom all responded the same too, totalling a number of seventeen out of twenty eight, 61% all with identical answers.
- One male participant marked every answer in the neural box, apart from the first question in the happy box, with is similar to the female participant. The other three male participants had a combination across all three responses.
- The researcher used quantitative mathematical data from the Likert Scale questionnaires in order to express the Year 1 children’s outdoor learning experiences, and therefore how much they have influenced the study results.

The researcher used the qualitative sources congregated from interviews and focus groups, in order to enhance the analysis and allow for conclusions to be drawn (Burton, 2008).
4.2 Theme 1: The Importance of Play

The first and perhaps most significant theme gathered from the teachers’ interview responses was the importance of play. Findings from the research correlated with those of Ouvry, 2000; Lindqvist, 2001; DCFS, 2008; Ivonne, 2009, as Participant A shared her thoughts on playing as a time where:

….children learn and appreciate the world which they live in, they are able to enjoy themselves whilst having fun and making new friends.

(Appendix 12)

Results from the Likert Scale questionnaires demonstrate that a substantial 93% of male participants do believe that the outdoor learning area helps with their learning, with only 1 male participant marking the ‘neutral’ box, 77% of female participants indicated that they thought the area does help with their learning, with only 15% in the ‘neutral’ box and 1 participant in the unhappy box.

Correspondingly, in agreement with Pellegrini (2005) and Stephenson (2002), Participant B enthusiastically responded on the significance of play in education:

…playing is so vital for children, they begin to understand the importance of the ‘rules of the game’ and how to work together with their friends, by allowing them to stay engaged with their learning by following their own interests and surely this must be more valuable than sat on a carpet listening to instructions.

(Appendix 13)
Interestingly, this opinion was also recorded from a child participant within a focus group, which supports the work of many researchers; (Dickinson, 2005; Humberstone and Stan, 2009; Fisher and Julie, 2010; Waite, 2011). Participant 4 shared with disappointment:

*I don’t think we will have time to be outside, the Year 1 children are always sat on carpet when I see them.*

(Appendix 17)

Participant A, agrees with Ouvry (200) and Lindqvist (2001), when responding to the researcher’s questioning on the significance play:

*…especially when they are playing imaginatively and are involved with acting out as different characters. They develop an understanding of the world which they live in and the differences between us all, but as I’m sure many other teachers have experienced when they’ve moved from an Early Years Classroom to a Key Stage 1 Classroom, that play does most certainly lack, I don’t even have a role play area in my classroom anymore!*

(Appendix 12)

Participant A, coincides with White (2009) and Bilton (2010) as she continues:

*I do believe that children learn best through play, and when children are outdoors, it does give them enjoyment and especially for those who may have not had a good day so far, play and the outdoors is able to isolate them from those difficulties and worries.*

(Appendix 12)

Correlating these findings even further with Participant 11’s response (Ouvry, 2000; Blakemore and Firth, 2005; Pretty, et al., 2009; White, 2009; Bilton, 2010) to whether or not she enjoys spending time in the outdoor learning area:

*…sometimes if I had a rubbish day or been told off I like to go to the quiet bit in the corner next to the wall and be on my own to make me feel better*
A significant percentage within one of the response boxes was gained from the Likert Scale questionnaire results in response to whether the children enjoy the outdoor learning area in Year 1: 87% male participants marked the happy box, alongside 70% of female participants, there was the remaining of only 2 male participants, 13% in the neutral box and 2 female participants, 15% with the other two females 15% in the unhappy box. Perhaps, these results could indicate that research from Ouvry (2000) are correct, as only the female participants stated they do not enjoy the outdoor learning area, however this was a small percentage received and other impending factors may be the reason for these 2 female participants to not enjoy the outdoor learning area, as Participant 3 concurs with Jarvis and Holland (2016), in response to spending time in the outdoor learning and what could be changed within the outdoor learning area:

No it’s always cold….dressing up clothes…some more space for a role play corner

(Appendix 17)

Numerous Reception children correlated to Ouvry (2000) and Gould (2011) research in the literature, by mentioning their maths learning within the focus group:

Participant 1: I like the magnetic shapes to build with and I now know about 3-D shapes

Participant 5: It’s fun and I enjoy the hoops and when we do our maths with the number cards

Participant 6: Yes I like it when we learn maths outside its better….when we play with the big chalk to do our letters and numbers the right way round on the floor

Participant 10: The big numicon and I can say all my number bonds to 10 now

Participant 14: I like to play with the big skittles and when Miss (name) plays maths games with them its funner than the classroom

(Appendices 17, 18, 19, 20)
2.3 Theme 2: Risk-Taking

In the semi-structured interviews, both teachers agree; (Gill, 2009; Bilton, 2010; White, 2011) in relation to encouraging risky play. Participant A continued to propose what most stands out for her when she is observing children outdoors:

…the risks they take which I wouldn’t have anticipated whilst they were indoors, don’t get me wrong I don’t stop children taking risks, if anything I encourage it within their play.

(Appendix 12)

Likewise, Participant B, explains her understanding of the term outdoor learning, in agreement with; (Sandseter, 2007; Little and Wyver, 2008; Anon, 2014) by mentioning that children:

…take risks which they wouldn’t have wanted to do or unable to do in the classroom…it is although they have two different personalities that are used inside the classroom and outside, the one when they are inside tends to be shy, whilst the one outside is loudly spoken.

(Appendix 13)

These findings appear to suggest that both participants in the school are proactive in encouraging children to experiment with and challenge themselves to take risks outdoors. However, after scrutiny of the focus group responses from the Reception children, the answers from the teachers could be challenged, and correlated to; (Tovey, 2010; Stan and Humberstone, 2011; Waite, 2011) as Participant 5, discusses in response to what he would like to change about the outdoor learning area and his prediction of what the outdoor learning area will be like in Year 1:

…grownups to not shout at us when we are dirty and climb on the frame…I hope there is bigger bikes to ride and I can climb on stuff without being told off, I’ll be bigger like my sister then.

(Appendix 17)

Participant 15 expresses his feelings correlating to Ouvry (2000) stating his favourite activity:
‘trim trail’, but we get told off from the teachers for climbing on it.

(Appendix 19)

Participant 18 shares his thoughts on spending time in the outdoor learning area:

I like it because I can climb but I do get told off if someone sees me.

(Appendix 20)

However, there is a small amount of data from the interview results which provides evidence to suggest that despite the efforts of both the teachers in this school, who strive to remove gender obstacles, findings perhaps suggest that gender in the case of this research does have a small impact on the risky-play choices made by the children in this reception class, likewise all child participants who mentioned risk-taking in their answers within the focus groups, were male. Participant A relates to Little, 2010; Morrongiello, Zdieborsky and Normand, 2010; Jarvis and Holland, 2016:

Some children absolutely love the outdoors and from my own classroom and personal experience I do think it is actually boys. I have two sons and one daughter and again they loved the outdoors, whereas she would much prefer to be indoors... I admit, my daughter probably didn't like the outdoors as much as my boys because I would get apprehensive when she was on the park climbing frame, but when the boys were climbing about as high as they could it didn't seem to bother me, it was like the 'norm' for them, it's what I expected really.

(Appendix 12)

Yet, when the researcher questioned her on whether she believes the school promotes gender equality, she answered positively:

Yes definitely, I know in previous year’s a teacher in Reception organised ‘outdoor partners’ which would be each set of partner’s comprising of a boy and girl. But again, you can never force a child to go outside.

(Appendix 12)
However, the researcher did acknowledge that full certainty of whether what the respondents say is factual is unattainable. The interviewees were made fully aware of the objective of the study beforehand of the interview, and so it is likely that the teachers may wish to uphold a good name for the school and staff, therefore changed their answers accordingly. Then again, both interviewees were assured privacy throughout the study, and were aware that anything discussed within the interview will not be distinguishable to their individuality. The school was also made aware that they will have the chance to read the final document in order to use the findings to improve their outdoor learning experiences where required, and so trustworthiness on the subject would be in their greatest interest.

Findings of the Likert Scale questionnaire, correlated with Morrongiello, Zdieborsky and Normand, (2010) by establishing that only 4 female participants 30%, stated that they do prefer to learn indoors rather than outdoors, with a high percentage of male participants expressing that they did not prefer to learn inside, 13 males, 87%.

Moreover, Participant A agrees with Ouvry (2000) by discussing how:

…I had twin girls in my class and directly from their mother’s mouth ‘the outdoors is both their worst nightmare’…mum said they can fall and hurt their selves…even mum admitted herself hating the cold and always fearing the worst what could happen outside….with my two boys I’m not as cautious…my daughter probably didn’t like the outdoors as much as my boys because I would get apprehensive when she was on the park climbing frame, but when
the boys were climbing about as high as they could it didn’t seem to bother me, it was like the ‘norm’ for them. 

(Appendix 12)

Nevertheless, she does still acknowledge and relate to Coster and Gleeve (2008) to how the outdoors offers:

…children opportunities for exploration and testing of their boundaries with a sense of achievement and challenge….Vital in terms of meeting children’s needs and exploring the world 

(Appendix 12)

Participant B also mentions how parents perhaps can have an impact to how children respond to risks, triangulating to findings in the research; (Tizard, B., Mortimore, J. & Burchell, B, 1981; Ouvry, 2000; Little, 2010):

I do think a lot of that comes down to their home life and how they have been encouraged to take risks and challenge themselves 

(Appendix 13)

Also, corresponding to Participant’s 10 answering:

My mum shouts at me if I rip my tights on the climbing frame 

(Appendix 18)

2.4: Theme 3: Planning and Resourcing for Outdoor Learning to Enhance Children’s Development

There have been many assumptions regarding the lack of value from the outdoors (Ouvry, 2003), during the interview, the researcher asked for elaboration on a point which was made by Participant A regarding Year 1 children not having wet suits, it was appreciated how she openly admitted to:

Because of the lack of outdoor learning which happens in Year 1, the funding could not be justified. The children in Year 1 rarely go out when it is a dry
sunny day never mind when it is raining… When I am planning, I feel so pressured with meeting my targets, outdoor learning unfortunately doesn’t often come to mind.

(Appendix 12)

Bilton (2002) and White (2011), would suggest that Participant A fails to consider the outdoor environment in as much depth as the indoors to create a complete learning environment. However, it seems that Participant B’s response, triangulates with Ouvry (2003), Fisher and Julie (2010) and White (2011), by establishing her understanding of the importance of effective planning for outdoor learning:

*The outdoors encourages children to learn through play but as I have learnt myself, the planning for this to happen must be well thought out and adapted to be effective…this takes time to plan and work successfully.*

(Appendix 13)

Yet, as Participant B acknowledges her organisation of planning, she agrees with Truelove, Vanderloo, and Tucker (2016). She states:

*...an obvious advantage I have when outdoors is the space…helps with the planning of activities being able to encourage the children to learn on a large scale rather than sat on their small assigned space on the carpet.*

(Appendix 13)

After scrutinising the result findings from the focus groups, the researcher discovered that 100% of the child participants within the first focus group all mentioned comments regarding planning and resourcing when they were questioned on what they would change within the outdoor learning area, which correlate; (Santer et al, 2007; Goouch, 2008; Hope, 2008):

*Participant 1: More stuff to play with like cars that you can sit in and ride*

*Participant 2: yes I would like more things for us too*

*Participant 3: more space for a role play corner*

*Participant 4: To have longer to play outside and more people allowed at once*

*Participant 5: have more toys cos’ some are old.*
Perhaps, these results could question Participant B’s earlier response, and as a result, relate to Fisher and Julie, (2010) as she states:

…the planning must be considered according to the individual needs of the children, if not then learning outside the classroom may not happen. The outdoor environment must be well-thought-out as any other environment and this takes time to plan and work successfully.

The researcher thoroughly scrutinised the focus group results, and discovered that three participants, all in separate groups related to findings from Bilton (2010) and Fisher and Julie (2010):

Participant 4: I enjoy the mud trays but we never allowed them because they take too long to put out Miss (name) says to us

Participant 7: bigger water trays but sometimes they don’t get filled up, the teachers say they forget

Participant 13: Yes I like the building bricks but Miss (name) moans that they take too long to get out and tidy up

This response may perhaps suggest the inexperience of the teacher who was mentioned, coinciding to Van Oers (2003) research within the literature. In addition to the demand for academic attainment and prescribed learning outcomes, Waite (2010). Which also, corresponds with an answer from Participant B:

…I do know of some teachers who do not promote learning through play as such, unfortunately, I must say that I see this more in newly qualified teachers.

Perhaps, uncertainty is shown from participant B in regards to learning through play and providing time for the outdoors as she contradicted herself later on in the interview and states that:
...time is always a barrier to taking children outside, from the very beginning of having to set the area up to getting the children ready to be taken outdoors with suitable clothing and then to actually make sure learning is taking place.

(Appendix 13)

Further findings from the Likert Scale questionnaire, suggest that 93% male participants do not like the outdoor learning in Year 1 as much as the area in Reception, likewise to 70% female participants.

2.5 Theme 4: Space and Time

There was bounteous of evidence from the Year 1 children in regards to their thoughts on whether they spend enough time in the outdoor learning area, with only 3 female participants, 23% marking the positive box, whereas the remaining of the
10 females; 3 stated the neutral box, 23% and 7 marked the negative box, 54%. However, 27% of the males participants marked the neural box and the remaining 11, 73% marked the negative box. Therefore, more than double of the participants revealed that they thought the amount of time spent in the outdoor learning area was inadequate and possibly in line with research of Sanders et al (2005) and Fisher (2009).

Findings associate with (Davis et al., 2006; Waite and Davis, 2007; Dubiel, 2016) yet are unalike to those of Fisher (2010) as Participant A states:

I have experienced that…the time for play does most certainly lack…I do not have the time to take my class outside or rarely even a group at a time because of these pressures!

(Appendix 12)

Likewise to Participants B response:

I realised the pressure I had on attaining targets for the children…so they was ready for their education in Year 2 and so on in their school years. From now having that experience in Key Stage 1 & 2, I understand the expectations.

(Appendix 13)

Participant A correlates with Ouvry (2000) and Baldock (2011):

…with such a large space for them to freely move around in they are able to achieve sense of freedom and continuously developing their fine motor and gross motor skills, whilst being in the outdoors.

(Appendix 12)

Participant B associating with White (2011):

Children should learn about the space around them, I always make the clear distinction between the indoors having lots of walls and ceilings to the outdoors where their actual limit is the sky.

(Appendix 13)
Findings from Waite (2011) correlate to Participants B response:

…time is always a barrier to taking children outside, from the very beginning of having to set the area up to getting the children ready to be taken outdoors with suitable clothing, but then again I would have to put this down to the children having to be prepared for the rest of their education, preparing for Key Stage 2 and so, and I definitely do not blame the teaching in Key Stage 1 at all!

(Appendix 13)

Children’s responses were in parallel with; (Ouvry, 2000; Davies et al., 2006; Waite and Davis, 2007; Waite, 2011) when predicking what Year 1 will be like:

Participant 4: I don’t think we will have time to be outside, the Year 1 children are always sat on carpet when I see them

Participant 16: I think we will only be allowed out like one time a day

(Appendices 17, 20)

Furthermore, Participant 9 relates to Ouvry (2000) and Varney et al. (2014);

We will only be outside if its sunny I think.

(Appendix 18)

Chapter 3.0: Conclusion

This was a very small scale study and obtained data which produced a slight amount of evidence which suggests that outdoor learning, specifically in this sub-urban infant school does not happen as often in Year 1 when compared to Reception. Key findings of the research include that outdoor learning, unfortunately lacks in Year 1; teachers are conscious of assessments, testing, attainment, progress and accountability within their career. Potentially, this could be due to the teachers’ inexperiance of outdoor learning and understanding of the importance and value of it; a responsible pedagogy must be in place so that every child is able to demonstrate their knowledge and development copiously (Dubiel, 2016).
Effective assessment can only take place when a child has the opportunity to reveal their own understanding and learning in a range of situations (STA, 2016). The researcher is fully aware that outdoor learning is a valuable part of children’s learning experiences, but not only in Reception, as certain children in Year 1 who may well be six years old, but are much below this age in terms of their developmentally stage, therefore it is not appropriate to have a top down pressured structure, as the researcher received this impression from the Year 1 teacher in her interview.

The researcher was also intrigued by, Shirley Clarke (2001), supporting the importance of formative assessment to be the key purpose of the process, continuing to state that, children are the plants and the summative assessment of the plants is the process of simply measuring them (Clarke, 2001). The measurements may be interesting to compare and analyse but in themselves do not affect the growth of the actual plants, formative assessments are the garden equivalent of feeding the plants- directly affecting their growth (ibid). However, the researcher is in agreement with Jan Dubiel (2016), from the text by Shirley Clarke (2001), approving that there is a missing layer, beneath the soil, which underpins the understanding of the statement. In addition, how the plants are fed and watered, will have a direct bearing on the outcomes, in this case the plants’ successful growth (Dubiel, 2016). These decisions will come from aspirations and intentions for the plants, likewise to the progress which children take towards greater mastery, knowledge and understanding (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997: Dubiel, 2016).

This research was an original study which hoped to build upon and contribute to the shortage of existing research literature relating to the comparisons of outdoor learning between Reception and Year 1. From conducting this research study, the researcher has experienced the enjoyment of being involved within research with the hope of possibly enhancing outdoor learning opportunities for children.

Chapter 4.0: Recommendations

Prior to conducting the research, the researcher was already engaged in the school as part of a university placement. Consequently, the children, staff and parents were
familiar with the researcher, enabling rapport to be built with them, which helped to
develop feelings of trust and confidence, perhaps reducing experimenter bias
because they were not curious or affected by the researcher’s presence (Cohen,
Manion and Morrison 2007). Consequently, the Hawthorne effect could have
occurred because the children knew of the research intentions and may have wished
to impress the researcher (ibid). The research may not be reliable due to the nature
of small scale research, if repeated in another classroom or school setting it may not
yield the same results, however, it is debatable how significant this is for the study in
respect of small scale, non-generalizable research. Research included a
combination of mostly qualitative methods and a small number of quantitative
methods which occasionally allowed the findings to triangulate; appreciating ‘the
whole picture’ (Mason, 2002; Mukherji and Albon, 2009).

At the time, the choice of the semi-structured interviews seemed appropriate
because they were able to provide qualitative, thoughtful explanations and personal
interpretations and beliefs. A weakness of the interview was that they take time to
organise, conduct and analyse, the numbers involved were small, which makes the
researcher vulnerable to the criticism that the data may not be representative
(Denscombe, 2014). To compensate for this weakness, a mixed methods strategy
was adopted which involved focus groups and questionnaires. The questionnaires
did not provide the kind of depth of information which the semi-structured interviews
and focus groups did but, by combining the methods, the researcher was confident
to be in a position to avoid potential criticism, linked to either the small sample size
associated with the interview method, or the relative superficiality of data collected
via questionnaires (Denscombe, 2014).

Research instruments may have been partially to blame for minor inappropriate
elements, but on the whole, did yield the intended results them to obtain and worked
as they were designed to. However, in reflection of this study, it appears that the
researcher should have conducted qualitative observations in addition to the other
research methods used, the researcher could have investigated the children’s
experiences more thoroughly and the impact outdoor learning has on their
development. Obtaining qualitative data of this sort would have enabled the
researcher to draw more firm conclusions of the children’s voices from the
comparative findings which would have been insightful and supported this study. As
findings indicate that outdoor learning should take place more often in Year 1 within this infant school, perhaps further staff training is required for this and how parents respond to the outdoors, significantly impacts children. Despite the downfall in the data and findings the research deserves some merit in relation to authenticity and validity, this research was an original study which hoped to build upon and contribute to existing research literature relating to comparing outdoor learning in Reception to Year 1. It was never the researcher’s intention to produce and yield generalizable results.

Chapter 5.0: Reference List


Fisher, J.A. (2009) ‘We used to play in Foundation, it was more funner’: investigating feelings about transition from Foundation Stage to Year 1. *Early Years*


