

Children's experiences outdoors: Education and community contexts

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Children's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). The early childhood period is a time when children's values and dispositions towards outdoor play and environments are formed. Children have an intrinsic drive and natural curiosity to explore the world around them and outdoor environments are a key context for this exploration. Outdoor play and learning provide significant benefits for all aspects of children's development - physical, cognitive, social and emotional (Brussoni et al., 2015).

Outdoor learning provides opportunities to learn diverse subjects and supports children's holistic development (Fiennes et al., 2015). Children also experience feelings of enjoyment during outdoor play (Waite & Rea, 2007). Spending time outdoors affects children's well-being and increases physical activity (Stone & Faulkner, 2014). In addition, engagement in challenging physical and adventurous or risky play is positively associated with a range of physical and social health behaviours. Brussoni et al. (2015) including acting as a potential mechanism for reducing the risk of childhood anxiety (Dodd & Lester, 2021).

This issue focuses on outdoor play and learning due to its importance and contribution to children. In addition, the Covid-19 crisis and its influence on children also contributed to the understanding of the importance of playing and learning outside.

When considering outdoor learning contexts, we wanted to include research projects from as wide a field as possible and as such lending itself to a wider brief than simply standard educational settings. Ratinen et al. (2023) offer a useful discussion about the potential breadth of what can be construed as learning outdoors, incorporating non-educational settings. In this way this edition was hoping to attract research that could be undertaken in any manner of spaces outside, such as local sites (parks, woodland, farms, city farms, community gardens, allotments, nature reserves, etc.); Forest School - and bushcraft - style on-site learning, in-school/classroom ecology projects, projects within urban areas, as well as educational settings. We also wanted to attract research involving not only children, but also parents, carers and grandparents. The importance and impact of nature and the natural world were considered through the lens of Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) Attention Restoration Theory, pertinent to this special edition, which suggests the increase in concentration and attention gained by individuals through experiences in and with nature. Through this engagement, when children return to the more formal aspects of education they can be more engaged and therefore have improved performance and achievement across all subject areas.

Eleven articles completed the process successfully to be published in this thematic issue, and Figure 1 indicates the word cloud from the published articles in this thematic issue. From the combined word cloud from these articles, the prominent words are children, play, outdoor, nature and so on. This gives us a brief explanation about the contexts of each research paper, and our aim to focus on the children's

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experiences outdoors. Added to this are: parent, urban, and culture.



Figure 1. Word Cloud from the Published Articles

From the point of prominent keywords, children are at the centre of the focus because child-centredness is one of the key aspects in education to achieve learning objectives in the activities (Wai Leng et al., 2021). Campbell-Barr (2019) underlines the ideal understanding of child-centredness, but the structural constraints have an impact on the practices. In this regard, the various reflections on child-centred activities can be explored through the articles. In addition, play is another significant word from this issue. While in their explanation about play, Meng and He (2021) remark on the importance of designing the spaces considering children's playful learning needs, including an innate desire to engage in adventurous, risky play (Sandseter, 2007). Regarding this, parents' and practitioners' understanding of risk causes a decrease in children's outdoor play opportunities (Sandseter et al., 2019).

Although the call for this thematic issue focused on outdoor experiences, outdoor is the third prominent word from the articles. Outdoor refers to both natural spaces and having access to out-of-school spaces (Waters & Maynard, 2010). There is an ongoing debate on children's outdoor experiences and learning opportunities provided across countries (Norðdahl & Jóhannesson, 2014). The articles included in this thematic issue draw on international research that reflect diverse approaches to outdoor play, free play and play-based pedagogy, including the importance of outdoor play experiences for maintaining cultural traditions.

As Tuuling et al. (2019) concluded from their research, teachers who planned outdoor activities improved their knowledge about nature and their surroundings further. The word 'nature' also features in terms of frequency in the published papers for the thematic issue. Nature provides experiences and learning opportunities for all stakeholders in education especially for teachers and children (Askerlund et al., 2022). "The types of natural environments accessed through the activities provided included parks, green spaces in residential areas, bodies of water (such as canals and rivers), woodlands, landscapes such as hills and moorland, and farms, including working farms and city farms" (Waite et al., 2021, p.132). Thus, natural environments involve various opportunities for children to learn in and through nature which is increasingly important in supporting children to become environmental stewards.

Various articles involve settings within the wider community. Helleman et al. (2023) explored and detailed what children actually do outside in the public space and with whom. They suggest that play, rather than being this general thing that all children partake of, is dependent on age, gender, district, and the play space. Wilhelmsen et al. (2023) look through the lens of children's rights to examine the wider community and what makes a child-friendly city. The voice of the participants is gained in multiple ways, including through building with Lego bricks.

Richard et al. (2023) acknowledge that there can be barriers to going outside and through their

research suggest themes and approaches so that the early child settings can break down those barriers. Gessiou and Mart (2023) compared outdoor play and learning practices across three cultures in order to reveal different approaches, so the findings might provide an overall perspective to enact a common practice and develop outdoor practices.

The voice of families is heard through the paper by Kadury-Slezak et al. (2023) who found that post-pandemic parents are not going out as much as they used to with their children. The authors offer guidance for parents to help them see the benefits of children playing in nature. The theme of the parental voice is researched by Figueiredo et al. (2023) who carried out a comparative study of parents to identify the motivators for them enrolling their child in a nature-based club. As the authors suggest this is research that needs to be expanded to better understand a person's connection with nature.

The importance of culture is explored by Bjerklund and Arnot (2023) and this research illustrates the importance of children learning alongside adults and how this approach enables culture to be passed onto the younger generation but also secures children's well-being. Culture is further explored by Matafwali and Mofu (2023) through their analysis of indigenous games and songs and how these can be incorporated into learning within schools, emphasizing that learning doesn't have to be by direct instruction only.

Dardanou and Karlsen (2023) used a range of approaches for their children to communicate their experiences of outdoor play and argue that this approach of recording children's ideas through Land Art and drawings may be a way forward for others.

Sanchez-Perez et al.'s (2023) research suggests that young children's working memory skills are aided when they have more contact with nature, and this is despite the educational level of the mother. Outdoor learning experiences of young children and educators. Finally, the paper by Donison and Halsall (2023) indicates the depth of knowledge of children and how they are fully able to appreciate what they can learn in nature and through nature.

In conclusion, we consider this special edition showcases a breadth of experimentation we were looking for. We have articles from Canada, Greece, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Türkiye and Zambia. Particularly heartening was the number of articles which included the 'voice' of the child in the research. This 'voice' was expressed through a range of mediums: the spoken word, gestures and body language as well as: photographs, videos, drawings, reflecting the 'mosaic approach' to research devised by Clark and Moss (2011) acknowledging that children do have agency, and have a right to express their ideas and feelings and that this approach does offer insight into other peoples' lives. This approach reflects the child's right to 'freedom of expression' and 'right to be heard' (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1990). We hope this collection is both informative and inspirational.

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