

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Barriers to Outdoor Learning in Early Years Settings: A Case Study from Portsmouth, England

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Megan McGregor-Sims

University of Portsmouth, UK

Email: meganksmith195@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8206-7592>

Abstract:

Outdoor learning and connection to nature are increasingly recognised as central to children's wellbeing and to the development of pro-environmental values. This paper explores the barriers to implementing outdoor-based curricula in Early Years settings within Portsmouth, UK—an urban coastal city with high deprivation levels and unequal access to green space. Early childhood is a period of profound curiosity, exploration, and sensory engagement; yet for many children, opportunities to experience the natural world are increasingly constrained by modern lifestyles, curriculum pressures, and environmental inequalities. Drawing on a qualitative design, data were collected through online questionnaires, setting observations, and environmental audits across seven Early Years settings. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes related to practitioner beliefs, environmental conditions, and curriculum demands. Findings reveal a strong professional commitment to outdoor learning but also significant challenges that restrict its practice. Pressures linked to curriculum outcomes, practitioner confidence, workforce instability, and physical access to quality outdoor environments all shaped the extent to which outdoor learning was realised. The study argues that outdoor education in the Early Years should be recognised not only as a pedagogical approach but as an ethical and ecological imperative. Supporting practitioners through training, leadership, and policy structures is essential to sustain meaningful connections between children and the natural world.

Keywords: outdoor learning, early childhood education, nature connection, sustainability, practitioner perspectives, Portsmouth, UK

1. Introduction

“We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”
(Leopold, 1949)

Current debates around outdoor learning and sustainability in early childhood education reveal both the transformative potential of nature-based practice and the systemic barriers that limit its implementation (Creati et al., 2025). Early childhood is a period of profound curiosity, exploration, and sensory engagement; yet, for many children, opportunities to experience the natural world are increasingly constrained by modern lifestyles, curriculum pressures, and environmental inequalities. These tensions are explored through the lens of Early Years practice in Portsmouth, UK, examining



how practitioners navigate structural, environmental, and philosophical challenges when implementing outdoor education. Portsmouth provides a valuable case study due to its distinctive geography and socio-economic profile. The city has one of the highest population densities in the UK, with limited access to high-quality green spaces (Portsmouth City Council, 2021). These conditions make it an ideal context for investigating how outdoor learning is interpreted and enacted in urban early childhood settings, and how socio-economic inequalities can influence children's opportunities to connect with nature.

Outdoor learning has long been associated with holistic development, fostering physical health, emotional wellbeing, and environmental awareness (Gill, 2014). However, implementation remains uneven both between settings, where access and ethos differ, and within settings, where practitioner confidence and curriculum pressures shape daily practice. Practitioners often work within frameworks that prioritise measurable academic outcomes, leaving limited time and resources for exploratory or nature-based activities (Ball, 2003). National policy on sustainability and climate change education has historically lacked coherence or emphasis in the Early Years (Aikens et al., 2016; Greer et al., 2023).

This study situates itself within these broader tensions, seeking to understand how practitioners' values, confidence, and working conditions shape their ability to deliver meaningful outdoor experiences (Harper et al., 2019). Using a qualitative approach grounded in thematic analysis, the research draws from online questionnaires, observations, and environmental audits across multiple Early Years settings of varying pedagogical practice in the different areas of Portsmouth. The combination of self-reported and observed data provides a triangulated perspective that captures both practitioner intentions and everyday realities. By focusing on barriers rather than solely on benefits, this research contributes to a more balanced understanding of outdoor learning in practice. It argues that while enthusiasm and personal commitment among educators are vital, they must be supported by institutional structures, adequate training, and equitable access to green or natural environments. The findings also invite reflection on how early childhood education can nurture a sense of ecological belonging and responsibility from the earliest years of life.

This paper aims to highlight the interplay between policy, environment, and pedagogy in shaping outdoor learning in the Early Years. It calls for a collective reimagining of education that positions nature connection not as an optional enrichment, but as a foundation for lifelong wellbeing and sustainable futures.

2. Literature Review

Leopold's (1949) call to see land as a "community to which we belong" captures a growing recognition that education must nurture both human and ecological wellbeing. More recent debates around outdoor learning highlight its potential to reconnect children with the natural world while also addressing widening social and environmental inequalities (Strife & Downey, 2009; Parkin et al., 2025). Within early childhood education, this discussion centres on how practitioners interpret, value, and enact outdoor pedagogies in contexts shaped by policy, culture, and environment. Scholars have long argued that a healthy relationship with nature underpins sustainable behaviour, for example the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993) proposes that humans possess an innate affinity for the natural world, while Phenice and Griffore (2003) describe an eco-psychological approach in which children are born with a predisposition to relate to their surroundings. When



educational systems neglect this instinct, opportunities for sensory exploration and emotional attachment to place diminish. Modern childhood has increasingly shifted indoors, constrained by safety concerns, technology use, and reduced access to nearby green space (Louv, 2008; Oswald et al., 2020). In dense urban areas such as Portsmouth—where deprivation levels are high and public green space unevenly distributed and accessible—these patterns risk deepening existing inequalities in children’s wellbeing and environmental awareness.

A growing body of evidence links contact with nature to improved physical health, emotional regulation, and cognitive development (Gill, 2014; Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2021). Forest School and similar models promote holistic growth through child-led, experiential learning (Connolly & Haughton, 2017), and studies have shown that such approaches can foster respect, cooperation, and environmental care (Waite & Goodenough, 2018). However, enthusiasm for Forest School is not universal. Critics argue that many implementations romanticise nature or overlook issues of inclusion and practicality (Leather, 2018; Waite, 2019; Maynard and Waters, 2007). For example, Waite (2019) warns that privileging woodland spaces may alienate practitioners working in urban contexts where natural environments are scarce. Similarly, Maynard and Waters (2007) found that poor weather and resource limitations frequently curtailed outdoor provision, questioning the feasibility of year-round access. Some scholars suggest that without intentional reflection, Forest School can reproduce traditional hierarchies rather than challenge them (Leather, 2018). Balancing ideals with context-specific realities therefore remains essential if outdoor education is to be equitable and sustainable.

2.1 Socio-economic and environmental access

It is apparent that access to quality outdoor environments is uneven across the UK and is shaped by socio-economic status (O’Neill, 2019). In cities like Portsmouth, the interaction between deprivation, population density, and limited green infrastructure constrains daily contact with nature. The Government’s 25-Year Environment Plan (DEFRA, 2018) recognises that children from disadvantaged areas need more opportunities to be “close to nature,” yet delivery remains inconsistent. Longitudinal studies link the absence of parks and open spaces to poorer physical and mental health outcomes (Gill, 2014). For Early Years practitioners working within such constraints, promoting environmental connection often requires creativity when repurposing small outdoor areas, using community gardens, or bringing natural materials into indoor spaces. Despite strong advocacy for learning beyond the classroom, sustainability and outdoor education occupy a limited position in England’s policy landscape. Climate change education has lacked a coherent national framework (Aikens et al., 2016; Greer et al., 2023), and Early Years practitioners often operate within performance cultures that prioritise literacy and numeracy outcomes (Ball, 2003). Frameworks such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) encourage outdoor play but remain largely outcome-driven, leaving implementation dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than structural support. These systemic pressures can discourage creativity, risk-taking and restrict child-led exploration. Research also shows that staff confidence and training are pivotal and practitioner attitudes determine how outdoor opportunities are offered to children (Henriksson, 2018; Kivrinta et al., 2024). When staff lack experience or institutional backing, outdoor learning may become occasional or tokenistic. This is particularly relevant in urban early-years settings where limited space and high adult-child ratios create additional constraints that intersect with curriculum demands.



2.2 Practitioner wellbeing and workforce pressures

Implementing outdoor curricula also depends on the stability and wellbeing of the workforce. The Early Years sector in England faces chronic issues of low pay, high workload, and limited professional status (Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Solvason et al., 2025). These challenges reduce capacity for innovation and continuous professional development. Smaller staff-child ratios, essential for high-quality outdoor experiences, are often financially unattainable and can hinder quality or implementation (Cronin-de-Chavez, 2019). In such conditions, maintaining enthusiasm for outdoor practice requires not only personal commitment but organisational recognition and resourcing. While evidence strongly supports outdoor learning as a vehicle for holistic development and sustainability education, literature also reveals tensions between aspiration and practice (Hill, 2013). The benefits of nature connection are clear, yet the capacity to provide consistent, inclusive experiences is shaped by broader socio-economic and policy contexts. Portsmouth's urban environment exemplifies these complexities. Research suggests that practitioners in urban and socio-economically disadvantaged areas often recognise the pedagogical and ethical importance of outdoor learning but must navigate structural limitations such as restricted space, limited resources, and unequal access to green environments (O'Neill, 2019; Gill, 2014).

2.3 The need for further research

As discussed, existing studies highlight the importance of practitioner beliefs and environmental context but offer limited exploration of how these interact in deprived urban settings. Further qualitative research is needed to understand how practitioners interpret national policy within local realities and how their own relationships with nature influence children's experiences. By focusing on Portsmouth as a microcosm of wider national challenges, this study addresses this gap by exploring how practitioner beliefs, environmental constraints, and policy contexts interact within urban Early Years settings in Portsmouth, England.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore the barriers practitioners face when implementing outdoor-based curricula in Early Years settings in Portsmouth, UK. The focus on practitioner perspectives aligned with the study's constructivist underpinnings, recognising that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through lived experience (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). A qualitative design enabled the researcher to capture participants' attitudes, beliefs, and daily realities within their specific social and environmental contexts. Data were collected through three complementary methods: online questionnaires, setting observations, and environmental audits. Using multiple sources allowed for triangulation, providing a more nuanced understanding of how reported attitudes aligned with observable practice and the physical features of the environments themselves (Flick, 2018).

3.2 Participants and context

The research was conducted across seven Early Years settings within the Portsmouth local authority area, encompassing a mix of maintained nurseries, private day-care providers, and a Forest School site.



The city's high population density and uneven distribution of accessible green space provided a valuable backdrop for investigating barriers to outdoor learning. In total, data were collected from 18 practitioners ($n = 18$) across seven settings who participated in the online questionnaire. These included managers, qualified Early Years educators, and support staff. The diversity of participants reflected a range of professional experience and setting types, providing insights into both leadership and on-the-ground practice. Observations were conducted in four of the seven settings, each lasting approximately two hours and focusing on children's outdoor play, staff interactions, and the use of natural materials or spaces. Environmental audits were carried out in all participating settings to assess features such as available space, vegetation, and resources for outdoor learning.

3.3 Data collection methods

3.3.1 Online questionnaires

The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended items designed to elicit practitioners' views on outdoor learning, perceived benefits, and barriers. Participants were also asked to complete a Nature Relatedness Scale (Nisbet et al., 2009), rating their own sense of connection to nature. This tool provided a comparative measure to explore how personal attitudes might shape professional practice.

3.3.2 Observations

Non-participant observations were carried out to capture naturally occurring behaviour within the outdoor environment. Field notes focused on the degree of child-led exploration, practitioner engagement, and how outdoor provision aligned with stated pedagogical aims.

3.3.3 Environmental audits

Each setting was assessed using a structured audit tool developed for this study, evaluating environmental features such as greenery, play affordances, and evidence of sustainability initiatives. The audit data provided a visual and descriptive context for understanding physical constraints on outdoor learning.

3.4 Data analysis

All qualitative data—questionnaire responses, field notes, and audit observations—were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. This involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and producing a narrative synthesis. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data while remaining informed by existing literature on outdoor learning and practitioner attitudes.

The analysis produced several overarching themes, including:

1. Emotional literacy and wellbeing
2. Child-led and holistic development
3. Curriculum and assessment pressures
4. Behaviour, screen time, and social skills



5. Language and communication

These themes informed the structure of the findings and discussion sections that follow.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Portsmouth's ethics committee. Participants were provided with detailed information sheets and consent forms outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality, and right to withdraw. Data were anonymised, and all identifying information—such as setting names or staff roles—was removed. Observations were conducted in line with safeguarding procedures and with consent from setting managers.

3.6 Reflexivity and trustworthiness

As a practitioner-researcher within the Early Years sector, the researcher acknowledged their potential influence on interpretation. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the study to monitor assumptions and ensure transparency in analytic decisions (Berger, 2015). Triangulation across multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings, while verbatim excerpts and detailed contextual descriptions enhance transferability to other urban early childhood settings.

4. Findings and Discussion

'It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world' (Rachel Carson, 1956)

The data collected from questionnaires, observations, and environmental audits revealed a strong commitment among Early Years practitioners to outdoor learning, yet significant barriers limited consistent implementation. Five themes were identified through thematic analysis: emotional literacy and wellbeing; child-led and holistic development; curriculum and assessment pressures; behaviour, screen time and social skills; and language and communication. These themes illustrate how values, environment, and policy intersect in shaping outdoor practice across Early Years settings in Portsmouth, UK.

The concept of nature relatedness provides a useful lens through which to interpret practitioners' attitudes toward outdoor learning. The Nature Relatedness Scale, developed by Nisbet et al. (2009), measures the extent to which individuals feel emotionally, cognitively, and experientially connected to the natural world and was included in practitioner responses as part of the questionnaire. Research suggests that higher levels of nature relatedness are associated with stronger pro-environmental behaviours, wellbeing, and engagement with outdoor environments (Martin et al., 2020). Within early childhood contexts, practitioners' own relationships with nature may therefore influence how confidently and authentically they engage children in outdoor learning experiences. This perspective resonates with Rachel Carson's often-cited reflection that "it is not half so important to know as to feel" (Carson, 1965). Carson emphasised that emotional connection to the natural world forms the foundation for curiosity, care, and stewardship. In this sense, environmental learning is not solely about transmitting knowledge but about cultivating meaningful relationships with the more-than-human world. Practitioners who themselves experience a sense of connection to nature may therefore be better positioned to nurture similar feelings in young children. Conversely, limited personal engagement with natural environments may contribute to hesitancy or reduced confidence in implementing outdoor



pedagogies. The findings of this study suggest that practitioners' perceptions of outdoor learning were shaped not only by structural barriers such as space, time, and policy pressures, but also by personal dispositions toward nature and their own values. Considering practitioner nature relatedness may therefore offer an additional dimension for understanding how outdoor learning is enacted in practice.

4.1 Emotional literacy and wellbeing

Across settings, practitioners expressed a deep appreciation for the emotional and therapeutic benefits of outdoor learning. Participant 5 described outdoor environments as “*spaces where children can reset, breathe, and express themselves freely*” while others emphasised opportunities for mindfulness and calm. Observations supported these claims: in the Forest School setting, children displayed self-regulation and empathy through collaborative exploration, and staff sensitively scaffolded and allowed for this to take place. These findings reinforce previous research linking time in nature with improved emotional regulation and wellbeing (Gill, 2014; Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2021). However, the extent to which these benefits were realised depended on staff attitudes and environmental quality. In some urban nurseries, limited natural features constrained opportunities for calm, sensory experiences. This aligns with evidence that access to green space and practitioner confidence mediate the emotional benefits of outdoor learning (Hartig et al., 2014). The emphasis practitioners placed on emotional wellbeing highlights their understanding that outdoor education supports far more than physical play—it fosters resilience, empathy, and self-awareness.

4.2 Child-led and holistic development

Participants frequently described outdoor learning as central to child-led and holistic practice. Participant 8 summarised their ethos as “*Birth to 3 matters. Child-led. Children’s independence. Good role models.*” Similarly, Participant 4 emphasised the value of allowing children to “*explore schemas in play*” and master skills through discovery. Observations in the Forest School setting showed children leading their own activities, while practitioners joined in as co-learners—asking open-ended questions such as, “*Why do you think the leaves are different colours?*”. In contrast, urban settings often exhibited more adult-led, structured approaches. These differences echo Henriksson’s (2018) argument that practitioner attitudes shape the degree of autonomy children experience outdoors. When staff feel confident and supported, they are more likely to follow children’s interests rather than direct them. Child-led, inquiry-based learning aligns closely with the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson & Kellert, 1993), supporting the notion that humans have an innate drive to connect with and make sense of nature. However, where practitioners felt constrained by ratios, safety concerns, or time pressures, opportunities for autonomy were reduced. Space limitations, risk management procedures, and parental concerns all influenced how far practitioners could facilitate exploration. Yet, even in these constraints, some educators demonstrated creativity—using planters, loose parts, or small gardens to enable independent investigation. This adaptability suggests that practitioner agency can partially mitigate environmental limitations, but sustained institutional support remains crucial.

4.3 Curriculum and assessment pressures

Tensions between statutory frameworks and outdoor pedagogy were among the most frequently cited barriers. Several practitioners referred to the pressure of “*next steps*,” phonics, and evidence gathering. Participant 12 described phonics as their “*pedagogical passion*,” reflecting a commitment



to curriculum goals but also the dominance of school readiness narratives. Observation data revealed instances where outdoor sessions were cut short or redirected to focus on literacy outcomes indoors. These patterns reflect Ball's (2003) critique of performativity in education, where accountability measures shape pedagogical choices. Many practitioners recognised the contradiction between valuing outdoor learning philosophically and being constrained by measurable outcomes. Participant 3 remarked, *"I don't think children aged two should be pushed into things that are based on reception age developmentally."* This tension points to a misalignment between developmental appropriateness and policy expectations. Previous research has similarly highlighted how rigid curricula can marginalise experiential and nature-based learning (Maynard & Waters, 2007; Glackin & King, 2020). For practitioners in Portsmouth, this was compounded by staffing shortages and resource pressures, limiting flexibility. These findings suggest that while outdoor learning is valued ideologically, it often competes with assessment-driven accountability structures, making it challenging to embed consistently.

4.4 Behaviour, screen time, and social skills

Behavioural concerns and screen exposure were recurrent issues across data sources. When discussing what practitioners identified as key learning priorities for children, Participant 8 referred to the need for outdoor learning by suggesting *"limiting screen time, respecting and looking after nature,"* were essential, while Participant 9 noted challenges with *"listening and attention, and speech and language."* Observations showed that in smaller more crowded outdoor areas, practitioners often intervened to support turn-taking or conflict resolution, particularly in settings where children had limited prior experience of cooperative play and where play resources were not natural items. These findings resonate with Oswald et al.'s (2020) claim that increasing digital engagement may erode children's social capacities and attention spans and capabilities for cooperative play. Practitioners viewed outdoor learning as a corrective environment where social and behavioural skills could be strengthened through shared, embodied experiences, as one practitioner explained, *"They learn how to take turns, solve problems together, and manage their behaviour much more naturally outside than they do indoors."* The natural environment's open-ended stimuli appeared to foster collaboration, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. However, not all practitioners experienced these benefits equally. In deprived areas of Portsmouth, external factors—such as limited family access to safe outdoor spaces—appeared to influence children's baseline social and emotional skills. This suggests that outdoor learning cannot be separated from wider social contexts. For some children, outdoor education was reported to be a compensatory space for practising empathy and communication that might not be as easily nurtured at home. As one practitioner noted, *"For some of our children, this is where they learn how to share, talk to each other, and understand feelings—because they don't always get those opportunities elsewhere"*.

4.5 Language and communication

Language and communication emerged as both a pedagogical priority and a barrier. Participant 3 identified *"speech and language and socialisation"* as key readiness goals, while others emphasised supporting vocabulary and turn-taking as a priority. In some settings, practitioners skilfully integrated language into outdoor play by naming plants and describing textures, aligning with research suggesting that natural contexts stimulate rich linguistic interaction (Barrable, 2019). However, observations also indicated inconsistency amongst settings with different pedagogies. In certain sessions, language was



predominantly instructional, focused on managing behaviour rather than co-constructing meaning. This variation suggests that while practitioners value communication, not all are confident in weaving it into child-led outdoor exploration. The pressure to evidence “school readiness” may inadvertently narrow the scope of language use outdoors, reinforcing indoor-style instruction rather than open dialogue. For children in multilingual or disadvantaged communities, access to outdoor learning can be particularly valuable because nature-based contexts offer embodied, sensory experiences that transcend linguistic boundaries and promote inclusion. This is an important factor in a city like Portsmouth, with its rich multicultural community. However, this potential is only realised when practitioners receive adequate support and training to facilitate meaningful conversation outdoors, as practitioner confidence and pedagogical knowledge are key factors influencing the quality of outdoor learning experiences (Barrable, 2019; Waite, 2017).

4.6 Synthesis and interpretation

Taken together, these themes reveal a profession deeply committed to outdoor learning yet constrained by systemic and contextual barriers. Practitioners in Portsmouth demonstrated creativity, care, and conviction in their work, but their capacity to act was shaped by structural pressures—curriculum demands, limited resources, and socio-economic inequalities. The study highlights how practitioner values interact with the material and institutional realities of their settings, creating both possibilities and limitations for outdoor practice. These findings align with international literature that situates early childhood education as a site where environmental, social, and pedagogical concerns intersect (Davis, 2015; Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2020). They also contribute to the growing recognition that sustainability education must begin in the Early Years, where foundational attitudes toward nature are formed (Ernst et al., 2021). Yet, the study also cautions against overly idealised views of outdoor learning, emphasising the need for realistic, context-sensitive approaches. By illuminating the lived experiences of practitioners in an urban UK context, this research underscores that outdoor education is not a luxury or an optional enrichment—it is a fundamental component of holistic, equitable, and sustainable early childhood education.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research investigates the barriers to implementing outdoor-based curricula in Early Years settings within Portsmouth, UK, with a focus on nature connection and pro-environmental behaviours. Drawing on survey, observation, and environmental audit data, the findings revealed a profession that values outdoor learning highly but faces a complex web of practical, structural, and ideological constraints that limit its consistent implementation.

At the heart of these findings lies a persistent tension between educational ideals and institutional realities. Practitioners articulated strong beliefs in the developmental, emotional, and ecological value of outdoor learning, yet their ability to act on these convictions was shaped by systemic factors such as curriculum mandates, staff shortages, and unequal access to green space. While enthusiasm and creativity enabled some educators to deliver meaningful outdoor experiences despite limitations, the broader structure of the Early Years sector often constrained what was possible in practice. A key insight from this study is the recognition that outdoor learning is not merely a pedagogical method but a cultural and moral practice. By enabling children and adults to connect with nature, practitioners are helping to nurture empathy, curiosity, and care—qualities essential to building a sustainable future.



The findings reinforce theories such as Wilson and Kellert's biophilia hypothesis and Phenice and Griffore's eco-psychological approach, which suggest that fostering an emotional bond with the natural world in early life encourages stewardship and environmental responsibility in adulthood. However, findings from this study also reveal that these ideals cannot flourish in isolation. Without systemic and policy-level support, practitioners risk burnout or disillusionment, particularly when competing priorities undermine their pedagogical intentions.

The study contributes to the growing evidence that local context matters. Portsmouth's high levels of deprivation and uneven access to green spaces shaped both opportunities and constraints for outdoor learning. Children in urban, disadvantaged areas are less likely to experience everyday contact with nature, which can affect wellbeing, confidence, and social development. Early Years settings in these contexts play a compensatory role, offering children vital opportunities for exploration, play, and connection that may be unavailable elsewhere. This highlights the importance of viewing outdoor education not only as an enrichment activity, but as a matter of social justice and equity.

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings indicate a clear need for professional recognition and sustained investment. Practitioners require time, resources, and institutional backing to embed outdoor learning meaningfully rather than superficially. Professional development opportunities should focus on building confidence, environmental literacy, and reflective practice, helping educators to view themselves as environmental role models and facilitators of children's connection with the natural world. Initiatives such as funded training days, collaborative networks, and practitioner-led research could strengthen both skills and morale. Inspiration and professional autonomy are crucial if outdoor learning is to move beyond policy rhetoric and become a living, everyday practice within Early Years education. Most importantly, there is a need for systemic alignment between educational frameworks and sustainability goals. Current curriculum and accountability structures often prioritise short-term academic outcomes over long-term environmental and emotional wellbeing. Policymakers should therefore consider how early childhood education frameworks can more explicitly embed environmental sustainability and outdoor learning as integral, assessable components of quality provision. This would signal a cultural shift from outdoor play as a supplementary activity to outdoor education as a foundational pillar of holistic child development.

5.1 Future research

Future research could build on this study by expanding across multiple regions to examine how local factors—such as geography, deprivation, and community engagement—shape outdoor learning practices. Further inquiry into children's own perspectives would deepen understanding of how they experience nature and environmental learning, while longitudinal studies could trace how early connections with nature influence attitudes and behaviours later in life. Evaluating the implementation of the Department for Education's Climate Action Plans (DfE, 2022) could also provide valuable insight into how national policy translates into everyday practice at the Early Years level.

Ultimately, this study underscores that supporting children's connection to the natural world is both an educational responsibility and an ethical commitment. Outdoor learning represents a space where curiosity, creativity, and care intersect—a setting in which the foundations for sustainable living are laid. By empowering practitioners through training, collaboration, and systemic recognition, the Early Years sector can play a transformative role in shaping not only the next generation of learners, but the next generation of caretakers for the planet.



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About the Author:

Megan McGregor-Sims is an early-years practitioner and researcher whose work focuses on outdoor learning, Forest School pedagogy, and sustainability education in early childhood. Drawing on her professional experience in early-years settings, her research examines the barriers and enablers to implementing outdoor curricula, with particular attention to practitioner attitudes, curriculum pressures, and access to natural environments in urban contexts. Her interests include nature connection, pro-environmental behaviours, and the role of early childhood education in addressing climate and sustainability challenges. Megan McGregor-Sims's work seeks to bridge research, policy, and practice to support meaningful outdoor learning experiences for young children.

