OUTSIDE play: Designed by adults, used by children.  
An investigation into outdoor play in pre-school.

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The aim of this research project was to study outdoor provision in pre-school settings, for children aged 3 - 5 years. The findings were gathered by observing and recording current practice at four different settings and collating the information. Primary evidence was gathered by the use of questionnaires, interviews, observations and field notes, which were compiled by visiting each setting twice. Consultation with children was also undertaken. Conclusions are drawn on the findings to help show what the outside play area looks like; who sets the area up and what children play with within the environment. The main findings of this piece of work are that children are not fully consulted in the design or set up of their outside play area. It also highlights how weather conditions and staff attitude to going outside creates barriers to children accessing the outdoor play area.

Keywords: Outdoor play, early years, consultation with children, free flow play

Introduction

I chose to investigate outside play within pre-school settings for children aged three to five years. My interest was sparked in this area because I am aware from visiting many settings in my professional role that outdoor play varies vastly from one setting to another. This fired my interest in how adults set up the area and whether children are consulted about their interests in this area. In particular I was interested in finding out if children were involved in the design and setting up of the outside play area.

The outdoor play environment has been an issue that has been debated over many years, with much research being undertaken over the past decade. The theme of outdoor play was also chosen for study as it is an area that practitioners have been expected to fully participate in under the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008), since its implementation in 2007. The EYFS states that children must have access to the outdoors daily, unless it is dangerous to do so. I have noted how this had led to difficulties for some settings in meeting this welfare requirement, as their environment does not allow for outside play to take place every day.

However, the definition of good outside play is complex as consideration has to be given to the quality of the provision, the resourcing of the area, along with the opportunities children have to access play outside. Using primary research, collated by a study of current practice, and secondary research undertaken by completing a literature review, this study uncovers what outdoor play looks like in the 21st Century.
**Literature Review**

In recent years promotion of outdoor play in England has been put high upon the agenda for children, following the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in September 2007. Outdoor play should support the child in a holistic way, meeting needs that may not be met within other areas of his life.

*For children who live in flats or other homes without gardens, the opportunity to play with wheeled toys, learning to steer, regulate speed, pedal, push or pull, building muscles and perseverance, is invaluable.*

(Dryden *et al.*, 2005, p.113)

Outdoor play as a concept has a history stretching back to the early part of the 20th century when Margaret McMillan pioneered the use and importance of the first ‘open-air’ nursery environment for children (MacLeod-Brudenell, 2004; MacNaughton, 2003; Lindon, 2001). Her inspiring work with children included setting up overnight camps to remove children from their overcrowded and often unhealthy living conditions (Featherstone and Bayley, 2002; Bilton 2001). She advocated for children to be surrounded by nature and to be entitled to access the outdoors with the ability to move freely from the indoors to outdoors (Featherstone and Bayley, 2002; Neaum and Tallack, 2002; Lindon, 2001). MacMillan’s work has influenced current practice, and is echoed in the EYFS and Sure Start Children Centre’s ethos (MacLeod-Brudenell, 2004).

Many other pioneers of the outdoor environment have shaped and formed play and learning in current practice (MacNaughton, 2003). Reporting on the philosophy of Rousseau, an 18th Century philosopher, McNaughton highlights his thinking that ‘young children learn what they need to from nature and we need to return them to it for their learning’ (MacNaughton, 2003, p107). Reggio Emillio Schools, as suggested by Featherstone and Bayley, (2002) have an ethos which promotes outdoor independence, incorporating gardens and flowers and includes wheeled toys and sand. Whilst this environment is seen as recreational it still promotes learning and development. In comparison recent practice in the United Kingdom also saw play as recreational, but perceived as a break away from work and a chance for children to ‘let off steam’ (Lindon, 2001, p.125)

In the 1970’s more attention was given to the provision of the indoor environment and little thought about design and accessibility of the outdoor environment (Waller, 2007; Dryden *et al.*, 2005). Prior to 1970, it is argued that little thought was given to the pedagogy within the outdoor environment or indeed the research of practice within the outdoor environment (Waller, 2007; Wood and Attfield, 2005). The reason for this was at this time the promotion of intellectual development was seen as the priority of pedagogy and as this was considered a brain based learning, many practitioners found it easier to support this indoors (Lindon, 2001). The introduction of the EYFS has made practitioners rethink their ideas on outdoor play as over the years this area has been neglected, which means that children often have play areas which are not attractive (MacLeod-Brudenell, 2004). However, implementation of change is a daunting process for some practitioners and this can add to the practitioners’ failure to produce an interesting play environment (Wood and Attfield, 2005).
According to Bilton (2001), children appear to love the outdoors, something which the practitioner often overlooks.

Either young children are perverse, or in fact they instinctively know something which adults seem to have forgotten, namely that the outdoor is a natural learning and teaching environment for young children and is one in which most children feel settled and capable.

(Bilton, 2001, p.vi)

Blatchford (1989) argues that not all children love the outdoors; some children resist going outside because they do not enjoy it, others became bored easily and often hang around the adult who simply provides a supervisory role. It can be argued that the interest of outside play has been reduced by home factors and adults’ expectations which include over use of television for entertainment, fear of personal safety and an increase of traffic (Waller, 2007; Clements, 2004). This is then reflected in their play within a pre-school setting where they may choose to stay inside and explore the ICT area (Clements, 2004). MacLeod-Brudenell (2004) states that this is a cultural shift when comparison is drawn to the 1960’s, when at this time children as young as two would have been allowed to play outside their homes. All of these factors have led to children spending more time inside at home and less time outside.

In our society, anxiety about children’s safety and increasingly sedentary nature of family life means that children may grow up with few opportunities to play outdoors.

(Featherstone, 2007, p.5)

Cullen (1993) adds another dimension by indicating that the expectation of play differs between adults and children. Children are often left to play unsupervised with little or no adult interaction and may choose to play with items, or within areas, that adults would deem unsuitable, for example in a dirt pit. When adults impose restrictions on what a child can play with it hampers their interest in outdoor play (Cullen, 1993). The child is often left to play unsupervised when playing outside. Bilton (2001) suggests this is because the adult does not find it easy to interact with children in the outdoor environment; subsequently this affects the quality of interaction between the child and the adult. Neaum and Tallack (2002) disagree and state that a well-qualified practitioner does interact well with the children and also supports the child’s learning by careful observation to support and extend the child’s learning.

Researchers suggest that access to the outdoor environment should be secure and easily accessible to the children from the classroom (Featherstone and Bayley, 2002; Bilton, 2001). Where practitioners allow the children to access the outside play area freely from the indoor play room, this is known as free flow play. Free flow availability encourages more participation in outside play, but staff deployment has to be considered as they need to be positioned outside and inside to achieve this and meet the ratio requirements of the EYFS (DCSF, 2008; Bilton, 2001). The EYFS (2008) states that two adults must be with children at all times with a ratio of 1 adult to 8 children for children three to five years. This may limit the opportunity for smaller settings to provide outside free flow play. Neaum and Tallack (2002) argue that this ratio is not high enough for outside play which requires extra staff to supervise and interact with the children. Dryden et al., (2005) suggest that practitioners still regulate the amount of outdoor play available for children and do not enable free flow play to take place.
Some researchers have suggested that designing and creating the ideal outdoor learning environment is not an easy task (Lindon, 2007; Featherstone and Bayley, 2002; Bilton, 2001). The practitioner needs to carefully consider the design of the outside play area as ‘material provision makes the bones of the environment’ (Bruce, 2006, p.59). Researchers point out that this needs a sensitive approach however, as the adult may try to improve the space, yet remove important features that a child would actually like to keep, ‘for example, a drain cover may be an important stopping place’ (Lindon, 2007, p.49). The size of the area can also cause problems.

Areas can be too small, too big, too thin, too sprawled out; they can consist of only grass or only tarmac, receive no sun, or get no shade, have no shed or so on.
(Bilton, 2001, p.25)

Wood and Attfield (2005) add that the role of the adult is to produce a quality enabling environment which should be well planned and use carefully adapted resources. Others argue that to fully foster the use of the outdoors, children should be allowed to set up their own environment by choosing equipment from ‘sheds, baskets and boxes’ as ‘they will always use it more imaginatively than if we decide for them’ (Featherstone and Bayley, 2002, p.75). It is suggested that by including children and parents through consultation about the design of the outside area, the practitioner will create a better environment for the child (Thomson, 2009; Wood and Attfield, 2005; Lewis 1998). Ways of including children in the design have included verbal consultation by asking them to draw plans, make paintings or produce models to indicate their preferences (Thomson, 2009; Lewis, 1998)

Bilton (2001) argues that even where provision of outdoor play is inadequately resourced, the most engrossing indoor session will be abandoned by children mid play to seek play outside; for Bilton this indicates how much they love the outdoors. Stephenson (2002) agrees and suggests the reason for this is that the practitioner is less led by routines in the outdoor environment, with fewer distractions; therefore to the child the adult may appear more approachable. Wood and Attfield (2005) remind us that only by creating a sympathetic approach to play and learning will the quality of play be improved.

Bilton (2001) highlights how safety is also an important factor, especially as the outdoor environment is often considered a more active environment which promotes physical play. To ensure safety the EYFS (2008) states that risk assessment should take place daily on all activities outside and in. Bilton (2001) reflects that Avery and Jackson’s 1993 accident study indicates that where mixed aged abilities play in the outdoor environment accidents are more frequent, as younger children may imitate the older children, this often results in more accidents taking place.

Stephenson (2002) argues that outdoor play is seen by practitioners purely as an opportunity for robust physical play to take place. Research suggests that children feel that it is only during outside play that they are able to make loud noises and run around. This is because this type of behaviour is restricted by practitioners when the child is inside (Featherstone and Bayley 2002; Neaum and Tallack, 2002). Tizzard et al., (1997) found in their study of outdoor play, that when outside, staff talked less to children and gave more negative instructions to children for example ‘don’t run, don’t climb’. Frost et al., (2001) also notes that adults discourage certain types of play indoors; for example, superhero play is seen as more acceptable outside because this is where the adult allows the child to run around. As suggested, for any play area to work, the responsibility of its success clearly lies with the staff in supporting the child appropriately, while

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allowing the child to make their own choices of play equipment and play themes (Bilton, 2001; Wood and Attfield, 2005).

Some investigators have found that, if there is a set time for outdoor play, there can be too many children in the area at once. Within a large setting if all children rushed out to play at once, this would result in an overcrowded environment (Dryden et al., 2005; Featherstone and Bayley, 2002; Bilton 2001). Neaum and Tallack (2002) argue that the advantage of allowing free flow play is that children learn they are able to release energy, make more noise outside and thus meet the adults’ request for being quieter whilst they are indoors. Studies have shown that where children have free access to play and no time limits are set, they are more relaxed, more settled and are less likely to rush outside as soon as the opportunity arises (Bilton 2001; Lindon, 2001).

Davis (2004) suggests that the outside environment should be used to promote education regardless of the weather. Bilton (2001) states that the female dominated environment of pre-school education presents its own problems, as women often dislike the outdoors, preferring to take part in activities within the pre-school room which are more sedentary. However, others argue that since the introduction of the EYFS, ‘early year’s teachers’ clearly understand how outdoor play is important to stimulate and aid promotion of learning (Thomson 2009; Waller, 2007). This has been influenced by policy and guidelines.

*Wherever possible, there should be access to an outdoor play area, and this is the expected norm for providers. In provision where outdoor space cannot be provided, outings should be planned and taken on a daily basis (unless circumstances make this inappropriate, for example unsafe weather conditions.*

(DCSF, 2008, p.35)

The resources of the outdoor environment varies from provision to provision, however to develop an inclusive enabling outdoor environment, practitioners should be imaginative (Lindon 2001). Neaum and Tallack (2002) state the outdoor environment should include large and small apparatus, have room for ring games, balls, hoops, balancing beams, barrels and crates. It should also differentiate for children of all abilities by offering materials at different heights and complexity. (Neaum and Tallack 2002; Lindon 2001). MacLeod-Brudenell (2004) suggests that MacMillan’s ideas have been carried forward and adapted. He states that large play equipment including tyres, climbing frames and the installation of all year round play surfaces has enhanced play for children, and this is something that echoes MacMillan’s early ideas. Lindon (2001) suggests good practice is to incorporate obstacles, create differing levels and textured surfaces, provide a range of outdoor games, and include wheeled toys and den making materials. Neaum and Tallack (2002) remind that within the UK, consideration has to be given to the climate; therefore many outside areas now incorporate covered outdoor space and shaded areas. Featherstone (2007) sums up good practice ideas by adding that animals, mini beasts, writing, drawing, role play, and art should all be incorporated into the design of the garden.

In summary, outdoor play is seen as a good thing for children, to help promote learning and enable them to experience the environment around them. The challenge for practitioners is to allow children to design and implement their own ideas to ensure they experience it positively.
Methodology

Prior to undertaking my research I considered the ethics as laid down by Plymouth University and received acceptance from the University to undertake my planned research using my chosen methodology. As consultation with children formed part of my research, parents and children were considered within my ethics. Firstly I wrote to request parental permission for the children to take part, giving them the option for their child to opt out of being observed (appendix 1). I also gave them my contact information so they could seek further information about my study to ensure they made an informed choice. Within the child’s consultation form I gave the children the choice of leaving at any time. I used stickers to encourage the children to take part and this worked well. The children were keen to take part to get a sticker. In order to include all children I gave stickers to any child who came up to the table. Some children were keen to get a sticker and gave me their own designed work instead of waiting to take part in the small group consultation (appendix 2).

Firstly, to guide the questions and define the research study a literature review was undertaken to set the scene for my study. It was important that the literature review was current and comprehensive as this helped to ‘refine the broad topic area of interest’ (Blatchford and Blatchford, 2001, p18). The items chosen for my literature review were considered carefully, and chosen for their relevance, ensuring the information was up to date and reliable, as Bell (2001), suggests these are important considerations. I then designed my methods for collating my primary research.

The methods chosen to gather my primary research focused upon four pre-school settings. Each setting was invited to take part in my research project, for this they signed consent forms. The settings are not named. For research purposes each setting was referred to by the numbers one, two, three or four and the data collected numbered accordingly; this ensured their anonymity. Using four different settings ensured a large amount of qualitative data was collected. This, as Hucker (2001) suggests, helps to back up research and enable firm conclusions to be drawn relating to the literature review. I also visited each setting twice at weekly intervals on the same day to ensure I was working with the same children and members of staff on each occasion.

Reliability of data is one area that was carefully considered. The research needed to fully reflect current practice so I had to ensure that I did not influence the adults or children as they used the outside play area. Green (2000) and Hucker (2001) both agree that collating reliable data is difficult for a researcher, but this can be overcome by carefully choosing methods to obtain reliable data. Therefore, my methods included observations of children, consultation with children, questionnaires and interviews with managers and taking general field notes.

Questionnaires were the main source of gathering data. As Willan (2004a) suggests, it can be difficult to rely on the completion and the return of questionnaires. Therefore, the questionnaires designed for the purpose of this research were delivered face to face so that I could record the answers as I asked the questions. This was to encourage full participation from all members of staff. However, it should also be noted that there was a danger that I could lead the questions, or that a member of staff could give me an answer they felt I wished to hear (Bell, 2001; Blatchford and Blatchford, 2001). However, I felt that as Green (2000) argues, that by being in control of the questions, this was the best option, as this enabled me to get a clearer insight and understanding of the replies given. To encourage open and honest answers I advised all...
practitioners that questionnaires would be anonymous and that they would not be identifiable to anyone. As Green (2000) states, this is a good way of encouraging people to complete surveys, especially if there are sensitive views to be sought. I did however bear in mind that asking face to face questions did not give total anonymity to the person. My ethical approach to cover this was to ensure that all participants understood that they could withdraw their participation at anytime.

The design of the questionnaire was carefully considered and I piloted some with family and friends to ensure they were not too time consuming, the questions were not too difficult and that the questions were open ended (Bell, 2001; McGee-Brown, 1995)

The interviews I undertook were very useful in providing information to show the adults’ feelings. However, it was evident as my results show that sometimes one person would contradict another person in the setting. This could indicate that staff were saying to me what they felt I wanted to hear. If I undertook this research again, I would ask some members of staff to give a short interview to fully explore their views and this would take place at a time when other people could not hear their responses.

I decided not to use a tick chart to record the equipment set up at each setting and opted to include a list at the bottom of my field notes instead. I felt this would help me to link my findings more easily. These findings were further supported by observations of outside play, interactions between children and staff and children’s play themes which I recorded on pre-made observation sheets. As Clark and Moss (2005) and McGee-Brown (1995) all state, by watching children in their natural play we get a clearer record of what is currently taking place in their environment. As Willan (2004b) suggests, the narrative style of my observations, provided ongoing ‘field notes’ (p94) which also gave me a natural record of the child’s interests. However, Bell (2001) states that observation is not an easy option, as it is open to misinterpretation from the observer, as I may have only seen what I wanted to see. As far as possible I tried to ensure that my observations were unbiased, factual and appropriate for the reason of research. As MacLeod-Brudenell (2004) discusses, if a researcher fails to remain unbiased the research is not factual, however it should be noted that what one person observes, another can see quite differently.

All of the methods used, the interviewing of practitioners and managers, gathering evidence from planning, consultation with children and undertaking observations of play helped to obtain triangulation of results. Researchers suggest that using a number of different methods ensures data is relevant and gives triangulation of information, thus giving a reliable result (Blatchford and Blatchford, 2001; McGee-Brown, 1995).

I asked the children verbally what they liked to play with and this was recorded. I then asked them to draw what they liked to play with outside. This enabled me to draw comparisons between what the children said and what they drew, with what was actually in place and set up by the adults. As McGee-Brown (1995) reminds us, getting children involved is difficult as they may ‘simply not respond’ (pg.20). Therefore I backed my consultation with the observations I undertook. This helped to show what the children actually played with when outside.
Findings

How have the play areas been designed?

For the groups in rented accommodation the physical area was predetermined by the design of the premises. The designs of some play areas have involved committee members, staff and architects. Consideration of cost played a factor when deciding what could be included in the play area. Neighbouring boundaries are noted for restricting what can be designed or changed within the play area.

Were children consulted over the design?

None of the settings had undertaken any verbal consultation with the children. For one setting, consultation through observation of play had taken place. This was over recent improvements to their play area. Another setting highlighted their plans for a new garden area, and they will consult with the children about this.

What does the area look like?

All settings were fully secure and fenced off. Three settings had doors which led from the play room to large outdoor play areas; this easily allowed free flow play to take place. One setting had a small yard area which could only be accessed via the kitchen, which means the children have to be accompanied by an adult when going outside. The play surfaces differed, one setting had concrete, one had a safety play surface only, one was a mixture of concrete and safety area, and the last had a mixture of grass, paths, paving, decking, and garden areas. The following chart shows the similarities of resources across the four settings.

![Chart 1. Similarities in resources across the four settings](chart.png)
Does outside play take place every day?

Within two settings outside play takes place on a daily basis. Restrictions due to drainage problems and slippery surfaces prevented this from happening at the other two. One setting overcomes this by undertaking regular visits to the park and have provided forest school training for one member of staff, which will enable them to use the local woods on a regular basis.

Who plans play in the outside area?

One approach to planning was to ensure that all six learning areas of EYFS (2008) were set up outside. The responsibility of this happening falls on the supervisor on duty. Two settings stated they use observations to inform their planning; this helps them to look at children’s play themes and plan accordingly.

How do children access outside play?

Free flow open access play takes place in one setting. One setting reports that they use free flow play; however observation of this setting showed how free flow was restricted by the adults when the children all went out in one group. Another setting operates an open door policy, to allow free flow play, but this is restricted by the supervisor on duty and is subject to weather conditions. This was backed by practitioners who noted that while free flow play takes place, this can be restricted by the weather, the availability of staff, or the attitude of staff members on duty. For the final setting no free flow play takes place as the children have to access outside via the kitchen.

![Chart 2. The views of practitioners on how children like to access outside play](image)

Staff in the outside play area

All settings met the ratio requirement of 1:8, as required for the age group 3-5 years. Where free flow access took place staff negotiated with each other to ask for help as children moved in and out during free flow play. Some staff took more of a supervisory role of watching play, supporting children who had fallen over and ensuring safety of children. In one setting the staff
supervised, observed and supported play, they did this by helping the children to build on themes and encouraging quieter children to interact.

Chart 3. What children say they like to play with and what adults set out for children to play with

Chart 4. What children drew to indicate what they liked playing with
Discussion and analysis

In the 1970’s not much thought was given to the outdoor play environment (Waller, 2007; Dryden et al., 2005). This is evident within one setting which was set up in 1973. This setting has a small yard accessed via a kitchen and for this reason cannot not allow free flow play. In comparison the other settings were able to offer free flow play. Their outside areas also had some safety surfaces, some shaded areas and rooms which were joined to the outside play area, this could indicate that current practice in design considers the outside environment as important. As MacLeod-Brudenell (2004) indicates, MacMillan’s early ideas are often used in the current design of pre-school provision. This was evident within one setting as it echoed MacMillan’s ideas where the playrooms led to verandas and outside play areas.
No verbal consultation had taken place with any children over the design of the play area in any setting. It was often the pre-school committee, staff or an architect who designed the area. Consultation with parents was not undertaken either; except for those on the committee. Thomson (2009), Wood and Attfield (2005) and Lewis (1998) state it is important when designing a play area to consult with parents. However, as only a limited number of parents get involved with the committee this is not a full consultation. It was worth noting that staff in one setting were not consulted either over a redesign of their area. Lindon (2007), Featherstone and Bayley (2002) and Bilton (2001) suggest it is not easy to design a play area and that by consulting with children and parents about the design of the outside area, the practitioner will achieve a better environment for the child. One has to consider that it must be even harder to design a successful area when children and staff who use the area daily are not fully consulted.

Each setting follows the welfare requirements of the EYFS (2008) by keeping to the correct adult child ratio within the outside play area. Three settings also meet the requirements of Featherstone and Bayley (2002) and Bilton (2001) who state that easy access from the playroom to the outside play area enables free flow play to take place. It should be noted that whilst the design of the three settings allow free flow access this does not always take place. Two settings face problems undertaking outside play on a daily basis due to problems with weather and safety issues. One overcomes this by arranging trips or visits out on a regular basis and the second by restricting play in the summer months to cooler times of the day. It is evident that outside play does not take place in severe weather conditions. One setting uses all in one weather suits, to support all year round play, however the children do not like to wear them as they are not easy to put on.

Bilton (2001) believes that children love the outdoors. One practitioner partially agreed with this statement by saying that some children are always outside. Some children indicated that they enjoyed being outdoors, with one child saying that they liked to play with rain and another that they liked to put their robot in the sand and water outside (appendix 3). However, all other findings argue against Bilton’s statement. I observed how two girls hovered by the play room door wanting to go back inside and did not join in with the outside play activities. This was backed by two other children, one who told me ‘I like it inside not outside’ and when asked why, she said ‘I don’t like the rain’ and the other who said ‘it’s too wet’. Chart 2, confirms that practitioners believe that some children like inside play more than outside. One Manager also said that the children are not made to go out and that they can choose to stay in, as some children do not like the cold. Practitioners also told me that some children need encouragement to go out, how gender appears to be an issue because girls access outside less than boys and that weather, especially the cold, affects the way children feel about going outside. It was also noted that girls will want to play outside more when it is warmer. In addition to this, children who are quiet or shy or find social interaction difficult also find going outside a difficult experience, so in order to go outside they need adult support. All of these ideas combined, therefore, confirm what Blatchford (1989) believes, that some children do not enjoy going outside. To determine exactly how social interaction, gender and weather conditions affect how children access outside play, further research would need to be undertaken.

As I did not observe children inside the setting, I was unable to witness if, as Bilton (2001) suggests, that where the play area is inadequately resourced children abandon indoor play for the outside play area. However, my outside observations and consultation with children, contradicts
with this argument as it appears that not all children choose to go outside. I witnessed, how when a group of children were all taken out at once, with only bikes to play on, a few of the children hovered around the door indicating that they wanted to go back in. I believe that as some children do not appear to like the outdoor environment they would not abandon the indoor environment, as this is where they like to play most. This also highlights that by having free flow play, that unless the children are being monitored to see who goes out, some children may never go out to play.

Another issue raised by one setting is how some girls choose to stay inside to access the computers instead of going outside. This setting also noted how the boys dominate the computers and as the boys go out to play, the girls take their chance to play on the computer. This could add another dimension to Clements (2004) idea that some children choose ICT rather than going outside and would warrant further research in this area.

It is also worth noting that where free flow play took place all day, the children were also able to get their coats easily, which allowed free choice and access to the outside area as they wanted. When the door was first opened a large cohort of boys rushed out, however as the morning progressed the entry and exit became calmer. This supports what Bilton (2001) and Lindon (2001) believe that where there are no time limits to outside play, the way in which the child accesses outside play is relaxed. In one setting children’s coats are kept outside the play room by the main entrance, therefore children needed adult support to get their coats. I observed during a 30 minute restricted outdoor play session, that by the time two children had gone through the process of getting help with their coats it was too late for them to go out, as the children outside were being asked to come in. This shows how restrictions created by adults affect the way children can access the outdoors.

My research also highlighted how a group of children who all came out together found their play area overcrowded by this process. Whilst their coats were easy to access, the fact that the children came out as a large group meant that all the children needed support at the same time. Therefore, some children were struggling to get coats on and those who were ready first were left unsupported and struggling to untangle the bikes that they wanted to play with. The staff had unintentionally overcrowded the environment by choosing to access play in this way. This confirms the ideas of Dryden et al., (2005), Featherstone and Bayley (2002) and Bilton (2001) that overcrowding hinders children’s play, as there is not enough space or resources available.

I witnessed how some practitioners took on a supervisory role, one of watching play and dealing with arguments. Blatchford (1989) suggests that when this happens the child’s play is less imaginative. I agree with this by drawing the following comparisons on observations of play I witnessed within the groups. I noted how play was more imaginative where the adults interacted and supported the children’s ideas. Where staff stood and watched play there was less staff interaction with children taking place and less interaction between the children themselves. This could confirm what Tizzard et al., (1997) believe, and that staff interact less when supporting children in the outside play area. This is further supported by the Manager who told me that staff need guidance on how to interact with children when outside. As chart 6 indicates, staff did not appear to use more negative remarks when outside. This is in contrast to Tizzard’s et al., (1997) belief that they do.
Staff attitude was a theme that ran throughout my findings. One Manager noted how her staff needed encouragement to go outside and help and guidance on how to interact with children once there. This was also confirmed by one practitioner in the same setting who reported that outside play took place depending upon the ‘staff member on duty’. Other practitioners noted that their colleagues used weather as a barrier to going outside. This was confirmed by the Manager who stated staff ‘put up barriers to the weather, when it is cold and wet, and they appear to want to sit down at a table to do activities inside’. As noted by Dryden et al., (2005) weather and preference for indoor activities are both excuses that practitioners use to not access the outdoor area. These barriers also stop children accessing outside play.

However when considering the above findings, one must consider how other findings contradict the above. Chart 5 indicates that all but two staff members said they had no preference to working inside or outside. One practitioner stated she likes to support indoor play only, ‘because of the weather – I don’t like the cold, but warmer weather I will come out’. Others indicated their preference for only supporting outdoor play. Therefore, to either agree or disagree with Bilton (2001), that women dislike the outdoors, further research would need to be undertaken to ascertain if the staff that indicated that they liked outside play did actually go outside. It could be that as their colleagues point out, not all staff support and promote outside play as well as they think.

Where observations were used to inform planning, I noted how the adults observed and supervised play and then would interact with the children to extend and support the play. For example, the children were setting up a tea party; the adult suggested they get a cloth for the table; the children then extended on from this and brought out chairs and tables. Neaum and Tallack (2002) and Bilton (2001) both state that observation and interaction with children enables them to get more out of play. Where the children were left to their own devices of riding bikes and running around there was less child and adult interaction and consequently play was less imaginative.

The play for one setting is enhanced by the predetermined rustic design of their rented play room and outside area. Two children took much delight in playing with a drain cover, looking into the hole of the drain cover, shouting ‘hello, hello’. Another child used an old drain pipe in the neighbouring garden wall to stick his brush in the pipe, sit on a crate and pretend to row with his oar. Adults need to witness this type of play to realise the value of these objects. This confirms what Lindon (2007) and Cullen (1993) believe that adults may remove items like drains as they do not deem them suitable for a play area.

An old cardboard box also formed a large part of entertainment for one group of children who were engrossed in imaginative monster play. Where this imaginative play took play, I witnessed the children had access to crates, planks of wood, metal gratings, boxes, a static boat, den making material and brushes. Wood and Attfield (2005) highlight that these objects support children’s play well. Interestingly, several of the children from the setting where all of these objects were available reported that they play with nothing. This could be because they are making their own choices to play with available resources, ones which they use regularly, for example the child who went to get a brush to sweep up sand, then used the brush, an old pipe and a crate as a boat.

Stephenson (2002) argues that outdoor play is seen by practitioners purely as an opportunity for robust physical play to take place. One practitioner indicated that ‘children need to let off steam’,
this could support the argument that it is more acceptable for children to run around outside. My consultation with children shows that they state they enjoy running around (Appendix 4) and playing with friends (Chart 4). Bikes are used by all settings, the reason for this is to develop gross motor skills, they are used as free choice play in a cordoned off area and ‘to help keep the children warm’. This could indicate that gross motor skills are promoted and used as the main point of outdoor play. One child who talked a lot about bikes told me ‘we always don’t play bikes at pre-school’. The Manager of this child’s setting had already told me how she felt that getting the bikes out was ‘a cop out’ as they are used as an easy thing to do and it does not foster imaginative play.

This research has highlighted how practitioners may try to overcome any negative discrepancy in design or facility. For example the group who cannot access outdoor play plan trips and are training a member of staff in forest school delivery. For the setting which has no shade and is boggy for most of the winter months, gross motor skills are supported by large apparatus being used in the play room and in the summer months play is restricted to the coolest part of the day. For the setting which has the smallest outside play area, careful trips are planned and they have recently been graded Outstanding by Ofsted. Therefore, Bilton (2001) in reporting that space can be too big, or too small does not allow for the fact that some practitioners can be creative in making their outdoor area work.

**Conclusion**

One strength of this research was in the design of using face to face questionnaires which enabled me to control the data I sought. This was further supported by my field notes. By asking the staff questions and recording their answers on the questionnaire, it ensured that I got enough data back; in one setting I left two questionnaires for staff to fill out and only one was returned. The consultation with children was useful in understanding what children’s views are of what they like to play with. The amount of data collected overall shows that my methods were robust, however this was also a weakness as I had more data than I needed for a small scale research projects, so had to spend a long time considering what was relevant and what was not. The other weakness is that by choosing four settings, I tried to achieve too much in a short period of time, which led to me feeling under pressure during the research period.

This study has also made me consider further research I could undertake. If I were to undertake this research study again I would turn it into a longitudinal study over the seasons, this would give me rounded data of how outdoor play is accessed throughout the year for each setting. I would also include interviews with architects and committee members to see how their vision has led the design, and how they ensured they had an understanding of children in the early years. Another idea would be to consider the effects of the weather on children to see if this changes how they choose to access outdoor play. I would also be interested in researching further the use of computers by boys and girls. It seems a very interesting concept that boys take precedence in using the computer and then girls appear to forfeit their outdoor play to get a chance to use the computer when the boys go outside.

I feel I could have used the consultation with children more effectively. To further support research I could have taken pictures of toys within the setting and shown these to the children so they could point to objects they like playing with. I would then have set up the area with the
choices made by the children and observed if this encouraged more children, particularly girls to go outside.

I have learned much from this research project, particularly that timing and organisation is crucial in making research successful. I have learned that children play in the environment they are given, but where this is supported by resources and sensitive adult support, their play becomes more imaginative and engaged for a longer period of time, which is reflected in their speech and behaviour. I found that children have their own clear thoughts and that adults need to listen to the child to enable them to have some say in their environment.

Overall, in conclusion, my findings show that it is evident that all four settings are aware of the requirement for daily outside play as laid down under the Early Years Foundation Stage. Some practitioners use the outside to allow children to run around in order to support the child’s gross motor development, by using large equipment and bikes. Outdoor play can be difficult to achieve for some settings, this is due to the design of the environment, the weather and lastly attitudes of practitioners, some of whom do not appear to want to go outside. My findings indicate that most staff say they like supporting outside play; however what practitioners report of their colleagues contradicts this information.

All settings state they undertake free flow play. However, it is evident that free flow play is interpreted in different ways. Settings state they achieve free flow by either allowing full all day access, or having free flow at restricted times, times set by the adult and this is often dependent upon weather conditions and staff attitudes. Some adults set up the environment for children by supplying resources they consider the children want to play with and others by undertaking observations and then resourcing the area accordingly. Where the latter takes place it is evident that while the children use their gross motor skills by running around, they also engage with each other in imaginative outdoor play. Therefore, it can be argued that while children will engage with whatever the adult supplies, their learning is further supported where practitioners set up the environment based around the children’s interests. Also where adults allow children to access indoor and outside play at the same time, the children then add to their own environment by bringing out items they want to add to their play.

Not all children appear to access, or want to access, the outdoor play area, with weather, and confidence being noted as reasons for this. It is important for practitioners to consider the child as an individual whilst supporting their interests and encouraging the child to access the outdoor environment. One area I feel is overlooked by practitioners, is that of consultation with children. When consultation takes place, verbally or through observations, it will ensure that children have their own interests promoted within their environment, thus fostering their interest in the outdoor area.

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Appendices for this report can be viewed in the Supplementary Files link, located in the Reading Tools list in the window adjacent to this article.