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Student Number: 40396602	
Module Title: Long Placement	Module Code: PAI3097
Tutor's Name: Debbie Lisle	Word Count: 6479

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### **Next Steps for Outdoor Learning in Northern Ireland**

Outdoor learning has many benefits for children, yet it remains marginalised by the Northern Irish Department for Education. Despite strong evidence, the implementation of Outdoor Learning has not materialised for most children across Northern Ireland; this report investigates why implementation is so weak. It uses literature, thematic analysis of interviews and policy analysis to identify and explain structural, cultural and political barriers. Understanding these barriers will allow evidence-based policy recommendations to be made, specific to a Northern Irish context. This report initially reviews literature, before presenting the methods used to conduct and analyse some semi-structured elite interviews. It discusses relevant policy alongside the findings of the interviews and lastly draws conclusions and makes recommendations.

According to Harvey (2012: p.15), 'Outdoor learning is an active, experiential approach to learning, that involves being outdoors as a central part of the experience. It seeks to use the outdoor environment as a vehicle for fostering a range of positive attitudes and actions towards risk, health, community and sustainability.' Therefore, the report uses Place-based education as its theoretical framework as PBE emphasises how children are affected by the places around them while noting how places are affected by people, and how community is so important to the world around it (Gruenewald, 2014, p.144). It provides student-led learning that builds knowledge and empathy (Smith, 2002, p.593).

Research strongly suggests that being outside is good for humans, especially children. Not only that, encouraging children outside is good for the environment itself. Nature Deficit Disorder describes 'human costs of alienation from nature' (Louv, 2019: n.p.). Its 'symptoms' are agreed upon by the literature; more people than ever before are suffering from obesity (Louv, 2019: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p.5; NI Direct, 2025: n.p.; Oberle et al., 2021: p.1.), mental illness (Louv, 2019: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p. 6; Feng et al., 2025: n.p.; Edmond, 2025: n.p.; Mind, 2025: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: pp.451-452), attention deficit and diminished senses. There are many reasons for its occurrence. Significant amounts of literature blame technology (Louv, 2019: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p.4; Edmond, 2025: n.p.; NI Direct, 2025: n.p.; Glanville, 2025: p.56) for giving children reason to spend all their time inside. Furthermore, the literature consistently identifies perceived danger outside as a reason for nature deficit. Over cautious parenting (Louv, 2019: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p.13; Edmond, 2025: n.p.) and less accessible open green spaces (Louv, 2019: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p.13; McCormick, 2025: p.17) are leading to children adopting sedentary lifestyles (Feng et al., 2025: n.p.; Oberle et al., 2021: p.251). This in turn is reducing children's sense of stewardship over the natural world, as they lack regular interaction with it, and so take less responsibility over their environment. (Louv, 2019: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p.17; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Crowfoot, 2025: n.p.). However, the solutions outlined in the literature are incredibly simple and low-cost; increase children's time outdoors. This report will examine the possible solutions highlighting how children can reap many benefits from such a readily available resource.

## **Benefits of Outdoor Learning**

There is broad consensus that outdoor learning improves children's physical health and mental wellbeing. Children exercise more imaginatively (Moss, 2012: p. 8; NI Direct, 2025: n.p.; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: p.452; Waite et al., 2016: p.79; McCormick, 2025: p.15), and increase their vitamin D uptake (Feng et al., 2025: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p5) by being outside, enhancing their mental health (Moss, 2012: p.8; Feng et al., 2025: n.p., Mind, 2025: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: p.452; Waite et al., 2016: p.77; McCormick, 2025: p. 15). Although much evidence derives from small-scale studies, the general agreement substantiates the findings.

Researchers widely acknowledge that outdoor learning also helps build social skills and emotional health (Oberle et al., 2021: 251) by encouraging healthy risk taking (Moss, 2012: p. 13; Glanville 2025: p.64; McCormick, 2025: p.25), teamwork (NI Direct, 2025: n.p.; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Mind, 2025: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: p.458; Molyneux, et al. 2022: p.6; Waite et al., 2016: p.70; McCormick, 2025: p.2) as well as reflection (Murdoch, 2025a: n.p.; Mind, 2025: n.p.; Molyneux et al. 2022: p. 5; Muafiah et al. 2021: p.6) and problem solving (McCormick, 2025: p.10; Molyneux et al. 2022: p.6; Wang et al. 2025: p.452). This helps combat behavioural problems (Moss, 2012: p.4; Wang et al. 2025: p.452; Molyneux et al. 2022: p.9). A minority of literature shows these social and emotional skills are especially notable in children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), especially Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Moss, 2012: p.8; Oberle et al., 2021: p.1; Glanville, 2025: p.21), presenting a promising area for further research to happen, especially as part of larger studies.

In the classroom, learning engagement is improved by outdoor learning. Literature widely concurs that concentration, self-discipline and resilience in the classroom are improved by outdoor learning (Moss, 2012: p.9; NI Direct, 2025: n.p.; Murdoch, 2025a: n.p.; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: p.452, Oberle et al., 2021: p.261; Glanville, 2025: p.74; Muafiah et al., 2021: p.7; Waite et al., 2016: p.9; McCormick, 2025: p.14). This is because outdoor learning provides a sense of accomplishment (Wang et al. 2025: p.457) without high levels of stress (Glanville, 2025: p.65; Mind, 2025: n.p.). Some evidence also points to improved attainment and enhanced learning (Waite et al., 2016: p.9; Oberle et al., 2021: p.261; McCormick, 2025: p.2; Price, 2015; Lewis, 2025: n.p.), however these studies note difficulties in proving causal links. Overall, the literature strongly supports implementing outdoor learning within schools.

## **Sustainability**

Many studies highlight that outdoor learning increases children's sense of environmental stewardship and civic responsibility. Children get to know their neighbourhood and community due to place-based learning, therefore they feel pride in place (Moss, 2012: p.11; NI Direct, 2025: n.p.; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: p.452). One source even suggests that strengthened stewardship over place reduces consumerism. (Moss, 2012: p.10). More research would be necessary to establish causality between community and consumerism. Moreover, it is widely accepted in the literature that increased sense of community improves relationships between children as citizens, promoting social sustainability (McCormick, 2025: p.2; Muafiah et al. 2021: p.4; Molyneux et al. 2022: p.4; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.).

Furthermore, environmental responsibility is improved, as children learn to use its resources in a sustainable way. Significant quantities of literature point to environmental benefits (Moss, 2012: p.11; Murdoch, 2025a: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: p.452; Oberle et al., 2021: p.251; Muafiah et al., 2021: p.7; Waite et al., 2016: p.57; McCormick, 2025: p.13; Lewis, 2025: n.p.). It is notable that most studies aim to demonstrate environmental benefits explicitly, apart from the Natural Connections Demonstration Project, which uses a less assumption-driven approach. Further research with a more generalised approach is necessary to substantiate the Project's findings.

### **Barriers and Potential Solutions**

Only a minority of literature addresses the barriers to implementation. There is only one piece that examines outdoor learning from a Northern Irish perspective. First are structural barriers, such as inflexible school days (McCormick, 2025: p.15; Waite et al., 2016: p.54; Oberle et al., 2021: p.255; Edmond, 2025: n.p.) and lack of green spaces nearby (Moss, 2012: p.13; McCormick, 2025: p.17; Glanville, 2025; Oberle et al., 2021: p.255). Prominent attitudinal barriers are held by teachers, parents and communities. Often teachers lack confidence when it comes to outdoor learning, which is compounded by a lack of support from senior management (McCormick, 2025: p.17; Waite et al., 2016: p.49; Glanville, 2025: p.230; Oberle et al., 2021: p.255; Molyneux et al. 2022: p.11; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Moss, 2012: p.16). However, these qualitative studies of teachers often draw from self-selecting samples of only teachers interested in outdoor learning, hence studies are hard to generalise.

Literature also refers to parental attitudes being extremely risk adverse (Moss, 2012: p. 14; Edmond, 2025: n.p.) or unaware of the value of outdoor learning (Murdoch, 2025a: n.p.; Oberle et al. 2021: p.255). Importantly, there are very scant examples of parents' interviews, hence these views might be unrepresentative of the population, as found in the interviews. Lastly there are community attitudes such as 'stranger danger', too much traffic and fear of extreme weather (Oberle et al., 2021: p.255; Moss, 2012: p.15). Some suggest this is due to limited relationships between schools and their communities (Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Waite et al., 2016: p.56). Very little research is conducted in this area, and community attitudes will depend heavily on location, so Northern Irish specific studies would be necessary.

Only a few pieces of literature noted extra funding would be helpful, though none concluded it was necessary (McCormick, 2025: p. 17; Waite et al., 2016: p.71; Glanville, 2025: p.18; Oberle et al. 2021: p.255; Lewis, 2025: n.p.).

The literature overwhelmingly suggests further teacher training is necessary to implement outdoor learning in schools (Edmond, 2025: n.p.; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Wang et al. 2025: p.463, Molyneux et al. 2022: p.12; Glanville, 2025: p.60; Waite et al., 2016: p.52; McCormick, 2025: p.77). However, there are differing opinions as to who should provide the training. Some argue best practice is most usefully conveyed by local practitioners or schools to reflect the context of the area (McCormick, 2025: p.77; Waite et al. 2016: p.52). Others advocate for government-led programmes which require additional funding (Glanville, 2025: p.235; Oberle et al., 2021: p.261; Wang et al. 2025: p.463, Edmond, 2025: n.p.). Although more research states the latter, studies by McCormick (2025) and The Natural Connections Demonstration (Waite et al. 2016) are by far the largest completed as they involve multiple schools, and in McCormick's (2025) case the context of Northern Ireland.

However, it is unclear from the literature what policy change is necessary to implement more outdoor learning. Potential policy options are curriculum reform (McCormick, 2025: p.77; Murdoch, 2025a: n.p.), or government recognition of outdoor learning (Oberle et al., 2021: p.261; Molyneux et al. 2022: p.12). Another option is building time into the school day for outdoor learning (Oberle et al., 2021: p.262; Waite et al., 2016: p.86; McCormick, 2025: p.77). Either way systematic research to examine the barriers is needed to build policy that is useful (Waite et al., 2016: p.96; Oberle et al., 2021: p.262; Molyneux et al., 2022: p.12; Louv, 2019: n.p.).

In the absence of government guidance in Northern Ireland, community initiatives and support systems offer place-based learning (Edmond, 2025: n.p.; Murdoch, 2025b: n.p.; Mind, 2025: n.p.; Oberle et al., 2021: p.261; McCormick, 2025: p.77). This improves children's access to public spaces and connects them to local history and biodiversity, without using the government's limited resources. This approach also recognises the cultural differences between areas, recognising it is difficult in urban areas where communities are more socially fragmented.

## **Methodology**

From the literature, it is clear that outdoor learning is beneficial to children, while there are many barriers to its implementation. These barriers need to be researched more carefully to understand them on a more local scale. Moreover, by gaining a better understanding of the barriers, more specific solutions can be offered, as the literature fails to describe the best course of action. By completing more large-scale studies such as the Natural Connections Demonstration, in Northern Ireland, there will be more understanding of solutions to allow every child in Northern Ireland to reap the benefits discussed. However, due to the resource constraints of this study, a smaller scale qualitative approach was undertaken. Purposeful sampling of participants was conducted, due to their expertise in outdoor learning in a Northern Irish context. Three semi-structured interviews were completed; gaining a well-rounded insight into their range of backgrounds: academic, non-governmental organisation, and an outdoor education body.

All were asked questions based on key themes. This ensured consistency across interviews while respecting each participant's specific expertise. The interview themes were:

1. The benefits of outdoor learning
2. Examples of outdoor provisions
3. Barrier to further implementations of outdoor learning
4. The roles of government in outdoor learning

The interviews were on average three quarters of an hour, and were all conducted online in October 2025. Recordings of the interviews were taken to produce verbatim transcripts. Ethical approval was granted by Queen's University Belfast, and all participants received an information sheet and provided informed consent. They all retained the right to remove their contributions at any time. These themes were further developed once thematic analysis took place to make them more specific. All interviews have been provided with pseudonyms.

A mixture of grounded theory and thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. First, a systematic approach was taken, using the interview themes to guide the inductive coding (Charmaz, 2006: p.49). This allowed for codes to develop naturally, helping to manage researcher bias. Reflexive notes were taken to critically examine assumptions and expectations. Each transcript was analysed line by line to reflect the words

and meanings of each participant while generating the initial codes. Furthermore, the codes were grounded closely in the participants' own language to reflect their perspective. The reflective process strengthened the transparency and credibility of the analytical process and was supported by academic supervision. Second, axial coding was used to make sense of all the codes, recognising specific themes, and the relationships between different groups of codes (Delve, Ho & Limpaecher, 2025). This approach highlighted the main issues explored during each interview without disregarding the context of each interview by looking at causation within the themes of the interview. Hence, six themes were developed that represent the participants' views and experiences with outdoor learning. However, Axial coding was found to be limiting. By trying to fit the codes into six distinct categories, the findings became convoluted, and so while axial coding was useful for organising thoughts, a more concise four themes were identified.

During the completion of the report, the committee for Education, in partnership with Northern Ireland Forest School Association, debated a motion entitled 'Curriculum Mainstreaming and Strategy for Outdoor Learning in Schools'. Further policy analysis was completed, using the verbatim transcript of the Plenary Hearing which happened on 24th November 2025. Similar themes can be found from the Assembly. Moreover, it provides unique insight into the official governmental position, the views of the Education Minister and the opinions of key policymakers across the parties of Northern Ireland.

The researcher is aware of limitations within the study. The small sample size, while appropriate for elite interviews, limits the generalisability of the results. Moreover, potential bias may have occurred due the participants' positive predisposition towards outdoor learning. Additionally, time constraints caused all interviews to happen within a week, while may have restricted any follow-up information. However, despite these limitations, combining the interview outcomes with the policy analysis enhances the validity of the conclusions.

### **The Northern Irish Context**

The literature on outdoor learning describes many benefits, however it was important to the study that these benefits can be evidenced in a Northern Irish context. The interviewees were asked along the lines of - 'what benefits have you observed in your job?'; the sub- themes were found inductively and later compared to the benefits discussed in the literature review, which showed notable agreement.

Interestingly, those who came from an educational background were more inclined to discuss physical health when asked the benefits of the outdoors, however those who came from an environmental background and began working with children tended to discuss the positives effects on mental health and wellbeing. This is likely due to educators relating to the curriculum more, whereas environmental specialists are more knowledgeable about the holistic benefits of the outdoors. Similarly, all three noted the improvements in relationships that come with being outdoors, however only those from an environmental background used that to draw conclusions regarding anxiety reduction. This shows the co-dependency between being sociable and mental wellbeing is noticeable in children, not only theory. Social skill development was an area of agreement, as two participants spoke about the outdoors being a useful location for learning how to express reasoned opinions and conflict resolution skills. All noted increased engagement and the benefits that brought back to the classroom; only one mentioned this regarding children with SEND, noting the inclusion of children with SEND often improved their engagement.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quote from Dave</b>	<b>Quote from Fred</b>	<b>Quote from Jerry</b>
<b>Health and wellbeing</b>	'It's through stories and play that we... become energised'	'Encourages physical activity... therefore physical health'. 'Positive benefits... mental health and wellbeing, reduces stress'.	'Confidence and self-esteem', 'patience and concentration', 'they're relaxed, they're comfortable, they're at ease'.
<b>Social Skills and Emotional Intelligence</b>	'It's about growing relationships of care and curiosity'	'Bring these different groups of people together'	'They've fallen out with somebody... that's for them to reflect on... and do better teamwork in the future'.
<b>Children with SEND and Inclusion</b>	N/A	N/A	'They don't struggle as much', 'often more at ease', 'happier to engage'.
<b>Learning Engagement</b>	'The intense focus... that persistence and the skills taught... to create a spark' (referring to using a flint and steel, and as a metaphor)	'Positive impact on understanding and on retention'. 'Advantages in terms of motivation'.	'As long as they're engaged, they take part, they're achieving... that's been shown to have a tremendous effect back in the classroom as well'.

The Assembly debate included comments on all the sub-themes gathered from the elite interviews. All nine speakers mentioned the benefit of outdoor learning on skills and learning development - in line with what the interviewees said about learning engagement, social skill and emotional intelligence. It was also noted in the debate the benefit outdoor learning has on children with SEND. Notably, both the proposition and opposition recognised the benefits of outdoor learning and held it in high regard. At no point was it suggested that Northern Ireland should not implement outdoor learning across all school ages; the debate centred on whether this should be a priority in the education system.

### **Environment and Sustainability**

The participants' reflections aligned with the literature on environmental benefits of outdoor learning. They were asked a question which allowed them to reflect on sustainability and environmental awareness. Some noted increased civic responsibility, as children are seen to promote environmentally friendly habits to friends and family, practicing environmental advocacy. Moreover, one participant directly referred to Place-based education - unprompted by the interviewer- proving the framework on which this report is based is employable in practice. All participants implied the child's ability to understand each

other and the world around them is closely linked to their communication skills. This was clear as children were seen, to promote outdoor play to their parents and peers. It is therefore useful to allow children to understand 'the basic vocabulary of the world around us', as it creates people who care and advocate for the environment.

<b><u>Theme</u></b>	<b>Quote from Dave</b>	<b>Quote from Fred</b>	<b>Quote from Jerry</b>
<b>Civic Responsibility</b>	'...wellbeing as people..., is so interdependent to the wellbeing of the rivers... the land... the soil... the biodiversity'. 'Schools in that wider community... is really important.'	'... meet each other... joint lessons together... stereotypes that you may have about them will sort of, lessen, or hopefully even, disappear'.	'Kids are engaged from an early age they will continue to respect the environment'.
<b>The Planet</b>	'...we've lost the basic vocabulary and literacy of understanding the world around us'.	'Help in terms of combating... overconsumption'.	'Go out for walks and go orienteering... Birdwatching... it's an addiction'.

Regarding sustainability, the Department of Education expects all schools to have a Sustainability Lead and a Climate Action Plan in place by 2025 (NEU, 2024), whose job is to ensure energy-efficiency in the building and that children are educated on biodiversity, climate issues and green career options. This plan comes off the back of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the Education Agency (EA) engaging with young people who asked for more climate content and green jobs be taught in schools (NIE, 2023).

Departmental plans were backed by politicians in the plenary hearing, who recognised the usefulness that outdoor learning has on promoting sustainability between peers. With its place-based approach, politicians recognised outdoor learning increases the relationship between children and place, and also the relationship between peers. One speaker reflected on his children's school where 'new friendships form as children work together in different environments, building... a sense of belonging in their community' (Middleton, 2025: p.17). This reflects Dave, and their emphasis on relationship building to support sustainable outdoor learning provisions.

### **Structural Barriers**

The literature review provides limited guidance on implementing outdoor learning more widely, and so it was valuable to understand participants' perspectives. They were asked what needed to happen so their project could be offered to every child in Northern Ireland. Their different understanding of government procedure was notable.

All participants thought further implementation was a good thing and wanted to see more. Two of the three participants noted that more funding and policy development was needed, especially when regarding urbanised areas. But where one participant pushed really

hard for outdoor learning to be on the curriculum for recognition and examples of best practice, another did not agree, noting the curriculum contains content not pedagogy. The policy development Fred wanted to see was to do with inspection, which are currently not mandatory, hence schools cannot be held accountable for the amount of outdoor learning it uses, as the effects of outdoor learning cannot be confirmed from test results. Both participants used examples from the rest of the UK to corroborate their policy, connecting roles out of Northern Ireland and the government barriers within it. All participants confirmed teacher training needs to improve if we want to make the most difference without outdoor learning, and that was the policy change most advocated for.

However, one participant was not interested in government action, rather community and charity action. It was implied that they expected the government would remain inactive and so, it was much more important what communities do for each other. To this end the local roles discussed were community based, regarding the trust they built between environmental projects and local schools. Similarly, another participant spoke about the quality of their community work and wished for appreciation from the government to substantiate the work they do.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quote from Dave</b>	<b>Quote from Fred</b>	<b>Quote from Jerry</b>
<b>Financial Barriers</b>	N/A	'Provide funding... to actually develop those spaces'. (speaking about green spaces in inner-city areas).	'Getting the other 25% is hard... developing... Stuff... we can't afford to do it'. (with regards to charity funding).
<b>Governmental/ Policy Barriers</b>	'... this stuff about conserving energy... turning the lights off... the children don't know why anymore'. (Quoting a primary school teacher)	'Policy development... providing the support and the implementation of it [outdoor learning]'.	'The lack of acknowledgement and appreciation by government.' 'It's not written directly into the curriculum'.
<b>Local Roles in Northern Ireland</b>	'We've been a community partner to schools...it's an ongoing, long-term relationship'.	'We need to re-write it [the curriculum] ... it's not very helpful, so hence it doesn't have much impact... on schools'.	'ETI [Education and Training Inspectorate], over the last couple of months..., they really have come on board'.
<b>Roles in Wider Governing Bodies</b>	'Committee for the Rights of the Child... international document declared that all children's rights are being impacted by environmental degradation'... really important... international framing'.	'England, they are held accountable... for the inspection system... and the inspection will look at whether you do that or not'. 'The inspections in Northern Ireland are not compulsory'.	'Scotland, England and Wales... get millions of pounds, and it's built into the curriculum'.

According to the plenary hearing, politicians recognise the same structural barriers as demonstrated by the participants from the interview. Similar to participants 2&3, there was disagreement between the politicians on the quantity of funding necessary for implementing outdoor education. Based on evidence provided by NIFSA, those pitching the motion made it clear that there is no need for vast quantities of funding as Northern Ireland is already so rich in natural resources. One argument was that there is no need for 'big capital spend' (Mr Mathison, 2025: p.14), as outdoor learning reflects the different environment each school is in. However, the opposition noted 'Schools struggle to meet basic needs, and support services are stretched' (Mr Brooks, 2025: p.15), and suggested that more urgent concerns should be addressed first. Therefore, there is a co-dependency between financial barriers and policy barriers, as the funding the Department of Education has, needs to be used to write policy for safeguarding and children with SEND (Mr Brooks, 2025: p.15). One could

argue that implementing outdoor learning is a cost-effective way to overcome safeguarding and SEND priorities. Due to the increased sense of community and recognised social benefits to children with SEND, place-based approaches such as outdoor learning can lead to friendlier neighbourhoods and a more thoughtful population. This was not considered by those involved in the plenary hearing.

Furthermore, outdoor learning from the rest of the UK and Ireland was discussed, mimicking the participants' discussions: if it is a valued and implemented pedagogy for our neighbours, why is it not used by Northern Ireland? Scotland's curriculum for excellence, was used as the best example of outdoor learning, as it is based on the United Nations Convention for the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) (Mr Mathison, 2025: p.14); a point made by Dave in the interviews. UNCRC (2023) notes that a degrading planet is directly against the rights of children, hence is an important ethos to base outdoor learning around. It is noteworthy that neither the participants nor the politicians at the debate gave evidence on how we can use these successful examples to benefit outdoor learning in Northern Ireland.

### **Cultural Issues**

This theme was conceptualised entirely inductively as the participants differentiated between structural barriers and attitude-based barriers. No specific questions were asked in an attempt to collect these results, but while analysing the transcripts it became clear that the distinction was necessary.

First, all participants agreed teachers need more support, which aligns with the literature on the topic. It was noted that teachers were worried about the quality of their teaching and lesson planning. Furthermore, teachers' attitudes are heavily influenced by parental concerns which was evidenced by participants talking about parental risk aversion causing anxiety in teachers. Both problems are solved by more teacher training, which the participants advocated for. Moreover, parental attitudes are affected by community attitudes. It was noted by all participants that learning outside is a great way to change community attitudes by encouraging communication from external influences, such as those who discuss sustainability.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quote from Dave</b>	<b>Quote from Fred</b>	<b>Quote from Jerry</b>
<b>Teaching Related Barriers</b>	'Teacher reflecting... how a child had come up to her asking what is this?... I don't know what this is... why am I not a good teacher... bought to... Thinking about what education's for, and how educations delivered'.	'Provide guidance and support to teachers and schools so that they can see in what ways outdoor learning is beneficial'. 'Give them reassurance around the risks'.	'Time to plan resources, to maybe make sure the site is... up to scratch'. 'Getting ideas for outside is the biggest problem'.
<b>Parental attitudes and barriers</b>	'She could have responded... you're so dirty, filthy... what a mess... that would have shaped that child's relationship with dirt... mud... and the outdoors'.	N/A	'It's important that the school, right from the start, brings parents along with them'.
<b>Community attitudes and barriers</b>	'Outside of people's comfort zone, a fundamental mindset shift'.	'Some communities to become more closed in on themselves and want to keep out external influences.'	'Great way to involve the community... parents... pupils... brothers and sisters... friends, they get to hear about it' [what was done in the forest on family days].

Contributors to the Assembly debate spoke mostly on the attitudes of teachers as barriers to outdoor learning. Politicians spoke of teachers lacking the confidence to teach outside, especially with the time-pressure they already experience. Parental attitudes were not mentioned, however the issue of risk was raised. As the assembly looks at writing policy, they must recognise the potential of the chamber in shaping public views, and Ministers will have a role to play in issuing guidance to schools and their communities, as well as issuing funding.

### **Examples of Outdoor Education**

Each participant has experience delivering outdoor learning and was therefore asked to reflect on how their project was implemented or is progressing. Hence how they deliver outdoor learning was important to examine, for possible solutions to be determined. The majority of participants named projects where children's outdoor learning was deeply connected with the community around them. This exemplifies the link between social skills, community attitudes and the wider purposes of outdoor learning. The other participant spoke

about charitable teacher training and how it is a robust solution for growing teachers' confidence, while ensuring best practice.

However, there were mixed reviews regarding government initiatives. Two participants spoke of the same Department of Education fund to buy outdoor equipment for schools (DfE, 2025: p.5). One was impressed by the Department of Education recognising outdoor learning as a pedagogy, whereas the other thought it was misspent funds, as it did not invest in useful sustainable outdoor learning practices. The first participant was from an education background, and the latter was from environmental work. This is an important contrast, as it highlights a potential lack of awareness in Government, and perhaps indicates smaller steps will be necessary to implement outdoor learning.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quote from Dave</b>	<b>Quote from Fred</b>	<b>Quote from Jerry</b>
Community/ Charitable Work	'Built a relationship with six primary schools. We did community events... had a relationship with the health centre'.	'Develop an outdoor... play space connected to the local primary school and put that open to the community'.	'Forest Schools NI...level 3 leaders qualification'. 'Intensive forest school... pupils they felt were most in danger of falling out of the education system'. 'Local Area Forest Schools... [for] people who are interested... people who are very experienced.
Government Initiatives	'Community Relations Weeks, run by the Integrated Education Fund'.	'In August, a fund was set up for outdoor learning by the Department of Education here'.	'It was ridiculous... 3 weeks... to secure one piece of outside equipment that was portable and get it installed... that's never been an obstacle'.

There are further examples of outdoor provisions, such as outdoor learning in Northern Ireland due to the work of Northern Irish Forest Schools Association (NIFSA). It has been developing Forest School programs since 2008 and supports more than 5000 students learning outside each month. 27% of schools in Northern Ireland are accredited Forest Schools, due to NIFSA providing training and accreditation for free to schools (NIFSA, 2025). Furthermore, a participant suggested that NIFSA has developed a model of forest school education based on fewer rules than its UK and Irish counterpart, which aims to have outdoor learning applied more equitably across diverse socioeconomic and geographic contexts. NIFSA works with many schools around the country, having trained over 200 teachers with a Forest School qualification. Its level 3 qualification is accredited and prepares teachers for teaching children outside (McCormick, 2025: p.1). Recently NIFSA have been working to get their level 4 qualification accredited, which focuses on managing Forest Schools to embed the programmes across more schools in Northern Ireland. NIFSA

receives no central government support and relies on Local Area Forest School (LAFs) networks to spread word, expertise and ideas across different regions (McCormick, 2025, p.2). It has one permanent Forest School site on the Clandeboye Estate, which hosts schools and nurseries regularly, and has its own afterschool club (NIFSA, 2025: n.p.; McCormick, 2025: p.2). With so little funding, and so many jobs NIFSA relies on local councils and enthusiastic teachers to provide meaningful outdoor learning.

Other charities promote outdoor learning in Northern Ireland. The charity Learning through Landscapes promotes outdoor learning most notably with their Polli:nation project which saw children be taught more about pollinating insects, while increasing their 'abundance and diversity' (Learning Through Landscapes, 2019). Learning through Landscapes still runs training in Northern Ireland though no other projects have happened since 2019. Similarly Outdoor Classroom Day is practiced across Northern Ireland and has two dates throughout the year. It promotes getting outside to help make children 'healthier and happier' (Learning through Landscapes, 2025).

Similarly outdoor learning is recognised by the EA as it runs the Magilligan Field Centre, which similar to the Clandeboye Estate, provides outdoor learning to visiting schools and youth groups, however, has a primary focus on field study investigations. Teacher professional learning is also taught at Magilligan, though it does not offer any qualifications. Furthermore, outdoor learning centres are advertised through the EA for residential trips for use in school specific curriculums. Moreover, Education Minister, Paul Givan, announced a curriculum-led program that would see £10million invested in 'outdoor play and learning experiences' in 2024 and 2025 (DfE, 2025: p.5). The program deals mostly with physical education and planned to spend £4million on additional outdoor play equipment in nurseries and primary schools. It is noted throughout the guidance that the Department of Education recognises outdoor learning is good for health, wellbeing, motivation, engagement, resilience and confidence; it notes this is only possible with further training of the educational workforce (DfE, 2025: p.6).

Paul Givan contributed to the Assembly debate, where he reiterated that £3 million was invested in outdoor play equipment, however the success of this scheme is yet to be evaluated. He also noted that the EA provides practical guidance on outdoor learning activities and commended the work of NIFSA and Open Farm Weekend as examples of community provisions providing place-based experiences to improve children's wellbeing (Givan, 2025: pp.20-21). However, another speaker at the hearing spoke of how many outdoor learning centres have been closed in recent years, removing recreational outdoor learning opportunities for children. Hence reassurance that this funding will not be cut again is a necessity to build community outdoor learning initiatives. Multiple speakers highlighted the work of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) who view outdoor learning very highly and often report on good practice. However, it is noted that there is an inconsistency of provision due to teacher capacity and lack of green spaces.

The key finding drawn from this theme is the connection and co-dependency government and community initiatives have on one another. As the community are the experts on providing meaningful outdoor learning, legislation needs to reflect their expertise. But practicing outdoor learning cannot be done without Government support. Therefore, Northern Ireland has a great base to provide outdoor learning to children across the country, as its benefits are recognised, and there are well-established, sustainable business models

for how outdoor learning can be applied more widely. Furthermore, as the Northern Ireland executive hopes to improve sustainability and climate awareness more broadly than just education, providing further outdoor learning would fit within the goals NIE already has. However, outdoor learning is not promoted as a pedagogical approach day to day, which is a more beneficial way to implement outdoor learning.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the analysis conducted, recommendations for the government are:

#### Short Term

1. Encourage consistent teacher training, ensuring outdoor learning expertise is present in schools' senior leadership teams,
2. Guarantee the guidance from the EA and ETI is made clearer,
3. Raise awareness in communities about the benefits of getting children outdoors to establish community support, and growing parental confidence,
4. Begin further research to demonstrate the effectiveness and cost-benefit of outdoor learning, while consulting with the experts who currently practice outdoor learning, to ensure that future government investments are strategically targeted. This should begin in urban areas that might lack green spaces.

#### Medium Term

1. Include integrating outdoor learning into curriculum guidance,
2. Work towards stronger school-community partnerships,
3. Expand Forest School accredited training and Local Area Forest Schools, to increase teacher confidence.

#### Long Term

1. Conclude Northern Irish specific studies to demonstrate a cross-community impact and benefits all children across the country.
2. Allow policymakers have access to compelling local evidence, and clear cost-benefit analysis to act effectively and successfully.
3. Create a coherent Northern Ireland Outdoor Learning Strategy, which recognises sustainable practices, with strategic cross-department funding, and improved evaluation frameworks.

### **Conclusion**

While the benefits of outdoor learning are widely recognised, outdoor learning continues to be marginalised in Northern Ireland, due to the intersection between structural, attitudinal, and political barriers. Systemic issues such as inconsistent funding and an unclear curriculum, compounded with a lack of teacher confidence are restricting the adoption of outdoor learning across Northern Ireland. Fuelling teacher anxiety is parental risk aversion, influenced by polarised community attitudes. Politically, outdoor learning is often treated as a luxury in Northern Ireland's particularly traditional education system, rather than it being accepted as a core pedagogy. Because of this only piecemeal initiatives are realised rather than sustained strategy. Moreover, practice is dependent on community organisations and schools, preventing the equitable access to outdoor learning across the education system.

These findings are significant for the implementation of outdoor learning. Some say the government is doing all it can with the already over-stretched funding it has. In this case, it is agreed outdoor learning should be a priority, however it cannot be treated as such until more pressing issues are dealt with. As the government faces challenging fiscal decisions, it

argues it does not have the time or funding to invest into broadening outdoor learning. It has already funded outdoor equipment, and the ETI recognises good outdoor practice, however it is likely this is not the best use of funding. Hence, others argue there is a need for more consultancy with the organisations who already practice cost-effective outdoor learning across Northern Ireland. By substantiating the influence these organisations already have, more children across the country could access the opportunities outdoor learning offers, without overwhelming the Department for Education's budget.

Without consensus, this affects the children of Northern Ireland's potential education. By highlighting the indecision of which sector needs to fix this issue, this report demonstrates the importance of consultancy, cross-departmental communication and government-community relationships, when it comes to sustainable education. Building these relationships could see the cost-effective implementation of outdoor learning, and other educational practices in the future.

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