



McConnell, Alex (2021) *What impact has increased outdoor play and Covid-19 had on early year's practitioner's pedagogical perspectives?* [MEd].

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Deposited: 20 May 2022



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What impact has increased outdoor play and Covid-19 had on early year's practitioner's pedagogical perspectives?

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Submitted for M.Ed in Childhood Practice

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August 2021

## Abstract

This dissertation seeks to explore the impact that both the increase outdoor play provision which necessitated the 1140 hours in additional childcare provisions set out by the Scottish government and the Covid-19 pandemic had on early years practitioners pedagogical perspectives. Within this study, the Scottish policy context was discussed in terms of outlining importance the outdoor play pedagogy in ELC settings through. Also discussed were International pedagogical perspectives and Forest Schools influence Scottish pedagogical approaches to the outdoors. This study adopts an interpretive paradigm in order to explore the individual perspectives and realities according to the participants involved, using thematic analysis by means of Braun and Clarke method to establish the themes of this study which included; outdoor play and changes to pedagogy, the pedagogical implications of Covid-19 and practitioner perspectives on training to develop outdoor play pedagogy. The research data was collected from early years practitioners within the author's local authority through online questionnaire and subsequent online discussion group.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

### 1.1 Introduction

Outdoor play and its importance to early years in Scotland has gained significant interest from policy makers and academics alike in recent years. In 2018, Scotland created an outdoor play and learning coalition, with input from signatories ranging from experts in education and childcare, health, the environment, the third sector and government ministers. This coalition created a national position statement, reiterating the importance of shared responsibilities to enable all children in the country to have access to outdoor spaces for the purposes of playing and learning which is ‘fundamental for children and young people to thrive in health, wellbeing and development’ (Inspiring Scotland, 2018: online). Bilton and Waters (2016:2), point out that the importance placed on outdoor space within the early year’s environment had been commonplace in the UK since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, there was a decline in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century where early years became more intertwined and seen as part of primary school settings and so outdoor provision lessened. The reasons given by early adopters of outdoor play, open air nurseries and nursery gardens are echoed by their modern day counterparts: Pioneer of one of the world’s first nursery schools, Robert Owen, extolled the virtues of outdoor play and the study of nature saying that it “to give children a vigorous constitution they ought to be kept as much as possible in the open air” (Care Inspectorate, 2016:3). These benefits have been elevated in terms of its importance with the increasing concern over the impact of modern day children’s sedentary lifestyles and the impact on their physical and mental health or ‘their constitution’ as Owen would put it. Researchers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have shown that outdoor play is vitally important not only for increased physical activity and health benefits but better cognition, social skills, reduction of anti-social behaviours and improves children’s environmental consciousness (Sandseter et al, 2020:112). Indeed, it can be argued that all elements of a child’s development can be vastly enriched by access to and opportunity for outdoor play (Bilton, 2014: 40). Outdoor play is nonetheless the central focus of this study and is the main theme that is explored through the main research questions of this study which are as follows:

- What impact has increased outdoor play provision had on early years’ practitioner’s pedagogical perspectives?
- What impact has the covid-19 pandemic has on pedagogical perspectives pertaining to outdoor play provision, if any?

In order to address these research questions, the study will firstly outline the rationale behind the project in light on my professional context working within early years. Chapter 2 will then consist of a literature review drawing on the Scottish policy context of outdoor provision and an overview of the changing policy landscape in the last 15 years. There will be focus on Scottish government’s

ambition of increasing the hours for early learning and childcare from 600 to 1140, and explore how this has pushed outdoor learning as a means of achieving this policy in a cost-effective manner whilst maintaining a high-quality service without the need for a fully functioning building (Care Inspectorate, 2019: 6). International approaches to outdoor play pedagogy as well as the forest school approach for outdoor learning which provides ‘a flexible social space with multiple opportunities for learning and interacting with others’ (Harris,2017:275) will then be considered in greater detail in Chapter 2. Pedagogical approaches to early years’ practice, principles of which have informed national practice guidance for early years in Scotland will also be considered. Following on from the literature review the research study will discuss Methodology and methods used in Chapter 3. The study will adopt an interpretive paradigm which concentrates on inductive reasoning and the subjectivity of truth and knowledge within participant’s own contexts (Ryan, 2018:16). In line with this paradigm, the study will adopt qualitative methods to collect data as they can be deemed useful when exploring change or conflict (Holloway and Gavin, 2017:3). Online questionnaires will be used, followed by a discussion group, utilising virtual tools. This will then be followed by a presentation of the findings and data analysis in Chapter 4, discussing themes that emerged from the questionnaire and discussion groups in line with the literature review. The study will culminate in Chapter 5, where there will be a discussion on the implications for my own practice and that of the wider learning community as a result of the study’s findings as well as limitations and links to previous research already conducted.

## 1.2. Rationale for the research study

The early years’ workforce in Scotland are experiencing transformational change at this moment with the expansion of the early funded childcare from 600 to 1140 hours (Scottish Government, 2017: 2). In a bid to achieve this ambitious target, the Scottish government have been calling for increased outdoor play provision. From an economic standpoint, increased outdoor provision for early years will reduce the costs of building or adapting hundreds of buildings to make them suitable for these increased hours whilst maintaining high quality childcare (Scottish Government, 2020a:6). It also asserts the belief widely discussed in Scottish government and Care Inspectorate policy documents including Curriculum for excellence (Education Scotland, 2010); Out to Play (Care Inspectorate, 2020); Realising the ambition; Being me (Scottish Government, 2020b), that daily, high quality outdoor play experiences have a ‘direct and positive impact on children’s physical, cognitive, social and mental health and emotional development’ (Scottish Government, 2020b:54). These changes, despite being planned for, come with practical and pedagogical consequences for practitioners, with the latter being the focus of my research study. In addition, these changes are happening in tandem with the unprecedented health and safety considerations brought on by the

covid-19 pandemic (Howe et al, 2020:3) which, arguably warrants further research alongside the longer term policy shifts of the 1140 childcare hours' expansion. For some practitioners, these changes may feel monumental and lead to a complete shift in pedagogy and work conditions which may cause some anxiety or trepidation. Conversely, it may be deemed to be a great opportunity for others. Therefore, this research is significant in that it aims to give practitioners an opportunity to reflect on these changes, both positive and negative and discuss these implications with practitioners from other settings. This is vital because, as noted by Howe et al (2020:12), considering practitioner's views regarding changes will allow implementation of the change to be as successful. Thus, this research will allow practitioners to discuss the varying approaches they are using with outdoor play pedagogy and the stage of the journey they are at in terms of increasing outdoor play provision in their setting. Any discussion relating to the research may allow participants to engage in discourse and reflect on the pedagogical changes in their differing settings-potentially creating a community of practice in the process, which often evolve from a "common desire among its members to achieve change" (Wesley & Busse, 2001:118) and often transcend organisational and geographical boundaries.

### 1.2.1 Rationale for my project in light of my professional context

Research within the area of practitioner perspectives has gained momentum in recent years in relation to practitioner values and aims for outdoor provision in the early years in England and Wales (Bilton, 2016;2020) and practitioner perspectives on risk which lead to barriers to outdoor play in a European context (Sandseter et al, 2020). As such, there is scope in widening out the discussion within a Scottish context to discuss whether the implementation of Scottish government policy has led to practitioners altering their pedagogical perspectives, particularly as noted with above with the policy context being altered in line with the expansion of early learning and childcare hours. With the pandemic of Covid-19 being unprecedented, and impacting on practice since early 2020, it needed to be considered in line with this research study which had focused on the planned changes of the expansion. However, research around the impact of covid-19 is still limited as the pandemic is still ongoing and so to include practitioner perspectives of how this may or may not have altered their perspectives from a pedagogical point of view, is arguably, invaluable.

Within my practice, I (the researcher) deliver training to early year's practitioners, parents and carers on the benefits of outdoor play in my role as Play and Early Intervention Development Officer. There will be positive benefits for my practice in that the questionnaire and subsequent focus group will allow me to identify potential barriers and address any challenges I may be faced with when delivering training to practitioners. It will further allow me to gain a more in depth understanding of



their perspectives of the pedagogical approaches surrounding outdoor play. For practitioners, and those with line management responsibilities, they could gain further insight into the perspectives of their colleagues. This could then aid further reflections in regards to team building to support the subsequent changes in pedagogical practice. Similarly, in terms of the wider community, this research may act as a provocation for other practitioners within the wider realm of childhood practice itself. Although the focus can and should always be on the children, it is important to assess the impact of these changes on the practitioners that are working with them, in order to reflect, continuously improve and utilise outdoor play to the best of our ability.

Reflection during a time of constant change in the early years, such as an increase in outdoor provision within early years and in dealing with the variety of challenges through living and working through a pandemic means reflection of this kind is required more than ever and indeed, reflection in a group context was also an important aspect of carrying out this research process as reflective practice is often contained in conversations, both of the formal and informal kinds and this, showing reflection, as described by Brookfield (2017) as a collective enterprise and not merely an individual pursuit. By offering this opportunity for practitioners to discuss and share their thoughts, both through an anonymous questionnaire and through a discussion group, this helps to promote reflection for practitioners and for settings as a whole and helps fulfil the role they have as 'change agents' (Rodd, 2013:217) that are continually evolving and adapting their practice to create worthwhile, sustainable and positive settings.

## Chapter 2 Literature review

In this chapter, there will be a discussion on the policy shift that has taken place within early years in Scotland in relation to pedagogical approaches to the outdoor provision. Firstly, the Scottish policy context in which outdoor play and pedagogy is placed within will be considered and the changes that has brought in the early year's sector. The changes in policy context will also be considered in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact this has had on provisions and settings. Secondly, I will discuss pedagogical approaches to outdoor learning early year's practice and the varying international approaches will be presented, compared and contrasted. The attention will then be directed at the Forest School approach more specifically. The origins and importance of the Forest school approach and the cultural impact it has made in terms of promoting outdoor pedagogy in the early years will be discussed. Finally, the developments in the literature about pedagogical approaches to early years' practice in Scotland will be considered, highlighting the journey practitioners have gone on in in the last 15 years and particularly within the recent context of a global pandemic which has upended society as we know it.

### 2.1 Scottish Policy Context of outdoor provision

In the last 15 years, there have been several landmark policy shifts in Scotland in relation to the role the outdoors plays in a child's education. Policy makers and academics have increasingly been espousing the benefits of nature as a resource and solution to 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges facing Scottish children such as such as obesity and mental ill health (Howe, 2020:1) with research highlighting play "as a vital conduit for children's development, learning, health (both physical and mental) and quality of life." (Sandseter et al, 2020:112). Over a decade ago, Maynard and Waters (2007:258) wrote about the how a 'rich, sensory, natural environment' supported both individual and group development for children and in their later works discussed about the numerous educational opportunities that are provided by children having access to natural space for play and activity (Waters and Maynard, 2010: 476).

With these concerns in mind, 2018's the *Scotland's Outdoor Play and Learning Coalition Position Statement* was launched, in which group of academics, statutory and third sector organisations in childcare, education, environment and government created this statement as call to action to embed playing outdoors as fundamental aspect of a Scottish childhood. The statement emphasises the life enhancing aspects of play as a means of reducing health inequalities, promoting mental, social and emotional wellbeing and fostering an appreciation of the natural world. The statement calls for a commitment by the signatories to work together to embed playing and learning outdoors as a 'fundamental part of growing up in Scotland' through a variety of aims; widening access to high quality, diverse greenspaces and natural landscapes, highlighting to children that they are entitled to

access these communal and publicly managed spaces for recreation and educational purposes and increasing the 'opening up' of these spaces, creating and enhancing urban greenspace and offering easy access to the outdoors and nature, generating and sharing knowledge and utilising evidence-based research to promote greater understanding of the benefits of playing and learning outdoors (Inspiring Scotland, 2018: online). Finally, it aims to empower every adult who is involved with children and young people lives by providing them with the confidence, enthusiasm and skills required to support learning and playing outdoors.

With interest in outdoor provision in the early years being heightened to greater levels in recent years, the value and rationale for an increased focus on the outdoor learning was discussed and given credence over a decade ago through the Scottish government's *Curriculum for excellence* as far back as 2008. Around this time, *the Early years framework* was published, outlining the vision for the transformational change early learning and childcare services in Scotland and using it to dismantle "the historic legacies of poverty, poor health, poor attainment and unemployment" (Scottish government, 2008:1) and create a fairer, smarter, greener, healthier, and wealthier society. 'Improving outcomes and children's quality of life through play' is one of the 10 overlapping elements discussed in the framework with outdoor play being given specific attention;

"Outdoor play in particular can also be a major contributor to outcomes around physical activity and healthy weight....This has wider implications for development planning and particularly provision of open space and green space."

(ibid, 2008:18)

The emphasis in this statement highlights the longer term planning and development ambitions of the Scottish Government regarding outdoor play and its holistic benefits prior to this framework publication coincides with the opening of the first fully Outdoor play program for an (as termed by the Care Inspectorate) 'early learning and care service' in Scotland that was licensed by the Care Inspectorate (Howe et al, 2020:2) (My world outdoors, 2016). The focus on outdoor play and learning was further developed through the resource titled *Curriculum for excellence through outdoor learning* which offers the rationale that 'well-constructed and well planned outdoor learning' aids children in developing skills in enquiry, reflection and critical thinking; key components in developing the successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors which are the core values of Curriculum for excellence. (Scottish government 1a, 2010:7).

Outdoor play opportunities in the early years were also included within the national practice document *Pre-birth to three* (Learning and Teaching Scotland: 2010) which emphasises the importance of maximising outdoor play opportunities for our youngest children, recognising the

responsibility of staff to enhance these experiences for children and the lack of access to rich outdoor play experiences that many children in the country may face. *Pre-birth to three* highlighted that it was important for outdoor play to not be confined to the walls of the centre but into the local and wider community and makes mention that already staff were utilizing the outdoors as a 'great resource' in a creative and positive manner. (Scottish Government 1b, 2010:74)

*Curriculum for Excellence through outdoor learning*, *Early Years Framework* and *Pre-Birth to three* all informed early years' practice by providing the framework, vision and statements of intent as the 2010's progressed. These documents were using the narrative that outdoor play wasn't just vital for children's educational attainment but also for their overall health and wellbeing and for improving Scotland as a whole.

As the 2010's progressed there has been a raft of publications building on earlier national approaches such as *Getting it right for every child* (GIRFEC), which began life as a review of the children's hearing system and became a national approach to developing more integrated and child centred children's services. (Scottish Government, 2018: online) which will be discussed next. GIRFEC was coupled by legislation by the Scottish government to improve the wellbeing and life outcomes of children and young people in Scotland. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 is the legislative lynchpin which created the environment where the Scottish Government has actively taken steps to making strong commitments to rights based approaches (Gadda et al, 2019:401), especially in regards to working with children and young people and from which many of policies discussed in this section derive from.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, placed further duties on ministers to help fulfil the United Nations Convention of the rights of the child (UNCRC, 1989). These duties included; strengthening the power of the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland in order to investigate matters in relation to children and young people, establishing an integrated structure in terms of planning and delivery of children's services within local authorities; and, a 'Named person' as a single point of contact with responsibility for promoting, supporting and safeguarding a child's wellbeing up to the age of 18 (this element of the law faced a number of legal challenges due to concerns surrounding information sharing and undermining parental responsibility and has not been enacted in law as yet). Other elements of the act included the creation of a single planning framework (the Child's plan) for children requiring targeted intervention and a more co-ordinated approach to the consultation and planning processes all in local authority provided early learning and childcare, day care and out of school care.

The UNCRC provided the foundation for Scotland's national approach for supporting children, Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) which was first introduced in 2006. This is a holistic methodology of looking at wellbeing, based on an ecological approach to child development with wellbeing being split into 8 key indicators; safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included (SHANARRI). It was hoped that these 8 'wellbeing indicators' would offer practitioners and families a common language by which to discuss wellbeing and identify strengths, challenges and the support required for children to reach the best outcome of each of these indicators and flourish in later life. (Scottish government, 2013:6).

The impact of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, the SHANARRI indicators espoused by GIRFEC approach, underpinned by the UNCRC on the increase for outdoor learning and outdoor provision is understood through one of the final pieces of the legislation; to increase the amount and flexibility of early learning and childcare available to all 3 and 4 year olds in Scotland, as well as vulnerable 2 year olds. The Act set in motion the steps for the expansion of early learning and childcare (A Blueprint for 2020, 2017) with the pledge by the Scottish government to double the number of hours of free Early Learning and Care (ELC) services offered to parents and carers from 620 to 1140 hours by the year 2020. These legislative changes are then coupled with earlier practitioner guidance relating GIRFEC's holistic focus on health and wellbeing and stating that "direct, frequent experience of being outside, particularly in contact with nature, produces positive physical, mental and emotional benefits that affect children's overall development. (Education Scotland, 2009:20) and that practitioners should utilise outdoor learning as an approach when working with children and families.

As the ramifications of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and subsequent plans for expansion was gathering pace so was the policy platform creating the conditions for increased outdoor play provision with early learning and childcare. In 2013, the Scottish Government published its vision and action plan for Scotland's very first play strategy in bid to improve the play experiences and opportunities of all children and young people, citing its importance to Scotland's wellbeing from a social, economic and environmental standpoint and the vision stressed the importance of early years' staff maximising outdoor play experiences for children (Scottish Government, 2013b:18). This strategy was reviewed in 2020 and 'focussed attention on the availability quality and resources needed to support outdoor play' was cited as a key recommendation for the progress review (Scottish government, 2020:28).

One year later from the 2013 launch of the Play strategy, *Building the ambition* (Scottish Government, 2014) was launched as national practice guidance for practitioners; the policy accentuated experiences and outcomes necessary for the development of Scotland's youngest children in the wake of the new legislation and plans for the expansion of childcare hours. The outdoors does not feature as heavily within *Building the ambition* (2014) as it does in *Realising the ambition* (2020) published latterly, but daily access to the outdoor environment and being shown the natural world was earmarked as a quality indicator in terms of what a child should expect from their setting and (Scottish Government, 2014:61) therefore set the tone for other policy documents to come.

Further documents citing the importance of the outdoors in early years' settings also include *My World Outdoors* (Care Inspectorate, 2016) which was an improvement resource for practitioners and highlighted the change from an a more risk –averse and regulatory approach to children being outdoors to one in which the Care Inspectorate were actively encouraging practitioners to take a 'risk benefit' to what was perceived as dangerous activities.' The resource acknowledged the importance of the outdoors by referring to the Scottish government's review of the National Care Standards in 2017, which explicitly states that children should access the outdoors every day;

"Standard 1.32: As a child, I play outdoors every day and regularly explore a natural environment (Care Inspectorate, 2017:7). The National Care Standards tilted the focus from organisational inputs to what individual children should expect to experience from their setting and the subsequent impact on their outcomes (Mathias, 2018). My world outdoors goes on to give practical advice to practitioners in early years develop this point and therefore the expectations of practitioners in terms of their pedagogy and practice.

*Space to grow* (2017, Care Inspectorate) and *Out to Play* (2018, Care Inspectorate) were subsequent Scottish government resources that were developed in order to encourage the development of high quality outdoor play by practitioners ahead of the 2020 Early Learning and Childcare expansion. The former focussed on promoting innovative and flexible design that would have a dual purpose of maximising the quality of children's care, development and wellbeing and increasing the space available for increased numbers. The latter, was a practical guide in addition to the plethora of other resources to offer advice and support to practitioners and sought to improve 'perceived difficulty' as noted by the Care Inspectorate (2018:1) in setting up or accessing outdoor spaces. Improvement resources have continued to be developed as the deadline to full expansion loomed, with *Space to Grow: Indoor/outdoor settings* (Care Inspectorate, 2019) being developed after feedback asked for increased explanation around indoor/outdoor settings and expansions of settings.

As mentioned previously, *Realising the ambition: Being me* (Education Scotland, 2020) noted that it was 'undeniable' that 'daily, high quality outdoor play experiences have a direct and positive impact on children's physical, cognitive, social, mental health and emotional development' (Scottish government, 2020:54) and that children should be accessing the outdoors on a daily basis. This practice guidance outlines how natural settings and the outdoor learning approach benefits children in relation to fulfilling the holistic aims of the national programme *Getting It Right for Every Child* (Scottish government, 2010) as discussed previously. Importantly, the Scottish policy context in relation to increased outdoor play pedagogy has built upon a rich patchwork of approaches, policy informed practice and legislative change, one of the most crucial being the *Children and Young People Scotland Act* (2014). Of course, the influence of the international community and frameworks, such as the UNCRC cannot be disputed and indeed by the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill was passed on the 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 despite the difficulties and pressing priorities of the covid-19 pandemic, making Scotland the first UK country to directly incorporate the UNCRC into domestic law. This will set further responsibility for local authorities to comply with children's rights and with Article 31 of the convention 'The right to play' coming under this, this will mean more importance being placed on children's access to play opportunities and coupled with pedagogical resources and decade's worth of policy and guidance backed by research from home and international approaches, which will be the focus of the next section of this chapter, wherein the benefits of outdoor play provision to children and practitioners seem almost limitless.**

## 2.2 International Pedagogical approaches to outdoor play and learning

This section of the literature review will concentrate on international pedagogical approaches to outdoor learning which has often fed into the Scottish policy approach when it comes to how outdoor play is practiced. Pedagogy in relation to early year's education is defined in myriad of ways, dependent on the cultural and social context in which it is used and outdoor pedagogy through the means of Forest school are suchlike, are pedagogically diverse in their approach (Knight, 2016, cited in Speldewinde, 2020:2) The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) publication, *Starting Strong* (2017) which outline key indicators in early care and education centre's (ECEC) within OECD countries, defines pedagogy in broad terms; 'A set of instructional techniques and strategies to support children's learning, development and the acquisition of skills, competence, values and attitudes.' (Anders, 2015 cited in OECD, 2017: 179). In relation to outdoor play and its role in early years pedagogy, there has been an explosion of interest in how countries apply these to their curriculum and teaching approaches, the most influential being the Nordic social pedagogical

approach laid down in Scandinavian countries which has renewed an interest in the benefits of outdoor play from an education perspective in Scotland and the wider United Kingdom. There are also emerging pedagogies within early year's outdoor education in Australia and New Zealand which will also be touched upon.

Within Nordic countries, outdoor play in the natural environment is a fixture of pedagogical practice in most early learning and childcare settings with strong anecdotal evidence to longstanding commitment's to widespread provision of outdoor learning (Bentsen and Jensen, 2012:200) ; the curriculum emphasises children's play experiences in natural environments as 'vital for children's wellbeing, development and learning' (Sandseter and Lysklett, 2017:119). This view echoes Beame's assertion that outdoor learning as a pedagogy in itself- that is allows for the curriculum to be delivered across many disciplines in an authentic context (Christie et al, 2016:418). The Nordic social pedagogical approach emphasises play, relationships and the outdoors, with children's learning taking through social interaction and processes which is often in contrast with the French-English tradition, characterised by an "early education approach" or "readiness for school" (Ringsmose and Kragh-Müller, 2017: ix). It is the former approach that has been gaining more an influence in the Scottish early years education since the mid 2000's with a renewed focus on outdoor play, with adoption and support from local authorities and Scottish Government to establish of more Forest /Outdoor Nurseries (Scottish Government, 2016:4) which seeks to emulate the long standing traditions of Scandinavian nature pre-schools or Forest Kindergartens and German *Waldkindergarten* (Sandseter and Lysklett, 2017:122).

From across Scandinavia and the northern hemisphere, outdoor play is emphasized in curricular terms with the Icelandic, Finnish, Swedish, Danish education systems all citing the outdoors in their educational ; Norway strongly asserting the outdoors as being 'important parts of child culture...that must be retained regardless of the geography and climatic conditions' with their Danish colleagues stating that Children in these settings 'shall have the opportunity to experience the joy of spending time in nature' (ibid, 2017:119). Danish teachers also deliver *udeskole* (Outdoor school), curriculum based outdoor learning twice weekly in many educational settings across the country despite outdoor learning not being statutorily required (Bentsen and Jensen, 2012). It is also an important feature in that culturally, there is a greater emphasis on being outdoors for leisure within this region), which may go some way in explaining the promotion of the outdoor play pedagogy for children in the early years. (Sandseter and Lysklett, 2017:121). The idea of *Friluftsliv* or 'free air life' a lifestyle philosophy is central to Norwegian and Swedish cultural life (Sandseter et al, 2020), which basis itself on experiences of freedom in nature and spiritual connectedness to the landscape and although is tied to outdoor education by supporting learning experientially, it goes beyond a learning



method and instead evokes a deeper sense of connectedness and spirituality (Leather, 2018:7). This philosophy and is carried through the home and educational life, which helps to contextualise how young people in these countries relate to the natural world and how this feeds into the pedagogy of their early years education system. (Gurholt, 2014: 234). Risk in outdoor play in Scandinavian is also viewed differently in comparison to other countries; this may be due to the abundant opportunities for play in natural environments and the cultural context's and values of the outdoors, which views of the benefits as opposed to concentrating on the safety aspects although increasing urbanisation has led to a decline in outdoor play even in these outdoor play promoting countries (Sandseter et al, 2020:112).

These concerns with the decline in outdoor play and the negative effects this can have on the emotional and physical development of children (Clements, 2004, cited in Hill, 2018:35) have also lead to the emergence of outdoor play pedagogies from an Antipodean perspective who have realised that their own geography offers opportunities to rebalance the relationship between children and nature and that significant learning can take place. (Speldewinde, 2020; Hill, 2018). In New Zealand *Te Whāriki*, a pedagogical approach used within early years education, had strong links with outdoor play pedagogy in terms of promoting empowerment, holistic development, family, community and relationships (Hill,2018:35) and also has resonance with the Nordic social pedagogical approach explored earlier in this section. Hill (2018), also remarks on the difficulty of balancing the formal regulations and health and safety aspects of outdoor education in these settings which can lead to teachers viewing outdoor education as having too many barriers which reduces the 'motivational force' that teachers have in engaging children in outdoor play and education (ibid,2018:38).

Similar difficulties in terms of risky play are discussed in Sandseter et al's (2012:178) comparative study if Australian and Norwegian practitioners with the Australian counterparts expressing concern over external regulations being a barrier to providing physically challenging outdoor play experiences. However, since this publication there has been a growing trend for the development of 'Bush kinder', which uses a variety pedagogical approaches, from play based to teacher led, in promoting nature based experiential and environmental learning within an uniquely Australian geographical context. Within Bush kinder, the natural environment is seen as a pedagogical space in its own right, which it is argued can provide opportunities for the enhancement of play and learning (Moser and Martinsen, 2010, cited in Speldewinde, 2020:4). Although pedagogical approaches used both within New Zealand and Australia may be emerging, varied and require further investigation (Speldewinde,2020:13), they do share common agreement with other international approaches such as those in Scandinavian by acknowledging the adverse effects on children if their access to outdoor

play is diminished (Sandseter et al, 2012). The theoretical and practical implications of integrating outdoor into an educational curriculum will be the focus of the next sections as we explore the influence of Forest school on outdoor play and pedagogical approaches to early years in Scotland, which share commonalities with the international approaches discussed.

### 2.3 Forest Schools Influence on Outdoor Play & Pedagogy

It could be argued that the Forest School Approach (FS), developed through the Scandinavian kindergartens was the catalyst to nature based and outdoor pedagogies within education that is enjoying such a resurgence today within Scotland and the UK more broadly (Knight, 2016). The principles of Forest school have been adopted and interpreted from its Danish origins with evidence showing that Scotland's education policy showed alignment in comparison with its Scandinavian counterparts (MacQuarrie et al, 2015:3) and its nature based experiences are apparent in numerous government policies and national practice guidance, as discussed in section 2.1 which highlight the pedagogical influence of our Nordic neighbours.

In the UK, the Forest School Association, the professional body for FS practitioners in UK describes the approach as one for 'specialised learning' that sits within the wider context and outdoor and woodland education;

'Forest School is a process that offers all learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees.'

(Forest School Association, 2021: online)

There are six guiding principles of Forest School a UK FS practitioner should abide by ; FS incurs frequent and regular sessions in the natural environment with planning, adapting, observing and reviewing integral elements of FS, takes place in a natural wooded environment to promote the development of a relationship between learner and the natural world, promotes the holistic development of all those involved and to take supported risks appropriate to the environment, run by qualified FS practitioners who continuously develop their practice and finally, use a range of learner-centred processes to create a community of development and learning. (Waite and Goodenough, 2018:27). These formal pedagogical practices in the UK in regards to FS approach to differ their Danish counterparts, where the intrinsic values and experiences of the practitioner take prime influence in the teacher and learning process (Leather,2018; Waite and Goodenough, 2018; Speldewinde et al, 2020:2). This had led to a 'standardised pedagogical approach' of FS in the UK

(Speldewinde, 2020:4) that is now being embedded in mainstream outdoor education here practitioners are emulating outdoor pedagogy without questioning or reflecting on theory and practice due to the speed of institutionalisation. (Leather, 2018). FS as a social construction has still not been explored within the UK as whilst the increasing commodification of the training has led to more FS type activities being delivered by practitioners it is argued that this had led to a lack of understanding and missed opportunities to embed FS and outdoor play pedagogy in the curriculum as a whole.(Leather, 2018:7)While increased recognition of the benefits of outdoor play pedagogy and the FS approach can be deemed positive, it has perhaps led to the skewing of its original intent as an alternative pedagogy (Waite and Goodenough,2018:42).

In Leather's (2018) critique of FS practices in the UK, they cite this formalised approach is anathema to the idea of *Friluftsliv*, (2018: 7) as discussed in the previous section which focusses on authentic, philosophical experience that is culturally rooted, complex and not seen easily transferred from one country to another. Some of the cultural sticking points are highlighted by Maynard and Waters (2007:262) is that the outdoors is not a central feature of the UK cultural identity, despite having natural resources of the same calibre in Scotland (MacQuarrie et al, 2015:3) they are not utilised in the same way. This has implications for practitioners within these early years settings in Scotland who are now working under increased outdoor play provision due to the 1140 hours and covid-19 considerations; the idea of being outdoors, in all weathers, for long periods, to some practitioners is a discomfort and could spark cultural resistance to the development of outdoor play pedagogy. Training with these considerations in mind is also explored in the literature as early year's practitioners who are 'outdoor immigrants' (Leather, 2018:16) who are unfamiliar with outdoor pedagogy and may feel unease at the transition to increased outdoor provision than those who have elected to undertake specific training in FS or deliver outdoor education regularly (Bilton,2020) also echoes the challenges of staff with differing perspectives and attitudes to the outdoor environment working together which could have an impact on the type of outdoor play taking place such as the level of risky play being undertaken to general dislike and fear over working outside.

These worries could be assuaged by additional training programmes, workshops and increasing the opportunity to learn from Outdoor Play Programmes (OPP'S) (Howe et al, 2020:13) .It is also widely recognised that a change in pedagogical practice from, for example, indoor, teacher led pedagogy to one focussed on FS principles and play pedagogy are followed by need for further education (Bentsen and Jensen, 2012:214). Wishart and Rouse (2019:2293) also discuss the challenges of educators adapting to new outdoor playscapes, where there is a temptation to superimpose their existing schemas of traditional early childhood playground provisions upon the unfamiliar terrain of

the more naturalized outdoor learning environment and these challenges can be seen in the context of Scotland's changing pedagogical landscape with the expansion and the covid-19 pandemic.

## 2.4 Pedagogical Approaches to the outdoors in Scotland

As we have seen through looking at the varying approaches taken to pedagogical practice, in particular outdoor play pedagogy across the world, it can take many forms and encompass a number of curriculum areas. From a Scottish perspective, pedagogy which described as 'interactions and experiences that support the curriculum and the process of how young children learn. (Scottish Government, 2014:51). Howe's recent study found early years practitioners within traditional settings and those within outdoor play programmes shared these perspectives on the benefit of outdoor play as all adhere to a 'play based, child led and developmentally-focussed model' within early learning and childcare settings that regards children as active agents of their own learning journey (Howe et al, 2020:13). The foundation of these pedagogical philosophies within early learning and childcare (ELC) settings in Scotland can be traced back to the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence framework which states that although this pedagogical approach is built into all elements of the early year's curriculum, it fits in particularly well within the key concepts of outdoor learning (Knight, 2016) with the values of 'Challenge, enjoyment, relevance, depth, development of the whole person and an adventurous approach to learning are at the core of outdoor pedagogy.' (Education Scotland, 2010:8). In Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland, the Curriculum for excellence emphasis on outdoor pedagogy is also credited with supporting a shift to a broader curriculum with more hands on learning opportunities, and this this has allowed for ELC settings to embrace active learning and learning outdoors.

A play based pedagogy for early years in respect of the outdoors is emphasized strongly in the national practice guidance in respect to outdoor learning in Scotland which states that the approach of using the outdoor environment as necessary for delivering its education curriculum'(Education Scotland, 2009)The importance of a play based approach is also promoted within the Curriculum for Excellence and detailed in Scotland's National Play strategy action plan (2013) in that playful, learner led approaches should be used within classrooms and outdoors and within the plan its states the importance of accessing free play, especially outdoor free play, on a daily basis in early learning and childcare settings (Scottish government, 2013b). The Building the ambition (2014) and Pre-birth to three (2010) national practice documents also discuss the importance of a pedagogy with Scottish

early years settings; the former states that practitioners should support children as 'active, busy learners' (Scottish Government, 2014:51) with the caveat that although children lead the learning there is intentional promotion of experiences and interactions by practitioners alongside the curriculum content within the caring, nurturing environment of an early learning and childcare setting. The latter, does not include formal curriculum in respect of Scotland 0-3 years old but rather embodies a relational approach focuses on 4 principles; Rights of the child, Relationships, Respect and Responsive Care which are reminiscent of another international approach to pedagogy discussed earlier, the *Te Whāriki* approach from New Zealand (Scottish Government, 2010b:34).

Although the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing, there have already been pedagogical implications in terms of how play pedagogy and outdoor play is delivered; the Scottish government have released a new Play Strategy for delivering play in a Covid-19 context and highlighted how children, families and practitioners have engaged more with outdoor play than in previous years and this is reflected in the renewed interest from staff on accessing training for outdoor play. (Scottish government, 2021:14). The covid-19 pandemic has shown outdoor play pedagogy and outdoor settings to be the viable, safer solution as transmission rates are deemed to be lower outdoors so addressing educator concerns and practice around outdoor play pedagogy are going to be crucial as means of delivering ELC provision in post-covid world.(Howe et al, 2020:3).

## Chapter 3 Methodology and methods

This chapter will introduce the methodology and methods that have been adopted in this research study. Considering paradigms, it will seek to justify the choice of the philosophical underpinnings of this research study with a brief discussion on the tensions between positivism and interpretivism as well as situate the research from an ontological, axiological and epistemological standpoint. This will be followed by a discussion on the methods utilised to investigate practitioner perspectives on pedagogy, in relation to increased outdoor play provision and the Covid-19 pandemic. Following on from this, the choice of data collection methods will be explained and will include an explanation about how participants were chosen in relation to the online questionnaire and subsequent discussion group. Following, the methods of analysis that were used will be discussed. Finally, any limitations pertaining to the methodology will be addressed as well as ethical considerations pertaining to the research.

This chapter will seek to justify the choice of paradigm for the project with a brief discussion on the tensions between positivism and interpretivism as well as situate the research from an ontological, axiological and epistemological standpoint. This will be followed by a discussion on the methods utilised to investigate practitioner perspectives on pedagogy, in relation to increased outdoor play provision and the covid-19 pandemic. Following from this, the choice of data collection methods will be explained and shall also include how participants were chosen in relation to the online questionnaire and subsequent discussion group, the methods of analysis that were used as well as address any ethical considerations pertaining to the research.

### 3.1. Paradigms

Paradigms are not seen as merely methodologies but instead are a means of observing the world and how we understand and gain knowledge about it. (Hammersly (2013), cited in Cohen et al (2018:8). The term has also been defined as a “loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts or prepositions that orient thinking and research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, cited in Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006: online). In the same way, according to Carr (1995, cited in Bridges and Smith, 2006:131), philosophical reflection and argumentation are key features of methods and procedures of educational research and as such cannot shy away from the responsibility for critical examination and justification of philosophical ideas within their research. Within research, there are a multitude of ways that it can be undertaken and researchers will have their own philosophical

beliefs and value systems in this respect. Methodology, as defined by Somekh and Lewin (2005, cited in Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006) is “the collection of methods or rules by which a particular piece of research is undertaken” and dually, “the principles theories and values that underpin a particular approach to research.” These principles and values therefore colour the lens to which research can be viewed by the researcher.

One example would be viewing research through a positivist lens, which deems itself as being objective and impartial with a causal relationship which can be applicable generally or universally. Positivism, as characterised by Guba and Lincoln (2005) sees the aim of an enquiry under a positivist lens to be about prediction and control, where hypotheses are verified and firmly established as ‘facts’ or ‘laws’. This theoretical lens asserts that the social world should be studied “according to the canons of the scientific method with its emphasis on directly observable entities” (Bryman and Becker eds in Becker et al, 2012:126).

With this in mind, this research study intends to place itself in contrast with this by using an interpretivist paradigm, as the project centres on uncovering the opinions and perspectives of participants involved and will seek to make no objective claim on the data collected. Exploring practitioner’s pedagogical perspectives lends itself more to using an interpretivist paradigm as it views participants as agentic beings who hold a variety of understanding and meanings and this includes the researcher who can never completely separate themselves from their values and beliefs in the way they interpret the data (Ryan, 2018:17.) Placing credence on the participant values within the context of their own unique lives is an integral in the research process in a socially constructed world (Holloway and Galvin, 2017:26)

In recent years, the binary between the ‘positivist’ and ‘interpretivist’ paradigms has become increasingly blurred in the last twenty years with confluence between seemingly intractable and opposing academic viewpoints (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). A paradigm based on positivism and used most frequently in the natural sciences would regard research process as a deductive one; based on an objective, quantifiable phenomenological reality that could be numerically measured to uncover and make connections between them and hence will often use quantitative methods in order to do this. (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2008; Bryman and Becker,). Bryman echoes this description as he denotes the four characteristics of positivism including; phenomenalism, where genuine knowledge can only be deemed so by the sciences, deductivism, where theory is able to be tested for proven laws and objectivity where science can be deemed as value free and finally, inductivism that gathers facts to provide the basis of laws (Bryman (2008, cited in Ryan, 2018:15). The role of the researcher in a positivist study is to remain separate from the participant’s world they are investigating (Healy

and Perry, 2000 cited in Krauss, 2005:260). Subjectivity for a positivist researcher's standpoint threatens the validity and subjectivity of the data/research (Guba and Lincoln, 2005:172).

On the other hand, a researcher operating under an interpretivist paradigm will often welcome the multi-faceted nature of humanity, acknowledging that participating in the world they study allows for better understanding and being better able to express the properties and nuances within them (Krauss, 2005) and all therefore allowing for a shared framework in viewing and investigating social phenomena (Walter, 2006:14) Alternatively, paradigms have also been described a philosophical tool, a 'metaphysical construct' (Mertens, 2007:215) to identify and describe one's worldview for the purposes of research. According to Ryan (2018), a research project should be placed within a paradigmatic framework prior to the research being conducted in order for it to be established, compatible and justified within the philosophical standpoint chosen (Ryan, 2018) and this theoretical lens on the research will ultimately shape the projects design, methodology and its analysis (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006).

Interpretivism moves away from a universal 'catch all' theory but instead yields its data from particular meanings, context's and purposes of the people involved and theory therefore emerges from these situations. (Cohen et al, 2018:20). Interpretivist study will often pursue more qualitative methods to their chosen study, especially if the aims involve meaning making and exploring the perceptions of significant groups of people (early years practitioners as an example) and the line of inquiry will often seek to uncover and explain events through the eyes and contributions of the people involved with the researcher playing a more facilitative role and not seeking to be the discover and harbinger of the truth (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2008:152)

However, as discussed at the beginning of this section, these paradigms have become increasingly intersectional and confluences have emerged and quantitative and qualitative methodologies research can be utilised in both paradigms and one may often facilitate the other. (Bryman and Becker, 2012:129). I will now go on to situate my research position in respect to the paradigms discussed.



### 3.1.2 My Research Position

In identifying and defining the research paradigm most suited to the research project, there were some philosophical assumptions to consider (Guba and Lincoln, 2005); that of ontology, axiology and epistemology. Ontology is focussed on the nature of reality on a conceptual level (Mertens, 2007) and as such researchers working in an interpretivist paradigm will do so utilising differing ontological assumptions about the world they live in. Reality in an ontological sense is experienced differently by individuals so therefore multiple realities exist so conducting research under a single reality negates the fundamental importance of individual perceptions. (ibid, 2007:215) and makes establishing validity from an external or objective viewpoint a futile exercise, (Trochim, 2000 cited in Krauss, 2005:758). As the study focusses on the perceptions of pedagogical change in the context on increased outdoor provision and the challenges of Covid-19 the practitioners involved in the study will have their own conceptual reality of what pedagogy is and how they perceive the changes in their workplace.

Following on from ontology, epistemology, or 'our belief in how we may know the world' (Ryan, 2018:14) within this research standpoint will be discussed. Epistemology is the relationship between the knower (the researcher) and would-be-known (the participants) in the context of the research process (Mertens, 2007:215). It is related to ontology by finding out how we come to know the philosophy of reality and methodology, which identifies practices used to attain said knowledge (Krauss, 2005:758). While a more positivist researcher would value a neutral, distanced standpoint when analysing the data by retreating from participants, under an interpretivist paradigm, being closer to the participants may allow the researcher to truly understand their experiences methods. Using an interpretivist paradigm, favouring subjectivity from a research standpoint may allow for new meanings to be generated, and with it, a possible change in perspectives and actions (ibid, 2005:763). Indeed, Braun and Clarke (2006) remark that is important that epistemologically speaking, "data is not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (2006:84) and it is important to discuss how the knowledge has come to be known in the course of the research. For the purposes of this study, as a researcher who also works within and around the early year's sector and with knowledge of the practitioners involved, being objective would present many difficulties and could potentially disinhibit participants from explaining their perspectives and therefore prevent me as the researcher from gaining deeper insights. This leads to discussions around ethical standpoints and the axiological standpoint within this research.

Axiology is defined as 'the branch of ethics, aesthetics and religion which should form the basic foundational philosophical dimensions of a paradigm proposal' (Guba and Lincoln, 2005:169),

therefore the role of ethics plays in said research from both the researcher and participant's standpoint. It is important for the researcher to acknowledge and define ethical theory within a research context and consideration must be made as how the researcher can and should raise ethical issues should they arise. (Mertens, 2007:215). For the purposes of the study, consideration was sought in terms of my own ethical values as both a practitioner and as a researcher and how this may be in contrast or confluence with the participants. There may have been strong opposing ethical viewpoints to consider and interact with especially in relation to ethical dilemmas and situations wrought by the covid-19 pandemic so differing ethical values interacting in the same space was something to consider when undertaking the project. By situating the research in concern of ontology, epistemology and axiology, this allowed for the philosophical intent (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006) of the research to be considered and this informed the methodology and furthermore, the methods used for data collection, which will be discussed in the next section.

### 3.2 Methods

Whilst methodology is often deemed to be the overall approach to research viewed through a paradigmatic lens, the method often refers to the systematic modes, procedures or tools used for collection and subsequent analysis of said data. (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006: online). Previously, it had been presumed that only qualitative methods, such as in depth interview or focus group, which allow for questions to emerge and change in order to understand culture or organizations (Krauss,2005:758) could be used in order to facilitate research under an interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative methods remain useful when the research is centred on meaning making and there are smaller groups of participants where meanings, perceptions and understandings can be analysed. (Walker, 2006:25). On the other hand, positivist paradigms have commonly applied the use of quantitative methods (Ryan, 2019:19) in order to seek reality. Common methods include collection and analysis that be numerically presented, coded or statistically explained. It is argued that these so called objective methods "prevent human contamination of its apprehension or comprehension" (Guba and Lincoln, 2005: 176) this objectivity was prized and deemed as the superior method when undertaking research but is less useful in research around subjective understandings.

However, instead of a debate existing about what is the most superior between qualitative and quantitative methods; there is now a view that these methodological approaches are just elements of research of a whole and they are equally vital in social science research and thus can be combined with a research design (Walter, 2006:25). This research study took the same approach by choosing both an online questionnaire and a discussion group focussing on practitioner's perspectives of

pedagogical change in the context of the increased outdoor provision brought by the 1140 hours' expansion of childcare hours and the COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative methods will be useful in exploring the change and gaining a more in-depth understanding of practitioner's perspectives (Holloway and Galvin, 2017). However, quantitative methods cannot be ignored as they are useful in terms of gathering large groups of data sources to collect interpretations and understandings of social phenomena (Walter, 2006:24) an initial online questionnaire was used first which asked a combination of open ended and closed questions (an example of this is contained with the Appendix). The findings of the online questionnaire of which then informed the questions of the subsequent discussion group. The next section will focus the choice of these two data collection methods.

### 3.2.1 Data collection

The section will now discuss the methods of data collection; the use of an online questionnaire and subsequent discussion group and there will be a discussion on the justification for each of these methods within the study.

The first phase of the data collection involved the creation of an online questionnaire which was sent to the Head of centres of 9 early year's settings in my local authority to disseminate to their early years practitioners. Permission to send the questionnaire to early year's practitioners was sought by the researcher to the Education strategic managers and head of service for early years within the authority prior to the research being carried out as part of the ethical process, which will be considered in greater depth in section 3.4. For the scale of the project, it was decided to send an online questionnaire to 9 settings across the authority, with a mixture of private and council run establishments used to elicit a diverse range of responses. The online was created using online survey software Microsoft Forms, using Office 365, which was recommended by the University of Glasgow Ethics guidance to ensure security of the data. (University of Glasgow, 2020: online)

It was decided to use an online questionnaire for this initial part of the research as it remains to be a versatile way of gathering data in that it is inexpensive, relatively easy to administer (Shields, 2003) and useful for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data (Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy, 2004:146) Utilising questionnaires, especially online questionnaires as means of data collection within an interpretivist study using open ended questions can also offer participants the opportunity to reflect honestly upon their practice, as they are anonymous and don't necessarily have to take place in the setting with their colleagues and can be self-chosen (Shields, 2003; Cohen et al., 2018).

Using an online questionnaire as a tool is arguably common practice within educational research and “the predominant mode of conducting surveys, superseding paper based surveys” (Cohen et al, 2018:361) can also serve as a means of highlighting specific issues, raising awareness and increasing participants feeling of being valued (Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy, 2004:146. As this project centres on practitioner’s pedagogical perspectives, specifically on changes wrought by increased outdoor play provision in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, this form of data collection seemed to be the most appropriate for this stage of the research process as it is crucial to engage practitioners who will be delivering early years’ education to get their views during a period of transformational change. From a practical perspective, as the researcher could not enter early years’ settings due to lockdown restrictions at the time of the research and indeed some practitioners who may have been shielding, self-isolating etc., an online questionnaire allowed for increased accessibility and removed the “spatial and temporal restraints” (Cohen et al, 2018:362) that a paper based, face to face questionnaire would entail.

Online questionnaires can fall short in terms of only capturing surface level opinions is that they don’t require an interviewer and therefore there is an opportunity for probing more into certain elements of participant responses and can be seen as “an impersonal medium” (ibid, 2004:362). With this in mind and to build upon the responses received in the questionnaire, it was acknowledged that the participants who had answered would be invited to take part in an one hour long discussion group to delve into the topic further. As social distancing restrictions due to Covid-19 were still in place at the time of data collection, and to ensure the health and safety of all participants involved, it was decided that the discussion group would also take place online on Microsoft teams and would be audio recorded, in line with the University of Glasgow’s virtual methods guide (University of Glasgow, 2020: online).

The use of focus groups or discussion groups in research is an efficient means of generating large amounts of data around themes and shared experiences (Holloway and Galvin, 2017). A group interview set like this can aid an interpretivist researcher as although the researcher supplies the topic that is to be discussed, the views of the participant are paramount and help to shape a collective agenda (Morgan, 1988, cited in Cohen et al, 2018:532). Using participants who have the same job role but work within different settings and bringing them together for the purposes of a discussion group allows for synergy to emerge as participants refine their thoughts and ideas through interaction with one another, with the interaction becoming a vital component of the analysis itself (Hennick, 2014; Cohen et al, 2018).

Expanding the interaction within a discussion group to include the researcher allows for increased meaning making within the context of the research as a whole as the interpretivist researcher allows for conceptualization of social phenomena to emerge from the whole groups interaction (Krauss, 2005:764). This valuable focus on interaction that takes place within a discussion group is also echoed by Kitzinger (2005, cited in Holloway and Galvin,2017:133) who claims that a defining feature of focus group research is the using the interaction between research participants to generate data and utilizing that interactions as part of any subsequent analysis. Although discussion groups are artificial in a sense as participants are brought together from a specific sector (in this case early years), to discuss a topic or theme well known to them, this interaction, facilitated and structured by the researcher can lead to new insights and allowed participants on the responses of others attendance so this add another layer of complexity to a discussion that wouldn't have necessarily surfaced from a one to one interview alone. (Hennick, 2014; Cohen et al, 2018)

For the purposes of this research, the themes explored initially in the questionnaire could be explored in greater depth by using a discussion group and this allowed for increased understanding of the multiple, overlapping pedagogical perspectives of the practitioners when it came to increased outdoor play provision. This was especially important as practitioners were from different settings with varying levels of outdoor provision in place already, so for some the changes would be striking than in a new centre that already enhanced outdoor provision from its inception.

The interactions or synergy discussed earlier in this section highlighted the advantage of using a focus group for this study as they can be very useful in developing understandings of perceptions from multiple viewpoints.(Holloway and Galvin,2017:126). There has also been limited opportunities since the beginning of the pandemic for practitioners to discuss practice with others outside of their own setting, so the use of an online discussion group allowed this to happen and it is hoped that this could lead to new understandings and meanings being developed around the topic of outdoor play pedagogy within the local authority and how settings continue to work under covid-19 parameters in differing ways.

In reference to the types of questions asked within the data collection, the questions and topic of discussion in the research methods both in the online questionnaire and virtual discussion group are not intrusive or demanding as they contained topics in relation to early years' practitioners practice and not their personal lives and the questions included onto the Microsoft forms questionnaire (attached in Appendix 1) reflect this.

Audio recording that was collected during the course of the research was encrypted on a secure USB drive on a personal laptop that was secure locked away after use. During the discussion group and prior to data being recorded, participants were asked to turn camera off in order to protect their identity to allow for data minimisation and avoid the risk of third parties such as children, being included in the recordings. Any automated backups of audio-recordings were deleted once the files were downloaded and encrypted.

When selecting methods, confidentiality and data handling has also been taken into consideration, in line with General data protection regulations (UK Government, 2018: online). This will be further discussed in the section of Ethics contained within this chapter. Data collected from the questionnaire was securely stored on MS forms on the University of Glasgow server, and any data collected will be encrypted on a secure USB drive on researcher's personal laptop, was securely locked away after use. Once data was analysed and results written up the data was destroyed. The next section will focus on the process of the data transcription and the subsequent analysis.

### 3.2.2 The process of data transcription and analysis

This section will now focus on the process of data transcription and analysis used within the study. As discussed above, Microsoft forms and Microsoft teams were used from the University of Glasgow's server with the subsequent data encrypted on a secure USB drive on the researcher's laptop, in accordance with GDPR. Completed questionnaires were anonymous unless participants had agreed to supply their email so they could take part in the subsequent online discussion group. The data from the questionnaire was then analysed and coded using thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and the themes coded from these responses informed the content of the second phase of data collection-the online focus group.

For the purposes of this research thematic analysis was used, as it is 'a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology' (Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis allows for 'underlying idea's, assumptions and conceptualisations' (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017:3553) to be identified through the semantic content of data collected. As noted above, the data collected was textual from the questionnaire and subsequent audio-recording data from the discussion group, which was auto-transcribed using University of Glasgow software Microsoft teams and then coded into themes in order to be analysed. The audio transcription was checked and edited by the researcher ensuring accuracy, with words not picked up correctly by automatic transcription due to accent or slang words being changed at this point. The data was then re-listened to in order to allow more patterns of data to become apparent and so no data was missed; this allowed for the data to

shape the analysis once the research has been conducted and aided the research not forcing any pre-conceived notions held by the researcher to be considered before the data collection has been completed (Braun and Clarke,2006:83) This subsequent copy was coded to protect the participant's identity then printed and contained in Appendix 2 is copy of the coded audio transcript. The transcription was analysed by a first round of highlighting words that were often repeated in relation to pedagogy, outdoor play provision and covid-19. By highlighting these major themes, these could be grouped together in order to develop the sub themes and codes within them. The transcription of the online discussion group was then compared with the text of the online questionnaire leading to the grouping of themes and sub themes as a whole.

During the process of data transcription and analysis it was important to recognise that as a researcher my own ethical values would colour the data provided as I am active within it as the facilitator of the discussion group. In addition, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007:200) state that there should be a sense of social responsibility and the projects framed as emancipatory. This research intended to value participants' perspectives and a possible means for addressing challenges or celebrating success in adapting to organisational change and adapting new pedagogical approaches. In addition, the researcher gave participants taking part in discussion group the opportunity to see the transcript of the data and researcher's initial interpretations; this was in order to meet ethical validity and authenticity as there should be an opportunity in most research study's for participants to challenge or verify the interpretations where the study includes them or their community. (ibid, 2007: 204) Transcription and subsequent data analysis must have ethicality as its mainstay and as such it is important that research participants are aware that all subsequent steps have been taken to ensure autonomy, privacy and dignity throughout the process. Following on the process of the data analysis, we will move on to the limitations of the research methods used within the study.

### 3.3 Limitations of the research methods

The limitations of the research methods used will be discussed next. This is being considered in respect of participant capabilities and survey design, sample size, facilitation of the discussion group and lack of observation while mitigating these limitations through placing the research within an interpretivist paradigm.

The use of online questionnaires, although efficient are indeed efficient there has to be the assurance that the participants have the adequate literacy and computer skills in order to access them and there is the risk that, if not properly explained beforehand, the participants may think the

link being sent is spam and so will not respond or delete (Cohen et al, 2018:362). For the purposes of this study an accompanying email was sent to the practitioners explaining the process of the questionnaire in order to make them feel valued and their contribution to the discussion was important and using an online survey which was anonymous allowed for the participants to be respond at their own pace with no concerns about vocalising ideas in front of others or being by others to make grammatical mistakes. The use of open and closed questions throughout the questionnaire and in particular, the use of a scrolling text box within the questionnaire offered an opportunity for a “form of freedom” as discussed by Shields (2003) allowed for the participants to be reflective, creative in the response and with no pressure to conform to a certain word length.

Another potential limitation was indeed the sample size of the participants and a low response rate to questions. Small sample size is another issue so another reason as to why general assumptions can't be made in relation to the perspectives. Dillman, 2014, cited in Cohen et al (2018:314) cited the following reasons for low and no response rates within surveys: contact, cooperation and ease of conduct, completion and return of the survey. The reasons behind the difficulties in this particular research study will be discussed in Chapter 5 but in terms of the methodological approach chosen, the research was never meant to gather a general consensus on practitioner perspectives as a whole but merely as a vignette to what could be issues, concerns and positive feedback pertaining to outdoor play provision in the context of covid-19 and is merely adding to a wider conversation that is in development, not striking up a new one.

Facilitation of the discussion group may also be seen as a methodological stumbling block as this may constrain the research as researcher can never fully separate themselves from their values and beliefs and as an actor in the research they will act according to his or her prejudices. (McClintock et al, 2003:718). However, as this is an interpretivist study this is not deemed as an issue as long as this bias is acknowledged and therefore taken into consideration when working with participants. This can be aided by ensuring that participants have sufficient understandings of what is being asked of them and allowing them to verify what is being said. To mitigate this, it was ensured that copies of transcriptions before analysis were provided to the participants can negate any potential difficulties.

Lack of observation within the study which is not granted within a questionnaire or online discussion group and can lead to disadvantages in that respect, similarly to Llewellyn and Rouse (2019) in their research on professional learning in relation to the pedagogies of outdoor spaces in Australian early years, practitioners practice itself was not observed so therefore there was reliance on their own reflections on outdoor play pedagogy during the questionnaire and discussion group. Lack of



observation was also the case in this study, in that the questionnaire and online focus group undertaken by the participants offered only opportunities for reflection in relation to ongoing practice in terms of changes in relation to outdoor play provision and covid-19 but could not be observed by the researcher. However, the 'truth' of the situation is entirely relative to the researcher and from an interpretivist ontological standpoint there is no single shared reality (Ryan,2018:17) and that what the participants describe as their reality within the discussion group must be considered and deemed valid when speaking about their pedagogical perceptions. The following section will now concentrate on ethical concerns arising from conducting research and considerations which have been briefly mentioned in the above section.

### 3.4 Ethical concerns

Ethicality is the thread that must run through the full research process from collection of data to reporting, archiving and subsequent dissemination and should be thought about long after approval from an ethics committee. For this study, it was deemed important to get the views and perceptions of early years' practitioners as they were the ones directly experiencing the pedagogical changes wrought by increased outdoor provision and working in early years' settings under covid-19 regulations. The views of members of the public or parent's carers may have produced completely different data and that is why it is important for the values of the participants to be interpreted in the light of the research context and community context (Cohen et al, 2018). In this section I will discuss how ethical considerations and concerns were mitigated and the subsequent section will touch upon goodness, as described by Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007)

For the study, ethical approval was respectively granted by the University of Glasgow for the purposes of this study and with reference to the University of Glasgow risk guidance document, this project was considered low risk. The researcher recruited a group of participants all of whom were over the age of 18, and hence not considered to be a vulnerable group. Participants were all early year's practitioners, taking part in the study on a voluntary basis with their consent being obtained prior to the online questionnaire and discussion group by used of using Consent Form, contained in Appendix 3. Participants were informed from the outset of the reason for the study and in addition to the consent form, they were also provided with a privacy statement and the plain language statement. By providing participants with this information beforehand this helped with gaining their informed consent to taking part and this helped to instil authenticity in the project as this process ran through both elements of the data collection and as participants were told they could halt proceedings at any time, ask for clarification or withdraw from the research completely. By keeping the practitioners

informed in a more dynamic way like this it ascribes to the notion that informed consent is seen as not a one off permission, but as a series of negotiation's running through the research (Silverman, 2020: 158). In addition to approval from the participants themselves, approval from the local authority was sought before participants were even recruited. The research study was also being reviewed by the College Ethics Committee to ensure it met research integrity requirements.

The topic of outdoor play pedagogy was deemed as low risk and there would be no sensitive information required to be shared. All necessary precautions were taken to support participants if they became distressed at any point i.e. they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study, be encouraged to speak to their line manager or be signposted to occupational health within the local authority, if required.

The planned sample size of the focus group was 6 to 8 participants, however when the focus group was conducted this ended up being 4 participants. The small number lowered the risk of the research as it enabled the researcher to check in with every participant individually and check they were comfortable with participating in the research and there was the opportunity to answer any questions beforehand. However, due to small sample size of the focus group there is a risk of participants being identifiable in the final report. To mitigate the risk, the data will be de-identified during the transcribing process to protect participants' identity and confidentiality. The participants will also be asked for consent to use any direct quotes from the focus group for the final dissertation report. The researcher is also aware of all the management of personal data guidance – GDPR, which will be adhered to, as well as secure storage of information and research data. The University of Glasgow Office 365 Microsoft Teams will be used to send out invitations to participants. Prior to the focus groups the participants will be asked to respect the anonymity of the other participants, as some staff participating in the Focus group may know each other from currently or previously working in the same setting, or as they are working within the same local authority.

. The questionnaire element of the research will take place using online survey Microsoft Forms using the Office 365 as recommended by the University of Glasgow Ethics guidance on virtual methods. The subsequent focus group took place online using Microsoft teams video conferencing software so social distancing regulations, which were in place due to Covid-19 lockdown at the time could be adhered to and participants did not need to travel to a location or venue for the research to take place. The focus groups were audio recorded, but measures will be put in place in line with the University of Glasgow data security guidelines when collecting data using 'virtual' methods (University of Glasgow,2020:online).

The participants that took part in the online focus group, done so from their own property, hence there is no risk associated with location as such. However, to mitigate any potential risks that may arise from interviews, and to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the participants as well as that of the researcher are assured, the researcher ensured that the supervisor was informed of dates and times, of when the focus group was being carried out, and following the interviews the researcher provided the dissertation supervisor with a debrief. Participants were also informed that if they had any concerns following the interview, the researcher could signpost them with organisations and website they could use for support, at the end of the interview process.

### 3.4.1 Goodness

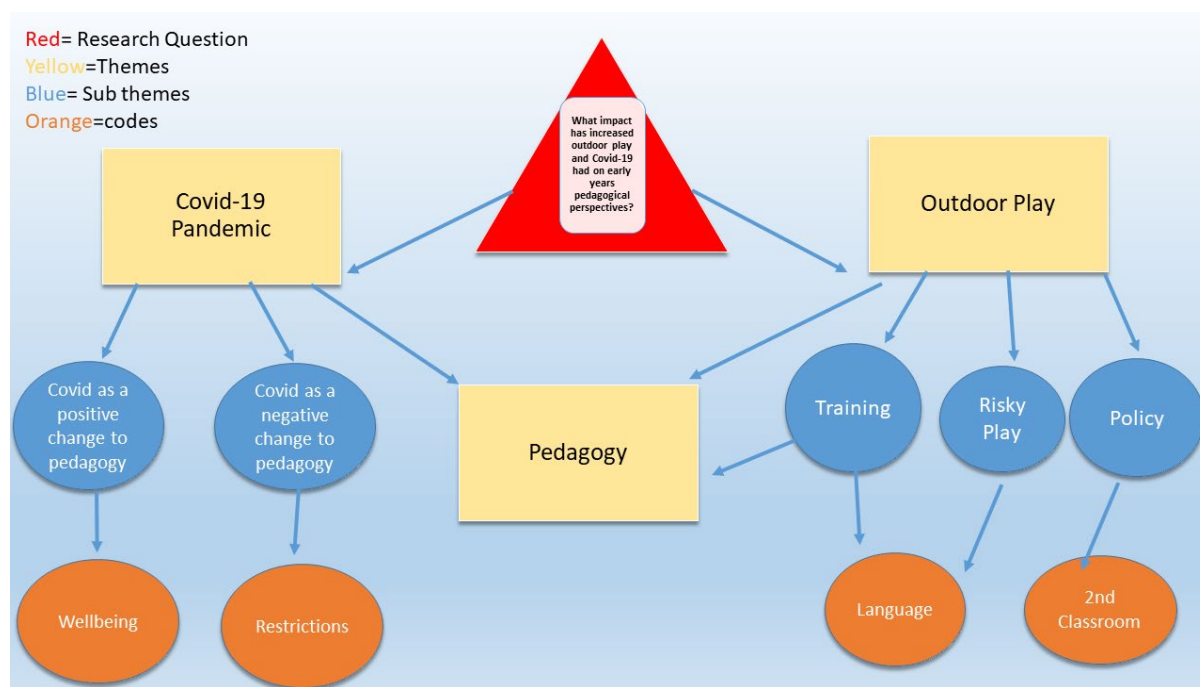
According to Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), a project or study should have 'goodness' at its centre- that there is criteria to be met to ensure that a project a whole and not just the ethical approval has been developed and put to good use and therefore the researcher has "an unwavering commitment to ethics and the improvement of the human condition in the context in which they work" (Groundwater- Smith and ,2007:209) .Goodness can relate too to the protocols, process and collaboration between participants and the researcher as benchmarks for the ethical standards researchers should be adhering to. These benchmarks add validity to the research and can contain outcome, process, democratic, catalytic and dialogic validity (Anderson and Kerr, cited in Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007:203). In terms of this project, the outcome is the impact of said enquiry-has led to resolution of the problem at hand? The scale of this study does not warrant a reframing of a problem but it contributes to wider discussions around outdoor play provision and pedagogical concerns whilst giving the participants opportunity to express their anonymously; at the beginning of the online discussion group, participants were asked to keep their cameras off if they wished to preserve anonymity but pseudonyms were also used in order to protect identities once the data is published. The use of a consent form and privacy notice also aiding in demonstrating the democratic validity of the study and liaising with the supervisor on this issue as transparency in compliance process shows engagement with all partners in the enquiry. In terms of dialogic validity, a study which values dialogue involves not only the speaker but requires the person to clarify their meanings to an involved 'other' (Ragland, 2006:172) and this realization can happen in the midst of a conversation and by playing a facilitator role in the discussion group, these dialogic interactions could take place and trustworthiness was then embedded within the project. The transformative potential of this research may be small scale in terms of catalytic validity but it has offered participants the chance to speak with other early years practitioners and reflect on practice, an

opportunity that has not be as available in the last year and a half due to covid-19 restrictions and could therefore be of use in creating an informal community of practice. So in a sense, the sharing or unburdening of concerns, frustrations and challenges and possible solutions has meant that the knowledge created with the context of the enquiry has been put to good use, as Groundwater-Smith and Mockler describe it

In terms of facilitating a thread of goodness and ethicality within an interpretivist study, it is important that instead of creating a stance where rationality, objectivity and pragmatism is valued above all else (White and Fitzgerald, 2010:281) .Participant's views and perceptions are of utmost importance, it is important from an ethical standpoint that their views are considered and that they are given the chance to challenge or alter their testimony. In order to facilitate this, the researcher gave every participant in the focus group the chance to speak, or abstain from any questions during the recording and endured that there were equal levels of participation to avoid louder voices from dominating the conversation. The opportunity to view transcripts after the discussion group if they wished to alter anything was another means of valuing participant's contributions. The participants were happy to proceed without changes, but this interaction helped to build a relationship based on reciprocity (White and Fitzgerald: 2010:282) which increased the participants trust in the research process overall. By ensuring that ethics are a consideration throughout and not either a barrier to overcome at the beginning or to be added on as an afterthought, it lead to frank and honest discussions within the data collections and led the richer data being collected overall which impact on the findings and discussions on the research which is contained in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4 –Presentation of findings and Discussion

Diagram 1



In the following chapter, the analysis, presentation and discussion of the data collection, as described in Chapter 3 , provides the foundation from which to develop the discussion on the basis of my research study: What impact has increased outdoor play and Covid-19 had on early years' practitioner's pedagogical perspectives? Data collected from the online questionnaire will be presented first, as this allowed for latent themes to emerge from which formed the line of the questioning for the online discussion group. Data collected from the discussion group was analysed by adopting Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analytical approach (see diagram 1) Thematic analysis is a means of identifying patterns or themes in the data that can address the research question at hand or saying something regarding an issue. (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017:3353). Some of the codes identified during this process included: risky play, learning, wellbeing, language, communication, restrictions, training, confidence, outdoor champions, 2<sup>nd</sup> classroom, policy, opportunity, outdoors. From these codes, themes were identified and formed the research findings: Outdoor play and changes to pedagogy, Pedagogical implications of Covid-19 and Practitioner perspective of training in developing outdoor play pedagogy. The themes will be discussed and will lead on to the previous links to research recommendations for practice and subsequent conclusions contained in Chapter 5.

#### 4.1 Presentation of findings

Turning to the initial questionnaire, participants were asked to categorize their setting in respect of the outdoor space available; indoor setting, indoor/outdoor setting with 20% additional capacity has been created with Space to grow national practice guidelines have been implemented, dispersed or satellite setting or a fully outdoor setting with minimal infrastructure. This established how long increased outdoors play provision had been taking place in the setting if at all, this may or may not have given an indication as to the practitioner’s general view of how they see outdoor provision within their setting. There were 9 respondents in total to the online questionnaire and out of the nine practitioners that responded, 6 described themselves as an indoor/outdoor setting while 3 described themselves as the more traditional early years setting with an indoor space with separate outdoor space. There was also a variety of responses with settings which have only recently started offering increased outdoor provision to support the 1140 hours and some settings which have newly built and have had outdoor provision high up on the agenda since its inception which could indicate the level of engagement with outdoor play experiences. The practitioners were also asked describe their practice prior to any changes to the outdoor provision of their settings or the increase to the 1140 hours if applicable as contained in Table 1.

Prior to the changes being implemented, how would you describe your practice in relation to the outdoors? ( taken from Online Questionnaire responses , Appendix 3)	
Positive perspective of practice	Negative perspective of practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Always strived to deliver outdoors as often as I could.”</li> <li>• “Focus on developing outdoors especially when My World Outdoors was published.”</li> <li>• “Keen to develop”</li> <li>• “We have free flow play”</li> <li>• “Very good”</li> <li>• “Always something new to learn or carry forward.”</li> <li>• “Having the ability to differentiate learning experiences outdoors.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Practice not as it should have and should have done on reflection. I didn’t fully see the benefits of outdoor education and it wasn’t an area I liked to be in. I feel this way because I didn’t have much training.”</li> <li>• “Lack of space-high restrictions. Delivering below standard opportunities. Lot’s of plastic resources. Adult driven and not child led.”</li> </ul>

Table 1

Table 1: Practitioner’s description of practice prior to increased outdoor provision

They were also asked to rate themselves in terms of confidence as a practitioner (1=not very confident and 5 being very confident) in the outdoor learning environment, pre and post changes to their outdoor provision. The majority of respondents placed themselves in the middle in terms of

their confidence with a few expressing little confidence echoing the descriptions of practice. Since the changes were implemented there was then an increase in confidence with no one scoring themselves below a three which suggests that having training supports and space available makes a huge difference in allowing practitioners to explore outdoor pedagogy. In responses concerned with the development of outdoor pedagogy in their setting, there was consensus in terms of specific training needed for outdoor learning and time required to explore outdoor play pedagogy as a whole team approach, which relates to the literature in terms of 'time, space and immersive experience' are all required in the process of perception change and a redrawing of the work roles in terms of practitioners being expected to be outside more. (Copeland et al, 2012, cited in Wishart and Rouse, 2019: 2295)

In addition, pedagogical perspectives centred on increased outdoor provision due to the 1140 hours expansion had allowed some practitioners to build on their passion for the outdoors that existed prior to the expansion, while some had cited that they had developed more risky play in their settings. Covid's impact on pedagogy varied with some citing the restrictions impacting on resources and space available while most conceded that it had led to a significant increase in outdoor play, play focused on wellbeing and the realisation that most curricular areas could be met outdoors.

## 4.2 Outdoor play and changes to pedagogy

**"It would be more of a getting fresh air, rather than learning outside...I think, since *My World Outdoors* come out, it's kinda made it more like this is place for learning as well. It's not just a place to go outside and burn off some energy for a bit"**  
Discussion Group P2

### *Vignette 1*

By using the responses from the questionnaire as a springboard to the discussion group, there were clear links between the two groups of participants in terms of their attitudes to the outdoors. Similarly, to Howe (2020) all espoused the benefits of outdoor play provision and use of outdoor play pedagogy with children. Practitioners in the discussion group who have been in the sector longer have noticed the difference in attitudes to outdoor play pedagogy with a move towards practitioners seeing the outdoors as more than just getting fresh air and this has led to a more child centred approach to learning and teaching, seen in vignette 2, below:

“We’ve come to the realization that you cannae just have then outside, like bombing about, like not aimlessly, I don’t mean that, but not reaching any other areas of the curriculum other than wellbeing and physicality...Like everyone’s approach to learning and teaching I guess has been different because you cannae just sit at a table and ‘Do you want to come and see this?’” Discussion Group, P3

#### *Vignette 2*

Other practitioners noted that outdoor play pedagogy allowed for children to manage and assess their their own risk and that staff had altered their practice to encourage risk by changing the language and words they use outdoors and being mindful to not say ‘be careful’ without more context and prompting of the children to articulate the risks themselves, thus improving language and communication within the setting as well. Practitioners cited policy as a driver for promoting outdoor play with My world outdoors (2016) being cited as lens for seeing the outdoors differently (see vignette 1) that justification through policy could also be a tool for new practitioners to challenge negative attitudes to outdoor play pedagogy within the setting:

“I think, given the documents and given the experience, you’re actually getting more confident with that because you have black and white proof from those documents that’s supporting what you’re doing” Discussion group, P2

An interesting omission from these discussion was the omission of Forest school principles in discussions around outdoor pedagogy; explanations could be attributed covid-19 hampering excursions to other areas as discussed in the next section but could also also due to lack of specific training and time spent discussing theoretical understandings around outdoor play and education (Leather, 2018).

### 4.3 Pedagogical implications of Covid-19

“ ..when you speak to colleagues, they’re like ‘aww just let them play..I feel like I’ve not had much focus this year just with COVID in because we’re giving them the opportunity. They’ve just as my colleague said, just let them play cause they’ve not seen friends at home and they’re used to being confined but we were getting more focused activities in the last few weeks but just with covid, definitely a big change with covid...But at the moment it seems to be just their wellbeing and trying to introduce that focus. But definitely their wellbeing in at the moment” Discussion Group, P4

#### *Vignette 3*



In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an interesting mix of views expressed both in the online questionnaire and in the discussion group. Some participants mentioned the restrictions that had affected free flow play, which tended to be a main focus of an outdoor play pedagogical approach which promotes children's choice and agency was curtailed because of the need to remain in cohorts or bubbles. Similarly, the sharing of garden space and resources was also noted as an issue with several settings, with physical impinging on socialization and free flow. It was noted that although children and practitioners were outdoors more, in some settings that was still restricted to the settings grounds and visits to other areas where outdoor pedagogy could be explored, like nearby parks was curtailed somewhat because of the challenges of ensuring staff ratio and the physical distancing of staff.

However, there had been a number of positive pedagogical developments in claims that the wellbeing of staff had been improved by being outdoors, despite initial hesitation to outdoor learning prior to covid-19. This would suggest that covid-19 is an even more important factor in the development of outdoor pedagogy than the 1140 hours but this change was pronounced in in regards to practitioners who were still hesitant about the risks and challenges of the outdoors but the risks of covid-19 from indoor environments had skewed this viewpoint:

“Yeah they may feel like more relaxed outdoors alone like practitioners might feel a bit, little stressed and see like you know all these germs and you know, cleaning everything all the time. So maybe when they're outside they might feel a bit feel bit more relaxed and they're able to focus on the learning.” Discussion group,PR2

It was also striking that although the practitioners discuss the variety of benefits and curriculum opportunities that outdoor play presents, within a covid context, this shift had moved again to concentrate on children's wellbeing after being in lockdown after missing out on socializing with friends and that had become the primary focus of practice and pedagogy, as evidenced in vignette 3.

#### 4.4 Practitioner perspectives of training in developing outdoor play pedagogy.

“We're really lucky that our manager is really involved and really wanting to drive the outdoors forward and that we all get time to go on that. See if you're not getting time or getting asked to do it at home then who is going to go? No. That's not maybe not a fault just with the outdoor stuff it's with loads of things-what other training's nine to five? And that's not your contacted hours? You're asking people to work out with, and that's just cannae happen if it's family commitments out with that time.” Discussion Group P3

#### *Vignette 4*

Training as theme ran throughout the discussion group in relation to developing outdoor play pedagogy and built on the views expressed in the online questionnaire in terms of its importance in developing outdoor play pedagogy in the wake of the expansion and the covid-19 pandemic. This links to the literature from Howe et al (2020) and Bilton (2020) that appropriate training can aid in removing barriers to practitioners developing outdoor pedagogy in their setting. As seen in Vignette 4, there were responses which detailed overall positive attitudes to training to improve outdoor pedagogy but also the barriers in access. Staff ratio and opportunities and changes to hours meaning a reduction in the twilight training opportunities were also noted, but generally the perspectives of training was positive but with little time accounted for in terms of attending and feeding back to learning to colleagues. On the back of this, there was the criticism around the term 'Outdoor champion' where settings have one specific person who spearhead outdoor play and some of the discussion group noted that this could be counterproductive as it centres around staff who Leather (2018) would define as "outdoor natives" and then would fail to address practitioners who still adopted the same schemas from an indoor, more static adult led approach to learning (Wishart and Rouse, 2019) or who weren't confident or knowledgeable about the outdoors. Discussion group participants unanimously agreed that improving outdoor pedagogy is the responsibility of everyone:

"So you need to kinda spread it out between the full staff but everyone should be involved in the learning at some point whether it's going to a course or whether it's you know setting things up yourself in the garden" Discussion group,P1

Practitioner perspectives on outdoor play pedagogy were overwhelming positive in terms of the benefits to children's wellbeing through risky play, building their language and communication and allowing children to be agents in their own learning but challenges were discussed around the attitudes of others who hadn't adapted to the changes brought on both the expansion but had now been forced to due to Covid-19 and the hope that outdoor play pedagogy would be further developed in the setting as a result of this and habits had been instilled and news ways of thinking emerge.

## Chapter 5 Recommendations and Conclusion

### 5.1 Key points from research project

This research study was intended to explore the impact that both the increase outdoor play provision which necessitated the 1140 hours in additional childcare provisions set out by the Scottish government and the Covid-19 pandemic had on early years practitioners pedagogical perspectives. Within this study, the Scottish policy context was discussed in terms of outlining importance the outdoor play pedagogy in ELC settings through *My world outdoors*, *Blueprint for 2020*, *Play strategy and the Curriculum for excellence*, to name but a few. The international perspectives from Nordic regions and the Forest school approach had influenced Scottish policy and context, although there are still barriers in ensuring all staff receive the relevant training and theoretical underpinnings in terms of developing outdoor pedagogy. The data collection and analysis found that although some practitioners within ELC settings already utilised outdoor play pedagogy in their settings before the expansion, this had increased after the 1140 hours were brought in and again through mitigating the risks of the Covid-19 pandemic there was renewed vigour and a positive attitude towards outdoors, even with those previously hesitant. There were positive and negative pedagogical side effects to Covid-19 with children accessing more outdoor play and practitioners embracing all aspects of the curriculum outdoors, but drawbacks included restrictions of space, resources, limits to free flow play and opportunities to explore natural environment's outside the nursery gates. Policy was also seen as a vital aspect of encouraging outdoor pedagogy within settings, especially in regards to emphasizing the important role of the outdoors within early years and removing barriers to training to allow outdoor play pedagogy to flourish.

### 5.2 Links to Previous research

The research concerning practitioner perspectives follows from a Scottish perspective by Howe et al (2020) which discusses educator perspective of the barriers, risks and challenges in relation to increasing outdoor play as a means of meeting the needs of the expansion and this study wanted to build on that whilst looking at the implications of covid-19 in respect of changes to pedagogy. The study has looked at how the Scottish pedagogical landscape has borrowed from the international perspectives of the Nordic regions and elements of the Forest School approach but in similar to Leather's (2018) assertions that the embodiment of outdoor education into the mainstream may have left a theoretical void that has not been explored by practitioners as they grapple with the practical considerations of delivering more outdoors and in the context of a global pandemic. However, the Curriculum for excellence (2010) has carved out a space for outdoor learning to be at the heart of a Scottish education (Knight, 2016) and this will only increase the validity of outdoor pedagogical approaches going forward.

### 5.3 Limitations of this study

The scale of the study and small sample size of participant's means that it wouldn't be feasible to reach a definite conclusion that the views of the participants are reflective of all Scottish early years' practitioner's as a whole. Another limitation of the study is the small sample size with online questionnaire take up being low-not being able to go into centres to discuss the research due to Covid-19 concerns was a barrier which if removed, could have helped with recruiting more participants. However, as stated in Chapter 3, this study merely paints a small picture and could be useful in illuminating some of the challenges faced by the sector as whole as well as a means to build on the good practice and encourage reflection of outdoor pedagogy in the context of Covid-19.

### 5.4 Recommendations and implications for my practice

To conclude this study, recommendations and implications for practice have to be considered and although the findings of this research study are small in scale, they can add to the discussions taking place about looking at the opportunities that the Covid-19 pandemic have presented to early years education by encouraging more outdoor play pedagogy on top of what was already occurring in settings across Scotland following the 1140 hours expansion of ELC entitlement but that care has to be taken to ensure that aspects of a child led approach to learning approach such as free play and access to other nature environments do not get weighed down by restrictions and regulations.

Having an opportunity to formulate recommendations for practice as a result of discussions with practitioners through this study has been of particular interest. Firstly, highlighting that the removal of training barriers is crucial order to encourage practitioners to engage with outdoor pedagogy. Within the local authority I work within, this could be mean the opening up of the 'Outdoor champion' roles to include all practitioners, even those with negative perceptions of the outdoors. Secondly, all 4 participants from the discussion group had noted that it was helpful to discuss outdoor pedagogy with practitioners from other settings as the pandemic has disrupted more face to face meeting so a recommendation to return these communities of practice to allow practitioners the chance to develop and reflect on outdoor play pedagogy should be reinstated, virtually or otherwise to allow for outdoor play to improve and develop across the authority. Within my practice, there is also an opportunity for allowing space when training early practitioners to discuss and share their perspectives on outdoor play pedagogy as well as including more of the theoretical underpinnings of pedagogy within training. This could be through discussing concepts such 'Friluftsliv' (Sandseter,2020) or the Forest School principles to widen understandings of why we are

going outside aside from the reducing transmission of Covid-19 or because the Scottish government policy mandates but to extoll the opportunities that outdoor play pedagogy can bring to Scottish early years.

## Appendix 1: Plain Language Statement (Reference: Alex McConnell, 2021)



### Plain Language Statement

**What impact has increased outdoor play provision in Scotland had on early year's practitioner's perspectives in relation to pedagogy?**

Researcher: Alex McConnell

Supervisor: Jana Chandler, Associate tutor University of Glasgow  
([Jana.Chandler@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Jana.Chandler@glasgow.ac.uk))

Course: Childhood Practice, MEd

You are being invited to take part in a research study for master's level study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether you wish to take part.

#### **1. What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this research is to establish early years' practitioner's perspectives on the impact of increased outdoor play provision on their pedagogical practice in Scotland.

By participating in this research you are agreeing to fill out a short online questionnaire with a series of questions asking your views about the impact of an increased outdoor provision in Scotland within early years on your pedagogical practice. This research is also interested to find out how we prepare for increased outdoor provision ahead of the completion of the implementation of the 1140 free childcare hours being brought in by the Scottish government in 2021. The research will also ask if the COVID-19 pandemic has played its part in bringing these changes forward.

## **2. Why have I been chosen?**

You are being asked to take part because you work in an early year's education. By taking part in this research you are contributing to a part of a community of practice by discussing any challenges/opportunities with other practitioners from different settings, which may offer alternative approaches or strategies that could be useful in your setting. This is also an opportunity to reflect upon the large scale changes that have taken place, or have about to take place in terms of outdoor provision and changes to pedagogy in your setting outside of the work environment.

## **3. Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; you do not need to take part in this study and your participation in the questionnaire is voluntary. If you decide to also take part in focus groups, you may withdraw without giving a reason. Participants have a right to withdraw at any time from the research without prejudice and do not need to provide a reason. Consent will be sought if the participant who wants to withdraw wants any data they have already provided to be removed or retained.

## **4. What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be required to complete an online questionnaire. The online survey will ask questions relating to increased outdoor play provision and practitioner perspectives on pedagogy. The questionnaire should take no longer than 10 minutes. At the end of the questionnaire, participants will then will be asked if they would like to take part in a 1-hour long focus group on Microsoft teams. The focus group would take place after work hours at a time and date convenient to participants. Again, this is completely voluntary, and you may choose to just complete the online questionnaire. The data collected from the questionnaire will form the basis of our focus group where I will ask you as a group to discuss and expand further on some of the responses given in the questionnaires from yourselves and other participants who completed it and ask for your perspectives. Prior to taking part in the focus group, *participants will be provided with a copy of indicative themes and questions which will form the basis of the discussion group. You will be asked about your views and opinions on these topics.* During the focus group, you will be required to turn your camera off when recording starts and your responses can be spoken aloud on the video call or in the chat function on the side if you wish.

## **5. Will the information that I give you in this study be kept confidential?**

Any personal details of participants will be kept confidential by allocating id numbers to any participant which means your personal information will be kept anonymous in any research published. No personal details will be kept longer than necessary and will be destroyed at the end of the project. Data collated in the course of the research will be electronically encrypted and any paper copies locked away securely and securely shredded once the project is finished.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible, within responses on the questionnaire or in the focus group, with assurances on confidentiality being strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such case, I will be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

During the research, all electronic data will be kept on an encrypted hard drive and saved onto a secure password protected folder.

#### **6. What will happen to the results of this study?**

Once the data you have provided me with is collated, it will be analysed and written up and will be used to produce a master's thesis which may then be produced in conference papers or academic journals.. Data will not be kept for future research.

#### **7. Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the School of Education Ethics Forum, University of Glasgow.

#### **8. Who can I contact for further information?**

If you have any questions about this study or have any concerns about how the research has been conducted, you can contact the following people:

Alex McConnell, student,

Jana Chandler, Associate tutor University of Glasgow [Jana.Chandler@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Jana.Chandler@glasgow.ac.uk)

Dr Barbara Read, Ethics officer for the School of Education, [Barbara.Read@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Barbara.Read@glasgow.ac.uk)

Thank you for reading this.

\_\_\_\_\_ [End of Participant Information Sheet](#) \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix 2: Consent form



University  
of Glasgow

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School of  
Education

### Consent Form

What impact has increased outdoor play provision and covid-19 had on early years practitioners' pedagogical perspectives?

Student researcher: Alex McConnell

Supervisor: Jana Chandler

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

### Confidentiality/anonymity clauses

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym as research is collated, analyzed and published.

### Data usage and storage

- ♦ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.

- ♦ The material will be treated as confidential and always kept in secure storage.
- ♦ The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- ♦ I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
- ♦ I understand that material from the study will not be retained for future research nor accessed by other researchers.

### Privacy Notice

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

### Consent on method

I consent/do not consent to taking part in an online questionnaire

I consent/do not consent to take part in up to an 1-hour online focus group as arranged by the researcher.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded for the purposes of the focus group.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to use of direct quotes from the Focus group in the final dissertation report.

(I acknowledge that copies of transcripts will be returned to participants for verification.)

### Consent clause

I agree/do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant ..... Signature .....

Date .....

Name of Researcher: Alex McConnell Signature .....

Date .....

..... End of consent form .....

## Appendix 3: Online Questionnaire Questions taken from Microsoft forms

- How would you classify your early learning and childcare setting?  
(Please choose one):

- Indoor setting – Traditional Early learning and childcare setting using a building and outdoor space.
- Indoor/outdoor setting – Early learning and childcare setting where Space to Grow has been implemented enabling up to 20% additional capacity.
- Dispersed or satellite setting – Early learning and childcare setting where a satellite model is also used: accessible local park, woods, beach or other green space.
- Outdoor setting – Early learning and childcare setting where the provision is outside requiring minimal infrastructure.

- How long has your centre had increased outdoor play provision?
- What words or phrases come to mind when you think of 'outdoor play pedagogy'?
- Prior to the changes being implemented, how would you describe your practice in relation to the outdoors?
- How confident did you feel as a practitioner in the outdoor learning environment before the changes were implemented? (1= Not confident 5= Very confident)
- Has the increase in outdoor play provision in your setting changed your pedagogical approach? If so, how?
- Has the increase in outdoor play provision changed your perspective on outdoor pedagogy specifically?

- How confident do you feel as a practitioner in the outdoor learning environment now that the changes have been implemented? (1= Not confident 5= Very confident)
- Has the covid-19 pandemic changed your perspective on outdoor pedagogy? Have you changed your practice as a result and how has it changed?
- How do you think outdoor pedagogy should be developed within your setting in the future?

## Appendix 4: Extract from the transcripts illustrating analysis

### Transcript of Online Discussion Group

26.5.21 ,7pm

R= Researcher

T=-4 participants,

- P1
- P2
- P3
- P4

#### Themes attached to codes

Covid

Pedagogy

Training/Policy

Risky Play

Outdoor Play/Learning

R=So what do you think has been more important in terms of changes?

Do you think it's been the increased outdoor provision? Or covid?

What's caused the changes to the pedagogy and the way you do things?

P2=I think it probably forced the changes with some people. A lot of people probably be at that stage already with the way they treat outdoor learning but then some people weren't at it and it's kinda brought it out more. Like to make it more obvious that this is, you know, a place of learning and it's not just an outdoor area it's made it more obvious that there is potential in this and a lot of places will develop it. I think over the next few years and you see new settings, when you see the garden areas. They're just like the tons of stuff in it. Whereas a few years ago it would just be like, you know a bit of grass and just some ground and then toys would be brought out. Whereas they've got structures and things set up for children to actually be involved in it more, and it's a more natural environment as well. They've got like the plants and everything, so it's not just a space anymore. It's like a full classroom but outside. Sorry, On you go, P3

P3=So the kinda like increase in like outdoor provision and the kinda benefit that brings any staff that are like into reading, furthering their practice like P1 was saying she likes to keep up to date and kinda change her practice to suit what they should be doing. People like that would have changed with the policy to search and what you should be doing like people

that like that they would have changed with the **policy** but centres and maybe like managers and things who may have been not as reluctant as such but such but might not have been pushing **outdoors**. As much as they would have been like ELLAT scoring or like some other thing deemed more important, with **COVID they've been forced, Like P2 was saying, it's been forced to happen,** so there is but then with that you've got people doing it over so long that it may become the norm of just going **outside**. Accessing it a wee bit more.

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