

## The Aims of Early Years Outdoor Education in England: A Conceptual and Empirical Investigation

**Helen Bilton**

Associate Professor in Education  
University of Reading  
London Road Campus  
Redlands Road, Reading. RG1 5EX

### Abstract

---

*This paper explores the place of aims in the early years foundation stage outdoor environment in England. Through examining the writing of academics, various themes are identified, and constructed into possible aims. These themes/aims are compared to an empirical study of early years teachers' attitudes. Data was collected by questionnaire from schools within the University of Reading partnership. There was general agreement between experts and teachers as to the aims. While some respondents were able to explain what the aims of outdoor activity were, a significant number were unable to identify aims; further, a significant number did not distinguish between approach/practice and aims. A lack of understanding and agreement as to what the aims are may indicate teachers are unsure about the purpose of outdoor education for young children. A result of this study is to agree and make explicit the aims for outdoor education in the early years.*

---

**Key words:** aims; outdoor education; early years; outdoor play; oral language

### The place of outdoors in early years education

Education has for the most part been considered an indoor pursuit; the outdoor environment viewed as a space to support indoor schooling, and where PE or environmental work is conducted. Yet in the non - statutory phase of education for children under five, (nursery/early years), the outdoor environment is seen as a holistic space where all developmental needs can be fostered (Bruce, 2005; Edgington, 2004). Indeed when the first nursery school was opened in England in 1914 it was titled: 'The open air nursery school' (McMillan, 1930). The greater part of the school day was spent in pursuits out of doors: academic, pastoral and domestic (Straw, 1990). The space afforded by the garden, uninterrupted self- initiated play and cooperative and corporate activity were central to this new approach to education (Cusden, 1938; de Lissa, 1939; Owen, 1928). The healthy body and mind aspect of this experience outside were emphasised (De Lissa, 1939, Holmes & Davies, 1937 and Plaisted, 1909).

The provision of an outside teaching and learning environment became part of the early years tradition (Clift, Cleave and Griffin, 1980; Pound, 1987; Tovey, 2007; Webb, 1974). The 1990s saw a renewed interest in, and greater general awareness of the early years outdoor teaching environment, starting with a small but significant publication by the Inner London Education Authority: Lasenby 1990. In 2000 the statutory guidance for England (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) for the first time stressed that an outdoor environment had to be provided in all under - fives settings. Throughout, the document refers to both environments: 'these principles require practitioners to plan a learning environment, indoors and outdoors' (Department for Education and Employment 2000, p. 14), and 'planning the indoor and outdoor environment carefully to provide a positive context for learning and teaching' (Department for Education and Employment 2000, p. 23). This was replaced by the 2008 statutory framework, which stated: 'Children must have opportunities to play indoors and outdoors', 'Providing well-planned experiences based on children's spontaneous play' (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 7). This was replaced in 2012 by new statutory guidance which states that 'Providers must provide access to an outdoor play area' (Department for Education 2012, p. 24).

## Practice and aims

Alongside these requirements there was an increase in texts, (academic and practical) on early years education; the majority of these discussing outdoors in terms of provision, approach and adult behaviour. At times the rhetoric is flamboyant, lacks precision and described by Waite as 'evangelical' (2011, p. xix). Added to this, statutory guidance, although it lays down end of key stage goals for children, for the most part discusses practice, approach and practitioner actions. Stephen (2012), looking into the theory in early years education, suggests that 'a focus on practices dominates the guidance' (p. 229); likewise training course materials can focus on 'practical actions' (p. 229). In other words, the concern is on what staff should do rather than consideration of the theory behind the action. Rogers (2011) looking at play and pedagogy in the reception class suggests early years practice still starts not from the needs of the child but from 'the perspective of the adult's role in providing an environment and strategies that support the processes of teaching and learning' (p. 2). An understanding of the theories underlying the practice for the most part is missing, and indeed, in the Stephen study, staff 'found it difficult to answer 'why' questions' (Stephen 2012, p. 228).

This emphasis on best practice and approach would appear to be intentional. Under- fives education has always been non - statutory, which makes it vulnerable to both criticism and closure. An emphasis on approach may have been a response to the very differing teaching approach of early years outdoor education, which had to be continuously explained and to a great extent justified in comparison to the more formal statutory education of inside. As Waite (2011) argues, outside has the uniqueness of being a 'place' rather than just a space and with that comes an association with and love of it. However, this type of teaching and learning environment needs explanation. 'Learning to be a pupil is what children learn best in school, but learning to be an inquirer, a scientist, an artist, or a writer with a purpose is better supported by authentic activities and places' (p. 210) of outside.

However, the danger of education being shaped by 'best practice' (Stephen, 2012) is that it does not provide opportunities to understand the basic principles of the practice. Yelland (2005), argues that we may be perpetuating a system of inequality of access to education and that we need to move from thinking about 'what is said to be right' to asking: 'In what ways can we create effective learning environments?' (p. 7). Browne (2004), Stephen (2012) and Waller (2010) consider the negative outcome of focusing on practice which Browne describes as 'the truths' (p. 157). An example of a 'truth' is of 'the naturally developing child' (2004, p. 157). She argues that such ideas can be misinterpreted and can create poor practice. 'The naturally developing child' has given rise to the concept of 'free' choice and minimal adult 'interference' but at the expense of some children having no choice while other children dominate environments (Browne, 2004, p. 157). There is also the option to ignore best practice due to one's own value system. For example, risk and challenge, in the literature, particularly Sandseter (2009a and b), demonstrates, through her research and the gathering of all relevant literature, that the values of the adults involved with children will impact on whether they allow or do not allow children to take part in risky play. As Waller and colleagues summarise, whether we allow risk or not, depends on our view of the child and whether we view the child 'as competent rather than...as vulnerable and in need of adult protection' (Waller, Sandseter, Wyver, Arlemalm-Hagser & Maynard, 2010, p. 441). Another example of how best practice can inform the approach without any basis of theory, is the child-centred approach. This is taken as a given now in early years circles, but, if you do not know why or where you are going, then one is in danger of, as Blaise and Yarrow (2005) suggest, perpetuating and possibly strengthening power dynamics within early years settings.

What appears to be missing from the narrative is the direction or at Stephen (2012) suggests the theory behind the practice. This could be described as the aims- 'a broad statement of purpose, a road to travel rather than the terminal point represented by those *objectives* which translate aims into specific actions. Both are underpinned by *values* which represent essentially moral standpoints on human behaviour, whether individual or collective' (Alexander, 2010, p. 195). Pollard considers that: 'Reflective teaching implies an active concern with aims and consequences as well as means and technical competence' (Pollard, 2008, p. 15). He challenges all those in education to consider their position concerning aims, arguing that we need to know our 'value position' (p. 125) as this acts as a measuring tool, to check we are being consistent within our school setting, to check external pressures and to check our actual practice. White argues that aims are needed to define 'what schooling should be for and how its purpose may be best achieved' (2010, p. 6). 'Unless those who work in education are clear on such things, the quality of what is provided is bound to suffer' (White, 2010, p. 3).

For example, an aim for outdoor education concerning risk might help to inform practice and open discussions between staff about the purpose of outdoor education. This is an important discussion: Waters and Maynard (2010) argue that the simple fact of *being* outside is not in itself sufficient justification for being there. How adults and children interact with children does impact on learning and that is informed by values, principles and the resulting aims. With such a range of staff qualifications in early years education, it would seem even more essential to agree on these aims.

### **The aims of early years outdoor education**

Above I have suggested that practice rather than aims may be determining what teachers do outside. With this in mind I decided to examine my own texts to see if I concentrated on practice or aims. My discovery was that although my works contain aims, they were implicit rather than explicit, practice, best approach and adult behaviour were the drivers in the books. For example, the texts are centred around ten 'guiding principles,' including children's need of 'versatile equipment and environments', the requirement that 'design and layout needs careful consideration' and the observation that 'children need to be able to control, change and modify their environment' (Bilton, 1998, 2010). The curriculum is centred round 'learning bays'. My reasoning for this line of argument was that, until the organisation and management of outside is right, then little learning will occur. My first book was published at a time (1998) when the outdoor environment was often seen simply as a place for children to 'let off steam'. There was therefore a need to establish the correct approach for the environment.

A study of other academics who concentrate on researching the early years outdoor environment in England and Wales, reveals a similar narrative, with all discussing good practice. All authors argue that outdoors can progress all aspects of child development- emotional, social, physical, linguistic and cognitive, and cover all aspects of the curriculum, a belief established from the beginning: Cusden (1938), de Lissa (1939), Isaacs (1929), McMillan (1930), Owen (1928), re-stated by writers such as Lasenby (1990): 'Outdoor play is essential to many aspects of children's development. It can provide children with experiences which enable them to develop intellectually, emotionally, socially and physically. In doing so it provides a rich context for the development of their language' (p. 5) and continued to the present day: Bilton (1998, 2010, 2012), Garrick (2009), Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013), Rogers (2011), Rogers and Evans (2008), Tovey (2007), Waite (2007a and b, 2009, 2011), Waller (2009,) and Waters and Maynard (2010). An exploratory style of enquiry of the main academic writers reveals that for the most part the authors do not explicitly reference aims apart from Waite (2011) who discusses values and purpose; aims can be found by extrapolating them from within the discussions about good practice and benefits.

For example the first and most transparent theme (which could be interpreted as an aim) to emerge concerns the body. Outside is seen as a place which is health enhancing (physically and emotionally) where children should be physically active-whether climbing or building, where exercise is part of everyday, where movement is both something to be learnt and something children will use to learn about the world, where the play and activity will be on a larger scale than inside and children will learn good coordination, agility, spatial awareness and secure mature motor skills. This is a well-defined theme, with a number of facets. Therefore some possible aims could be threefold: to develop an active learner, to develop a healthy child, to develop physical strength, competence and coordination.

The second theme to emerge from the exploration of the experts' writings concerns personal development and the dispositions necessary to be a successful learner; a theme that covers much ground. This theme is aired in terms of the correct environment to foster these dispositions, described by Tovey (2007) as 'provocative environments' (p. 67). Important characteristics mentioned by all are: independence, responsibility, an 'I can' approach, problem solving, determination, initiative, self-regulation, self-worth, care for all, confidence, innovative and critical thinking skills. All the writers concern themselves with the need for children to have opportunities to experience risk and challenge. Other aspects to this theme include the importance of talking to develop thinking, rough and tumble play and that this environment is for girls and boys. In summary then, the second theme to emerge clearly from the analysis of academic writers concerns personal development, including the range of dispositions necessary for effective learning. Possible aims could include the following: learning to take risks, to overcome adversity, to think and make decisions confidently and, to develop a strong sense of self-worth, self-regulation and self-motivation.

The third clear theme to emerge from the experts' writing is that outdoor education is about developing the social and linguistic needs of the child. These two needs, social and linguistic, are closely linked. This theme is very much aired through the discussion about the most effective environment and the most appropriate adult behaviour. The authors discuss having the right playful situations, where language development and oral communication in particular, is fostered and where the relationships between adults and children and children and children is paramount. Good practice includes quality conversations, keen dialogue, listening and questioning skills. The art of sustained shared thinking and the link between thinking and talking, highlighting the importance of metacognition is expressed. To summarise, this third clear theme of social and linguistic development would appear to have a number of aims: to develop a confident, proficient and articulate communicator, to develop an empathetic, cooperative and social being, and to develop an independent thinker.

The final theme to emerge is that of the natural environment. The authors signal that children need to be outside (including the wider world), experiencing the weather, interacting with and appreciating the natural environment, learning to garden, working and helping in the environment and completing both scientific and environmental study. In this way children learn about nature and the natural world: nature being more 'the study of' and natural, being 'the experience of'. In terms of the experience the authors suggest that children need to learn to have a positive attitude to the outside, developing a sense of independence, and that they can be frivolous, and experience awe and wonder. This theme could be summarised as the child looking outwards at the wider world. It's possible aims could be the development of a deep relationship with and understanding of nature, and of a creative attitude.

In this section a broadly based scrutiny of early years experts' writings has illuminated their values as to the aims for the outdoor learning environment. This study has highlighted a general failure to explicitly address the aims but also signalled how aims may be reached. It is now important to understand how this relates to an empirical study which examines what teachers perceive their aims to be.

### **The present study**

In the spring of 2013 an online questionnaire was sent via email to the administrative addresses of all 350 maintained schools with Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) provision in the University of Reading partnership. There was a range of schools- nursery, infant and primary, the latter two having either EYFS units, or EYFS classes. The teacher in charge of the class or unit, or in the case of nursery schools, the headteacher, completed the questionnaire. This consisted of twenty seven questions, some open and some closed, some requiring a single response, some requiring prose, some requiring multiple choice style answers. The questionnaire was entitled: 'Early Years Foundation Stage - facilities and staff behaviours and attitudes'. The questions aimed to elicit what facilities settings actually had, what staff felt about certain issues and what they said they did in practice. However, it has to be acknowledged that the replies were written and as action was not observed, the answers can only be construed as a 'behavioural indicator of an attitude' (Simmons 2008, 209). This paper is looking particularly at the response to one question from that questionnaire: 'What are the specific aims for outdoor activities and how do these relate to your overall aims?' It was not asking about action but about understanding, trying to glean attitudes to a certain aspect of early years education.

The categorization of the information volunteered in the replies to the questions was imposed retrospectively after careful consideration of what individuals had written. This can be termed inductive, as the 'researchers seek to build theory from data rather than testing existing theories' (Hodkinson 2008, 99). The process involved the coding of the data. 'Coding refers to the ongoing process of assigning conceptual labels to different segments of data in order to identify themes, patterns, processes and relationships' (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 87). Themes emerged as a result of the process of coding and, as the analysis and comparison of data continued, some of the initial codes were combined into broader categories. No respondent was coded twice for the same theme. The responses were looked at from the standpoint of a researcher and early years teacher with advanced knowledge of the early years outdoor environment. Both the usual and unusual themes were identified and considered alongside the research evidence.

## Results

### *Number of responses*

Of the 350 schools sent the questionnaire, 184 replied, although not all answered all questions; this constituted a 52.6 per cent return rate. Of the 184 teachers who responded, 125 completed the aims question; that is 67.9 per cent answered the aims question out of a total of 184 who could have. Therefore, 32.1 per cent left the aims question unanswered. 287 coded responses were identified in those 125 replies.

### *Aims identified*

Fifteen coded categories were identified (See Table 1). These fifteen were then gathered under two sub-headings. The first sub-heading consisted of identifiable aims, and the second of those which were not identifiable as aims but referred to issues concerning practice and approach. Those coded responses which were identified as aims were:

physical development,  
dispositions for learning/personal development,  
exploration of the natural world/scientific and environmental study,  
social development,  
oral language,  
mathematics and literacy.

These amounted to 51.3 per cent of the total 287 coded responses. Those coded responses which were identified not as aims but as practice and approach were:

individual needs,  
gender and outside,  
role play,  
open access to resources,  
a different environment,  
statutory guidance,  
real world experiences,  
aims are same as for inside,  
no relevant theme to emerge.

These amounted to 48.7 per cent of the total number of 287 coded responses.

Of the 125 people who replied to the aims question, 80 (64 per cent) replied offering an actual identifiable aim and the remaining 45 (36 per cent) replied with a no aim response. If those who replied offering aims are viewed as a percentage of the total replies to the questionnaire, including those who didn't even complete the relevant question, then 80 of 184 respondents, that is 43.5 per cent, offered one or more aims. This means 104 (56.5 per cent) were unable to offer an aim. Finally of those 80 respondents offering aims, 40 suggested one aim, 22 suggested 2 aims, 12 offered 3 aims, 4 offered 4 aims and 1 offered 5 aims. The most common response was therefore one aim.

### *Types of responses*

There was a range of styles in answer to the aims question, for example:

- 'I am not completely sure how to answer this question. Our aim is that outdoor activities support or extend indoor learning or provide opportunities for learning that could not be achieved inside. Overall aim to give children memorable real-life learning experiences and outdoor learning provides that in spades!'
- 'The aims vary according to the type of activity being accessed by the children and what we are learning within the classroom'.
- 'To provide more suitable activities for boys'.
- 'EYFS curriculum'.

There were those who answered beginning with 'to' for example: 'to engage children in learning' although this does not leave any clues as to what specific learning. Others dealt with practice and simply touched on specific learning: 'To provide rich learning opportunities in the outdoor environment.'

To provide space, resources and adult support to develop gross motor skills. To give children opportunities to explore and discover. To encourage children to use their imagination in their play'. Some answered with a list of nouns and verbs: 'enjoyment, health and well-being, learning to risk take, independence'. Some offered short statements such as 'enhance aims', or 'exploring the natural world-role play'. Some were simply contributions about early years education: 'outdoor activities contribute and reflect indoor activities but are more popular!', 'to provide a curriculum that matches the inside', 'outdoor provision is integral to all that we do and the area is being developed so that children have access in all weathers (no covered area currently)'.

***The fifteen coded responses (these are discussed individually below, beginning with the six aims and followed by the nine practice replies).***

*1. Aim: Physical development*

The most common response as to what teachers saw as their aims of early years outdoor learning was physical development. Of the 125 answering the question, 57 (45.6 per cent) mentioned physical development. Responses comprised a range of styles. There were general ones, such as: 'The outdoor area also enables the physical development of the children', 'good physical development opportunities'. There were more practical responses such as this: 'An opportunity to develop gross motor skills eg: riding, using space hoppers, painting the fence with large brushes, drawing on the floor with chinks, skipping with a skipping rope etc'. There were specific skill responses: 'developing upper body strength, gross motor control... and co-ordination' and 'climbing, balancing, balls skills'. Of the 57 who replied with a physical development aim, seventeen of these mentioned the fact that outside offered activity on a larger- scale.

*2. Aim: Dispositions for learning/ personal development*

The second common response referred to the dispositions for learning/personal development. Of the 125 respondents to the question, 35 (28 per cent) mentioned this broad theme. Responses were wide- ranging and overall gave the impression that this was a notable aim. They included general lists of attributes such as: 'independent learning, exploration, problem solving and risk taking', 'thinking', 'explore, problem solve, challenge themselves and learn', to sharper and prose -style -answers: 'To give children opportunities to challenge themselves and task risks within a supportive environment'. Others had a more philosophical style as seen in: 'explore, and develop an inquisitive nature that feeds their thirst for learning in a variety of areas'.

*3. Aim: Exploration of the natural world/scientific and environmental study*

The third common theme to emerge was reference to the natural environment. Of the total 125 respondents, 22 (17.6 per cent) commented on the exploration of the natural world/scientific and environmental study. This had the largest range of responses for any of the themes. Responses referred to the weather, flora and fauna or gardening. Some were very passionate: 'We believe that the outdoor environment is where children can come into contact with the ever changing systems of nature and the four elements. It is the dynamic world of living and non-living things that endlessly interact through time and space. The seasonal changes and differing weather conditions provide children with a sense of time and place and offer endless investigation possibilities'. This passion was not apparent for any other theme. Other responses were very specific: 'Additionally, children have nursery pets, Mo and Jessie the guinea pigs to love and care for', or referring to one aspect of this theme: 'Also do lots of growing of flowers and vegetables'. More generic responses included: 'to encourage children to explore and enjoy the outside environment'.

*4. Aim: Social development*

The fourth most common response was to do with social development - there were 14 (11.2 per cent) respondents who referred to this theme. Responses included the broader style such as: 'We aim to provide outdoor activities which promote social development', or 'social skills', and more specific skill- based responses: 'opportunities for collaboration and team building' and 'learn to cooperate with each other'.

*5. Aim: Oral Language*

There were eight (6.4 per cent) respondents who discussed oral language but all did so very briefly. 'Oracy', 'To be able to listen to the birds', 'Cl' (Communication and Language), 'listening', 'communication friendly environment' were typical comments.

#### 6. *Aim: Mathematics and literacy*

There were also eight respondents (6.4 per cent) who mentioned mathematics and/or literacy. Some responses were quite explicit, suggesting a more KS1, rather than early years approach to education: 'Our outdoor activities in the morning link to the teaching of mathematics and literacy' or somewhat more specific: 'big writing', 'big number lines' and 'reading books'.

#### 7. *Practice: Individual needs*

Overall there were 22 respondents (17.6 per cent) who stated that outside was more suited to some children than to others. Either learning styles were mentioned or it was noted that the environment suited some children in particular. 'Children are happier outside', outside 'enables all pupils to access learning according to their needs, interests and learning styles', or reference was made to the living conditions and that: 'many enjoy time to run around as they spend an excessive amount of time indoors whilst at home'.

#### 8. *Practice: Gender and outside*

There were three respondents (2.4 per cent of the total 125 respondents) who commented that the outside was more relevant to boys. 'To provide more suitable activities for boys', 'to reflect boys' and girls' differing learning styles', 'we have an area designed for gross motor skills for the boys to access'.

#### 9. *Practice: Role Play*

There were 19 respondents (15.2 per cent) regarding role/imaginative play, with some listings possible roles play scenarios: 'e.g. Circus ticket office, bike repair shop, car wash, MacDonald's drive-thru' or outdoor themes: 'e.g. garden centre, ice cream shop, bike repair garage, summer café etc.'.

#### 10. *Practice: Open access to resources*

Of the total, nine respondents (7.2 per cent) mentioned resources in terms of the importance of children accessing them freely, for example: 'To provide open ended resources for the children to plan and resource their play'.

#### 11. *Practice: A different environment*

That outside was a very different environment to indoors and provided opportunities not afforded inside was mentioned by 14 respondents (11.2 per cent); the implication being that both inside and outside are needed to ensure that a complete curriculum is available to all children. 'Our aim is that outdoor activities... provide opportunities for learning that could not be achieved inside'. Sometimes the comments were associated with the larger- scale aspect of outside.

#### 12. *Practice: Statutory Guidance*

Of the total 125 respondents, seven (5.6 per cent) answered the question in terms of referring to the statutory guidance, rather than exploring the underlying aims for the outdoors. 'All 7 areas of learning can and should be covered inside and outside' and 'to develop the children's skills in all areas within the EYFS'.

#### 13. *Practice: real world experiences*

There were three respondents (11.2 per cent) who suggested that outside was somewhere children could experience the real world. An example is: 'We aim to provide activities that are likely to be encountered in the 'real world''. No actual examples of what was meant were given.

#### 14. *Practice: aims same as for inside*

An aspect of the aims question asked: 'how do the aims for outside relate to the overall aims?' and 58 (46.4 per cent) of the total 125 respondents answered this question. Replies consisted of single words, including: 'same', 'extension', 'complement', 'reflects', 'continuation' or phrases describing practice, such as outside being the 'outdoor classroom for children'.

#### 15. *Practice: No relevant theme emerged*

There were a number of responses that simply could not be coded anywhere else as there was no apparent theme; these were coded as having no relevant theme to emerge. There were eight (6.4 per cent) respondents who fell into this category.

### *Cross Tabulation findings*

When the 15 coded types of responses are compared, there appears no pattern of interrelationship between them. There is only one possible pattern, found in responses offering five or more aims. All these mentioned physical development and dispositions for learning.

## **Discussion**

### *Identification of aims*

The evidence presented here can only give an indication of tendencies. This said, a distinct finding from the study is that while some respondents were able to explain what the aims of outdoor activity were, a significant number were unable to identify aims; again, a significant number did not distinguish between approach/practice and aims. A surprising finding was the vast range of responses, and hence the inclusion of many of the comments in this paper, to demonstrate this range. Under half of all the respondents (80 of 184) were able to offer aims and, of those 80, half (40) offered only one aim. So not only were there fewer people who could offer aims than those that did not; even those that did, offered only a very small number. Some respondents seemed to confuse practice, which could be described as the action in the classroom, with the actual purpose of that action, namely the aims. This lack of certainty in the teachers' responses is reflected in the experts' writing. The prominence given to practice/approach and staff actions mirrors the authors' in that much of their writing hinges on the environment for teaching and learning, and approach and good practice. This emphasis appears to be supported by the Stephen (2012) research, in which she argues that staff actions are shaped not by theory but by 'best practice'.

But the lack of emphasis on aims could also be due to the outdoor environment being viewed as a learning environment rather than a teaching environment (Bilton, 2010). Stephen (2012) supports this in suggesting that the early years setting can often be seen as a learning environment, not a rigid teaching zone (Stephen, 2012). Interestingly this is a conclusion drawn from a previous extensive study into the aims, role and deployment of nursery staff from 1980 (Clift, Cleave, & Griffin), which laid great emphasis on provision of activities, the organisation of children, and the uniqueness of nursery education. The lack of emphasis toward aims could also be due to successive Governmental focus on outcomes which has closed the debate about the purpose of education. However, one could argue that this lack of understanding is surprising in view of the focus of the statutory documentation for England. For example, the 2000 document very clearly stated the various aspects of child development which should be fostered, including personal, social and emotional well-being, and language and communication (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2000). Likewise, in 2008, the statutory framework continued the theme of the six areas of learning and the sixteen principles which could be seen as aim orientated (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

Although not in significant numbers, some respondents were wholly reliant on restating the statutory guidance as aims. Is it possible that with Government summative targets, teachers do not feel they have ownership of the curriculum and are therefore unable to talk knowledgeably in terms of goals or purposes? Or does it suggest a real lack of understanding of the aims for outdoors? Waite (2009) suggests, in her survey of outdoor learning for children aged 2-11 years, that 'governmental guidance is a strongly influential factor in the opportunities offered' by staff to children outdoors (p. 3) (See also Waite, 2007 a and b). Alexander (2010) indicates that teachers are dictated to by central Government demands and these demands undermine teachers' independence.

From the analysis of the questionnaire the most important aims were identified in terms of the frequency with which they were mentioned by the respondents. From the analysis of the experts' writing, they were identified by the coverage and emphasis given by the authors. Thus, in order of frequency, the questionnaire results were: physical development, dispositions for learning/personal development, exploration of the natural world/scientific and environmental study, social development, oral language, mathematics and literacy. In a similar study, carried out in a rural part of England, the order of incidence of types of outdoor experiences from high to low were: physical activity, personal and social development, other areas of learning e.g. language and literacy, environmental education and creative activities (Waite, 2009). (However, from the Waite study it is unclear whether the types were created by the researchers or through analysis of the answers given). The order of prominence given by the authors combined is more difficult to rank as they tended to give weight to different aspects of development; but, probably overall, the following is a reasonable estimate of ranking: physical development, dispositions for learning/personal development, social and linguistic development, explorations of the natural environment/scientific and environmental study.

So a clear finding is that some teachers and the writers are in agreement about the broad intentions for outdoor activity: to foster the physical and personal development of the child. But there are also differences and it is to the similarities and differences I now turn.

The teachers' emphasis on physical development as the critical aim would fit the early years outdoor environment experts, who note that the outdoor environment is a place where both gross and fine motor control and coordination can be advanced, development which cannot be fostered inside. Two differences however appear to emerge when comparing the authors' writing with the teachers' responses. First, the authors talk about the importance of the health benefits of outside, for example fresh air and light; these are only offered by three respondents (one of which talks in terms of healthy *attitudes*). Second, although seventeen of the fifty-seven respondents do mention the wider nature of this aim, that it is a place where children can work on a larger-scale and the centrality of movement for learning, their emphasis was much less pronounced than in the work of the authors. In terms of the dispositions for learning/personal development, the authors and teachers both appeared to lay equal stress on its centrality and the importance of the outside space for enabling children to learn, and moreover to learn skills for the future of their educational life. Indeed the research by Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) places an emphasis on this suggesting that those children who appear to be underachieving inside are seen differently when viewed outside. Although authors and respondents use very passionate and exuberant language when discussing the aim of exploration of the natural world/scientific and environmental study, only just over a tenth of respondents felt it was a different environment to inside. Whereas Tovey (2007) argues, the environment is 'unique...qualitatively different from the indoors' (p. 13).

The standing given to social development by the authors is not mirrored by the replies in the questionnaire and these responses by and large are shorter and less descriptive than those given for any other aim. Even being combined with the oral language and play, respondents did not raise the social development response rate greatly. Noteworthy is the low frequency of responses concerning any form of communication within the teacher responses—oral or written. Language development, particularly oral language, is emphasised by the writers who linked this to both the social and personal development of children, but this was not the case with the teachers. From the questionnaire responses, oral language appeared to be 'taken as read'.

#### *Lack of reference to language development and in particular oral language*

Given the centrality of oral language for young children (Goswami, 2010; Dockrell, Stuart, and King, 2010), it has to be a concern that teachers may not be viewing it as a central tenet of their work or even as an aim. Alexander (2010), talks in terms of aims being 'a broad statement of purpose' (p. 195). Without this purpose, teachers may be travelling, but without vision clear intent. That the authors often incorporate language development into discussions regarding social development further suggests that while language development could be assumed to be happening, it may in fact not be. The emphasis on creating best practice may conceal a lack of quality in language development. That is, staff view best practice and assume this means quality is being achieved in terms of learning. One can only judge whether children are learning if this learning is actually scrutinised. Referring to past research, two large projects into nursery education looking at staff aims (Clift, Cleave, & Griffin, 1980; Taylor, Exon & Holley, 1972) found that staff volunteered 'social' aims (including confidence and independence) the most frequently and 'linguistic' aims the least' (Clift, Cleave, & Griffin, 1980, p. 94). This would mirror the teacher questionnaire responses today: oral language is listed by 6.4 per cent of the respondents and also the same percent for mathematics and literacy. So this seems to suggest that the 'social/personal' umbrella of early years assumes a great deal. It may also be that those who mention role play, and in particular role play scenarios, assume that oral language is, as a matter of course, happening. The difficulty with such implicit assumptions is that the desired outcomes may or may not be happening.

#### *Gender and outdoors*

Although only three respondents mentioned that outside was more relevant for boys, this does indicate that stereotyping as opposed to equality is happening. This idea resonates with Browne (2004) who argues that some practitioners take such discourse as free choice and child-initiated play to mean that adults have minimal contact with children. However, in this situation some children may achieve free choice while others may not, and this is not equitable. Gender inequality is referenced by all the academic authors. Rogers and Evans (2008) found evidence of inequality of access for boys and girls, and sometimes differences in needs, and observed that adult behaviour could hinder or enhance play for both boys and girls.

But they also pose an important question: ‘how can early childhood practitioners widen children’s gender scripts whilst allowing for their individual development and social need to be met?’ (p. 113). Possibly a focus on the aims for outdoor education would be a helpful starting point, as the discussion would have to focus on all children. This then may take in a wider discussion concerning ‘gender, sexuality, teaching and learning’ (Blaise and Yarrow, 2005, p. 56).

## **Conclusion**

This study began with the premise that in my earlier work I might not have paid sufficient attention to the aims of early years outdoor education and I looked to other academic authors and teachers to see if this was typical. From this study it would appear that this lack of attention to aims resonates with other authors in the field and is also reflected in the empirical data, in which over half the respondents did not offer any aims. It is not that the lack of attention is by intent, more that the tendency to focus on ‘best practice’ assumes the aims are apparent. Although some teachers did answer the aims question, some either did not address the question explicitly or the focus was with practice in the learning environment rather than the purpose of it. Where the staff in schools in this study and the academic writers do reveal aims, there is overlap and broad agreement, although the weight given to individual aims can be different. Clearest agreement comes in the aims of physical development and dispositions for learning/personal development. These are emphasised as important aims by both the authors and the teachers. Exploration of the natural world/scientific and environmental study is considered an important aim by the authors and teachers. Social and linguistic development are often intertwined in the authors’ work, but there is very limited reference to language development in the teachers’ responses. Further, oral language development has limited reference and is also referred to indirectly through play and social development.

It would seem important to reflect on this discovery given the concern expressed about oral language development and its centrality to reading and learning per se (Ricketts, Cocksey & Nation, 2011; The Communication Trust, 2012). The Communication Trust argues that ‘Effective communication skills don’t just happen. They need to be actively developed and nurtured from infancy, throughout a child’s life and educational journey’ (The Communication Trust, 2012, p. 2). A focus on aims for outdoor education would be valuable to ensure, for example, oral language is at the fore of early years outdoor education.

As a result of this study there appears to be a need to agree and make explicit the aims for outdoor education in the early years. This would ensure that all are in agreement as to the purpose of the education and give opportunity to challenge values, for example inequality, which may be at odds to those aims. Where there were clear differences between the authors and teachers, for example with the place of risk and challenge, having aims would enable practitioners to feel confident to enable children to take risk and to know why it is important to do so. A lack of reference to mathematical, language and literature learning, both in the responses to the questionnaire and the experts’ writing, may potentially make the early years sector vulnerable to criticism. As Reiss and White (2013) argue, having an aims -based curriculum (ABC) ‘will constantly be reminding learners, teachers and planners alike that larger, global aims lie behind them, which lead back to central questions about what education should be for’ (p. 66).

## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Professor Paul Croll for his incredibly helpful discussions and advice and to Professor Andy Goodwyn for his support.

## References

- Alexander, R. (Ed.). (2010). *Children, their world, their Education. Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bilton, H. (1998). *Outdoor Play in the Early Years. Management and Innovation*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Bilton, H. (2010). *Outdoor Learning in the Early Years. Management and Innovation (3rd ed.)*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bilton, H. 2012. The type and frequency of interactions that occur between staff and children outside in the Early Years Foundation Stage settings during a fixed playtime period when there are tricycles available. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20(3), 403-421. doi: 10.1080/1350293X.2012.704763
- Blaise, M., & Yarrow., A. (2005). How 'bad' can it be?: Troubling gender, sexuality, and early childhood teaching. In N. Yelland (Ed.), *Critical Issues in Early Childhood Education* (pp. 49-57). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Browne, N. (2004). *Gender equity in the early years*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Bruce, T. (2005). *Early childhood education (3rd ed.)*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Clift, P., Cleave, S., & Griffin, M. (1980). *The aims, role and deployment of staff in the nursery. A report of the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales*. Windsor: NFER Publishing Company Limited.
- Cusden, P. (1938). *The English nursery school*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- de Lissa, L. (1939). *Life in the nursery school*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Department for Children, Schools and Families. (2008). *The early years foundation stage setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.
- Department for Education. (2012). *Statutory framework for early years foundation stage setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. Runcorn: Department for Education.
- Department for Education and Employment. (2000). *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.
- Dockrell, J., Stuart, M. & King, D. (2010). Supporting early language skills for English language learners in inner city preschool provision. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(4), 497-515. doi: 10.1348/000709910X493080
- Edgington, M. (2004). *The foundation stage teacher in action. Teaching 3,4, and 5 year olds*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Garrick, R. (2009). *Playing outdoors in the early years (2nd ed.)*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Goswami, U. (2010). *The Wiley- Blackwell handbook of childhood cognitive development (2nd ed.)*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hodkinson, P. (2008). Grounded Theory and Inductive Research. In N. Gilbert (Ed.), *Researching social life (3rd ed.)*. (pp. 80-100). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Holmes, B., & Davies, M. (1937). *Organised play in the infant and nursery school*. London: University of London Press.
- Isaacs, S. (1929). *The nursery years. The mind of the child from birth to six years*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Lasenby, M. (1990). *The early years. A curriculum for young children. Outdoor play*. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Maynard, T., Waters, J., & Clement, J. (2013). Child- initiated learning, the outdoor environment and the 'under-achieving' child. *Early Years An International Research Journal*, 33(3), 212-225. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2013.771152
- McMillan, M. (1930). *The nursery school*. London: Dent and Sons.
- Owen, G. (1928). *Nursery school education*. London: Methuen.
- Plaisted, L. (1909). *The early education of children*. Oxford: Oxford University at the Clarendon Press.
- Pollard, A. (2008). *Reflective teaching*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Pound, L. (1987). The Nursery Tradition. *Early Child Development and Care*, 28, 79-88. doi:10.1080/0300443870280108

- Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (2000). Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority .
- Reiss, M. J., & White, J. (2013). *An aims-based curriculum. The significance of human flourishing for schools*. London: Institute of Education Press.
- Ricketts, J., Cocksey, J. & Nation, K. (2011). Understanding reading comprehension impairments.' In S. Ellis & E. McCartney(Eds), *Applied linguistics and the primary school* (pp. 154-164). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rogers, S. (2011). *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rogers, S., and Evans, J. (2008). *Inside role-play in early childhood education* . Abingdon: Routledge.
- Sandseter, E. (2009a). Children's expression of exhilaration and fear in risky play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 10 (2), 92-106. doi: 10.2304/ciec.2009.10.2.92
- Sandseter, E. (2009b). 'Characteristics of risky play'. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 9 (1): 3-21.
- Simmons, R. (2008). Questionnaires. In N. Gilbert (Ed.), *Researching social life (3rd ed.)*. (pp. 182-205). London: Sage Publications Limited.
- Stephen, C. (2012). Looking for theory in preschool education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 31, 227-238. doi:10.1007/s11217-012-9288-5
- Straw, H. (1990). The nursery garden. *Early Child Development and Care*, 57, 109-119. doi: 10.1080/0300443900570112
- Taylor, P., Exon, G., & Holley, B. (1972). *A study of nursery education*. London: Schools Council/Evans/Methuen Educational.
- The Communication Trust. (2012). *The communication trust. Our strategy 2013-2017*. Retrieved from [http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/27941/final\\_summary\\_strategy\\_leaflet\\_-\\_a4\\_version.pdf](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/27941/final_summary_strategy_leaflet_-_a4_version.pdf).
- Tovey, H. (2007). *Playing outdoors. Spaces and places, risk and challenge*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Waite, S. (2007a, June). *Teaching and learning outside the classroom: opportunities and challenges for alternative pedagogy*. Paper presented at the Affective Education in Action, Adana, Turkey.
- Waite, S. (2007b, August). *The world beyond: contributions of experiences outside the classroom in unlocking children's learning. Developing potentials for learning*. Paper presented at the 12th EARLI Biennial Conference, Budapest, Hungary.
- Waite, S. (2009, April). *Outdoor learning for children aged 2-11: perceived barriers, potential solutions*. Paper presented at The Forth International Outdoor Education Research Conference, Victoria, Australia.
- Waite, S. (2011). *Children learning outside the classroom*. London: Sage Publications Limited.
- Waller, T. (2009). *An introduction to early childhood* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Waller, T. (2010). Let's throw that big stick in the river: an exploration of gender in the construction of shared narratives around outdoor spaces. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18(4), 527-542. doi: 10.1080/1350293X.2010.525953
- Waller, T., Sandseter, E., Wyver, S., Arlemalm-Hagser, E., & Maynard, T. (2010). The dynamics of early childhood spaces: opportunities for outdoor play? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18 (4), 437-443. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2010.525917
- Waters, J., & Maynard, T. (2010). What's so interesting outside? A study of child-initiated interaction. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 18 (4), 473-573. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2010.525939
- Webb, L. (1974). *Purpose and practice in nursery school*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- White, J. (2010). *The aims of education restated*. International Library of the Philosophy of Education. Volume 22. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Yelland, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Critical issues in early childhood education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

**Table 1. Number and percentage of coded responses and respondents to the ‘aims’ questions**

	Coded Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Physical development	57	19.9%	45.6%
Dispositions for learning/personal development	35	12.2%	28.0%
Explorations of the natural world, scientific and environmental study	22	7.7%	17.6%
Social development	14	4.9%	11.2%
Oral language	8	2.8%	6.4%
Mathematics and literacy	8	2.8%	6.4%
Individual Needs	22	7.7%	17.6%
Gender and Outside	3	1.0%	2.4%
Role Play	19	6.6%	15.2%
Open Access to Resources	9	3.1%	7.2%
A Different Environment	14	4.9%	11.2%
Statutory Guidance	7	2.4%	5.6%
Real World Experiences	3	1.0%	2.4%
Aims same as for inside	58	20.2%	46.4%
No relevant theme to emerge	8	2.8%	6.4%
Total	287	100.0%	N of Cases 229.6%