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Outdoor Education in the Perception of Polish Preschool Teachers: A Focus Group Study

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Abstract

Objectives of the research: The aim of this study was to gather information about preschool teachers' expectations and attitudes toward outdoor education in the context of shaping and improving the quality of education. The study sought to collect material that would address the following research questions: What does outdoor education mean to preschool teachers? How do preschool teachers implement outdoor activities? What are the challenges of outdoor education according to the surveyed teachers?

Research methods: The main research method used was a focus interview.

A brief description of the context of the issue: Human beings are connected to nature, we are part of it, and we live and function thanks to it. From early childhood, the natural environment is the closest and most natural for humans, and thanks to our cognitive needs and childlike perceptiveness, we immerse ourselves in the world of nature spontaneously and with great interest. Preschool teachers should see meeting children's need for curiosity and discovery of new knowledge as a challenge, and prioritize

activities in this area. Furthermore, the natural environment, due to its resources, can be perceived as a workshop that teaches knowledge about the world, allows for developing children's vocabulary and shaping new concepts. It also teaches humility, patience and understanding. The environment naturally enhances the activity of children who feel comfortable in nature.

Research findings: The importance of outdoor education in children's development has been discussed for years. Unfortunately, as the results of the survey suggest, this does not convince teachers to move part of the educational process outdoors. Teachers list certain limitations and shortcomings as factors that prevent the implementation of this approach in Polish preschool institutions.

Conclusions and recommendations: The teachers participating in the focus groups recognize that the implementation of outdoor education activities in kindergartens is necessary, if not indispensable. They see outdoor education primarily as an opportunity for experience-based learning and connecting with nature. The teachers are sufficiently motivated to offer outdoor activities so that children can play and learn simultaneously. However, many see significant obstacles in the education system when planning outdoor learning experiences for their students. To make outdoor education more sustainable and integrated into preschool practices, it would be necessary to remove these barriers and provide support at all levels of the education system and society.

Keywords: preschool education, outdoor education, preschool teachers

Introduction

Outdoor education is a popular field of pedagogy in countries such as Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States. In Poland, this pedagogical approach has not been clearly defined, and similarly, foreign authors seems to struggle when defining the concept. Outdoor education is used in the training of preschool and early school teachers

in Western Europe. The adventure education movement is equally widespread. Researchers disagree on the roots of both movements and the differences between them. For the purpose of this article, we will not dwell on semantic and linguistic problems, although these terms have been translated into Polish with little consistency. The Polish literature uses such terms as “adventure education,” “adventure pedagogy,” “outdoor education,” “adventure tourism,” “pedagogy of experiences,” “field activities,” and “education outside the classroom” (Leśny, 2014, p. 41). Adventure pedagogy and the pedagogy of experiences are rapidly developing in the West. In practice, outdoor education usually refers to a structured process of learning through independent experience and experimentation, most often through informal education. Commonly used forms include outdoor team games, hikes and expeditions, climbing, adventure parks, water sports, archery, raft building and survival expeditions (Leśny, 2014, p. 41). Outdoor nature classes require being active and relying on previous experiences, as they constitute a foundation for acquiring knowledge and skills. The natural environment determines active and creative attitudes. A creative attitude engaging individual abilities and strengths is expressed through action. Such an attitude rarely arises spontaneously. Children and teenagers need the inspiration of educators to develop the right attitude (Gawlina, 2001). Teachers usually appear as companions, mentors, coaches and less frequently as providers of knowledge (Sendecka, 2017, p. 6).

In recent times, modern didactics has introduced a new trend focusing on designing multifaceted teaching and learning activities, which involves discovering and experiencing phenomena. Learning outdoors through experiencing reality allows for a unique understanding of the laws that govern nature, which helps develop lifelong sustainable attitudes and skills. In the natural environment, one can learn responsibility, boost confidence in one’s abilities, and experience success. Engagement in pro-environmental tasks gives a sense of fulfillment and motivates further actions.

Outdoor education and teacher competencies

According to Małgorzata Jagodzińska and Anna Strumińska-Doktór (2019, p. 55), education students are not prepared to do activities outdoors. As young teachers, they rarely organize field trips, and if they do, they treat them as recreation and a break from learning. Teachers' awareness of new trends in pedagogy, including outdoor education, is increasing. However, their competences related to conducting outdoor classes has not changed accordingly. Research shows that such classes are organized only a few times a year. Preschool and physical education teachers are the ones who most often organize outdoor activities outside the classroom (Strumińska-Doktór & Doktór, 2016, p. 43).

It is believed that the training of young teachers is insufficient to effectively educate children. A teacher who lacks key competences in this area will struggle to develop them in children and adolescents. Competences included in the European Framework for Natural Sciences include the ability and willingness to explain the natural world using existing knowledge and methods (including observation and experimentation), to formulate questions and draw evidence-based conclusions. Competences in natural science, technology and engineering include an understanding of changes caused by human activity and an understanding one's responsibility as a citizen (Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018). It is important to be able to observe nature outdoors, conduct research, use project-based methods and create an environment that will be conducive to learning. Teachers should develop in themselves the competences they want to foster in their students, as well as those that enable group activation, encourage critical thinking, curiosity about the world and exploration of nature. Regularly organized field activities are becoming an important developmental factor and an irreplaceable space for social interaction and building group relationships, by providing a sense of contentment from interaction with nature. In order for field activities to fulfill their purpose, they should be organized regardless of the weather so that students can release pent-up energy and become more sensitive to the beauty of nature. Children quickly develop resilience

to adverse conditions, and bad weather can stimulate their curiosity about the world and the joy that comes with being in a natural environment. A future teacher must personally enjoy nature and take pleasure in being in natural settings. If they are genuine in their efforts, they will ensure that their students also enjoy interacting with nature.

During their studies, teachers learn alternative teaching methods that offer a chance to conduct classes with children in a different way than the usual routine. But how can a teacher encourage critical thinking in their students and show them professional pedagogical autonomy if they themselves rely on fixed patterns? As Dorota Klus-Stańska writes, “the teacher knows that they should change and do something new, but they do not really know why or how” (2002, p. 223). Outdoor education requires teachers to have different competencies than those required in traditional lessons. Outdoor education, which originates from the philosophy and teaching of John Dewey, requires a teacher who loves nature and considers meadows, parks, country roads and forests to be a large playground. Such a teacher has the courage to step out of their comfort zone and follow the following principles:

- Individuals learn on their own, they are not taught (constructivism).
- Learning in a group is easier, more enjoyable and more effective.
- Participants are given choices during activities (games, challenges, and tasks). There is no compulsion (the principle of challenge by choice).
- Much of the content is learned through real-life experiences (the principle of learning by doing).
- The Kolb Cycle model, learning style theory and transfer of knowledge from experience (games) to “real life” are used in the learning process through collaborative summaries.
- The teacher is a companion, not a “loudspeaker” from which knowledge is transmitted. The process takes place in a safe atmosphere (emotional, physical and social security).
- Simple evaluation is avoided in favor of constructive feedback or formative assessment (Roszak, 2018, p. 137).

Both practicing teachers and student teachers should view the extensive incorporation of outdoor education into their work with children as an opportunity for personal and professional development. The youngest students will benefit the most from such activities. Reflective teachers and student teachers who develop their competences are able, in the current conditions of accelerated scientific and technological development, to take risks and implement outdoor education without fear of not “covering” the curriculum.

Materials and methods

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach. Focus groups consisting of preschool teachers were organized to obtain answers to the following questions:

1. What does outdoor education mean to preschool teachers?
2. How do preschool teachers implement outdoor education?
3. According to the participating teachers, what challenges can outdoor education generate?

Approach

The focus group method is suitable for gathering information (including opinions) from respondents on the topic of interest to the researcher. It also allows observation of interactions between participants and focuses on respondents’ experiences directly related to the issue under study: in this case, this was outdoor education. The data collected during the survey underwent thematic analysis, allowing themes and sub-themes to be generated from the data. The reporting of this study follows the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants

The study included a random sample of preschool teachers from institutions located in southern Poland who expressed interest in the research project. The research group varied in terms of teaching experience

(ranging from 4 months to 35 years) and place of work (public and private kindergartens, including Montessori schools). This sampling strategy was chosen deliberately so as to collect extensive material from teachers representing different backgrounds and different levels of work experience.

Study Sites

The survey was conducted in two cities in southern Poland. Prior to that, a pilot study was carried out to test the interview questionnaire. The main study took place in Krakow and Jaworzno, where three focus groups were conducted. Two sessions were held at a kindergarten in Jaworzno, and one was held at a university in Krakow. These specific institutions were selected in order to ensure easy access to the study sites from the homes of the preschool teachers participating in the study.

Ethics

The study was conducted with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the Ignatianum Academy in Krakow. Additionally, all participants gave written consent to participate in the study before the focus group interviews were conducted. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All personal data, such as names, years of teaching experience and school affiliation were anonymized.

Discussion Guide

The structured questionnaire for the focus groups was developed by an international team participating in the “Kids Lab for Sustainability” research project under the Erasmus+ Action 2 program. The team consisted of representatives from five academic centers from Poland, Italy, Ireland and Spain. The research group responsible for developing the interview guide had previous experience in conducting focus groups, including involvement in a previous project (Kitchen Lab for Kids) that also used this method of data collection. The questionnaire was constructed according to Krueger and Casey’s recommendations (2010) and included opening,

transition, key (main), and closing questions. The order of the questions was interchangeable, but all questions were asked in each focus group. After the pilot study, there was no need to make major changes to the interview questionnaire, and the data collected during this session were not included in the analysis.

Data Collection

The study was carried out in March and April 2022. The focus group interviews were conducted by two researchers with higher education and prior experience in conducting interviews and running focus groups with adult participants. The lead researcher (group moderator) in charge of conducting the interviews had a background in psychology, which made it possible to appropriately modulate communication and interaction between group members. A second researcher (assistant moderator) provided organizational and technical support, including audio recording, video playback, and field notes on key topics.

The focus groups varied in size (5–7 participants) and were homogeneous in terms of gender (only female preschool teachers took part). This structure of the focus groups facilitated effective communication between participants, increased comfort and ultimately encouraged teachers to share their views with others.

All focus groups followed a structured thematic guide, which allowed for in-depth exploration of topics related to outdoor education and provided an opportunity to analyze and compare respondents' statements.

Data Analysis

All statements made during the focus group interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Each transcript was open-coded by two independent researchers, and their coding responses were compared. Open coding involved summarizing the participants' views by assigning relevant words or phrases to quotes. In cases of discrepancies or inconsistencies in the coding process, a third researcher was consulted for evaluation. Furthermore, all codes were compared with written field notes taken on the day of each focus group session. Subsequently, two

researchers worked on categorizing codes and assigning them to themes and subthemes.

Table 1. General information about the interviews and study participants

Number of groups	3				
Number of participants	18				
Gender	Female preschool teachers				
Age (years)	21 – 30	31 – 40	41 – 50	51 years and older	
	7	2	5	4	
Work experience	1 and below	2 – 10	11 – 20	21 – 30	31 years and older
	5	4	4	3	2
Place of work	Public kindergarten		Private kindergarten		
	9		9		

Results

Defining the concept of outdoor education is not a simple task, even for those who are not new to the idea. This is because outdoor education has undergone various transformations over the years, incorporating innovative trends and solutions into its principles. However, it can be generally assumed that outdoor education is a way of learning in and for the environment (Sabet, 2018). Do preschool teachers understand it in a similar way? To find out, focus group participants were asked to write down up to 5 associations with the concept of outdoor education. Not all participants took the opportunity to provide a complete set of ideas. Initially, the study participants' nonverbal behavior showed some uncertainty, fear and embarrassment. Also, some respondents asked if they could give fewer answers. Once the moderator assured the participants that the number of associations was not key, the groups began to write down their ideas.

Associations of Preschool Teachers with Outdoor Education

Preschool teachers participating in the study provided a total of 72 associations with outdoor education. These associations were categorized, which made it possible to identify the main thematic areas. The surveyed preschool teachers associate outdoor education with:

- Development of children’s knowledge and skills (28%) – the opportunity to teach about ecology, about the forest, science (exploration and cultivation of respect for nature), and to foster the overall cognitive development of the child. According to the teachers surveyed, skills that can be developed through outdoor education include independence, creativity, self-expression and the opportunity for enjoyable play, which is a natural activity for children.
- Method of work (19%) – nature as an area for conducting experiments and observations – if they are related to nature, of course.
- Physical activity and engaging forms of working with children (18%) – opportunities for walks, excursions and sports activities (including outdoor games). Implementing outdoor education also provides physical activity outdoors.
- Nature (16%) – outdoor education provides interaction with nature, space and plants; an opportunity to engage the senses.
- Health (12%) – the beneficial effects of interacting with nature on our health and well-being. According to the teachers surveyed, outdoor education is simply enjoyable and relaxing, which is much needed in today’s technicized world.
- Emotions (7%) – joy as the main emotion experienced in the natural environment, along with enthusiasm.

Methods of Implementing Outdoor Education According to Preschool Teachers

Renata Michalak and Teresa Parczewska (2019) indicate that there is no room in the Polish curriculum for outdoor education. Therefore, we decided to ask the participating teachers about how outdoor education is implemented in their institutions. Analysis of the transcripts allowed

us to distinguish three thematic categories: conducting outdoor activities in the immediate vicinity of the preschool facility, parental education, and maintaining a balance between outdoor and indoor activities in the educational institution.

Category 1: Conducting outdoor activities in the immediate vicinity of the kindergarten

Preschool teachers implement outdoor education primarily in areas surrounding the preschool or close to it. These methods were most often mentioned by teachers, often along with specific practical examples from their professional lives.

“For example, we planted peas ourselves, and we also have a garden in our backyard. Each group has its own garden and we get to work whenever we get the chance. The children plant vegetables, take care of them and can get dirty in the process.” (Teacher 1)

“I once buried dinosaur toys in the sandbox and gave the children thick paintbrushes. The children were instructed to find the hidden toys themselves. And [the children] remembered much more from these activities: the shapes, the names of the dinosaurs.” (Teacher 4)

The teachers also said that they conduct outdoor education using primarily activating teaching methods, such as:

“In our preschool, we organize scavenger hunts, for example. We draw a map [for the children], which can be a bit challenging for them to read, but they try to follow its instructions.” (Teacher 1)

“In our preschool, we have a makeshift kitchen where various experiments take place involving mixing ingredients and pouring and so on.” (Teacher 2)

Teachers also pointed out that outdoor education offers opportunities for relaxation and recreation, and is an excellent learning opportunity.

“In our garden we have mats where children can lie down and relax while listening to stories and books.” (Teacher 7)

“Sometimes it’s just educational activities conducted outdoors because it’s more enjoyable, and sometimes it’s activities that require more space, such as discussing the universe and the solar system, where we

show the children the approximate distances between the planets and the sun.” (Teacher 6)

Only a few focus group participants mentioned implementing outdoor education in areas further away from the kindergarten. Teachers suggest organizing trips (excursions, as well as visiting interesting places or participating in workshops.

“The Geosphere Park has an ecology trail, so when we go there, we learn about plants. We also do ecology workshops during classes. There are also green towns that we go to.” (Teacher 5)

Category 2: Parent Education

Parents are key partners of teachers in the learning and teaching of children. They can either help or hinder kindergarten staff in planning and implementing outdoor learning activities. Teachers are aware of the importance of parents’ attitude towards outdoor activities. They understand that introducing new ideas into the teaching process may spark some controversy among the children’s parents / caregivers as evidenced by these statements:

“Make parents aware that getting dirty is not a bad thing for children, that it brings them joy.” (Teacher 9).

“First of all, you have to start by educating the parents so that they are not afraid of it.” (Teacher 10).

Category 3: Maintaining a Balance Between Outdoor and Indoor Activities in the Educational Facility

During the focus group discussions, there were indications of a “golden mean” in the implementation of outdoor education. Teachers are aware that outdoor activities are essential for children’s development and that they must take place. They emphasize their beneficial effects on children’s physical and emotional development, sensory integration and learning about nature. However, they also stress the vital importance of activities held in an educational institution. They believe that outdoor and indoor activities should be balanced (with a slight emphasis on the former) to provide children with opportunities to explore different environments.

“Children spending time outdoors, playing in water, mud and rolling in the grass – these are fantastic things that bring great joy to children. However, I believe it’s important to maintain moderation and harmony, to mainly prepare children for social life that doesn’t rely solely on the woods and the outdoors. There should be a certain balance between outdoor and indoor activities. Of course, these proportions can be adjusted.” (Teacher 11).

“Let them [children] draw with sticks in the dirt, but also provide them with paints, a table and chairs so they can experience both. We need to strike a balance between different forms of activity, between culture and nature.” (Teacher 12).

Difficulties (Challenges) of outdoor education according to focus group participants

The need to integrate outdoor education with learning opportunities is widely discussed worldwide. Experiences gained through nature activities are remembered for life, and outdoor learning becomes enjoyable, creative and full of adventure, even though it can be demanding. It was this element of difficulty that was primarily emphasized by focus group participants. Polish preschool teachers perceive outdoor education mainly through the challenges it can bring, rather than as opportunities to be overcome. In their statements, the participants pointed to social groups – teachers, parents and children – as well as preschool infrastructure as barriers to implementing outdoor activities

Category 1: Teachers

The training of teachers and their continuous professional development make it possible to provide quality outdoor education. In their statements, teachers emphasized the lack of the necessary knowledge required for implementing outdoor activities, the shortage of practical materials as well as a dismissive attitude of some teachers towards teaching based on connecting with the natural environment.

“It would be generally helpful to have basic education for teachers on nature. As a child, I had the experience of learning about the structure of the amoeba, which is of no use to me to all, while I struggled to

distinguish the basic trees growing near my home. I believe it's essential to learn about the natural environment that is closest to us." (Teacher 11). "Tools and ideas tailored to different age groups. These are always materials that can inspire or sometimes serve as ready-made solutions if we don't have any better ideas, so I think the practical aspect will certainly be helpful." (Teacher 2).

"I also have experience working in a private institution where the value of going outdoors wasn't really appreciated; it was seen more as a chore." (Teacher 2).

Category 2: Parents

Parents, as partners of teachers in their children's education, can either support outdoor activities or effectively block them. Ambivalent attitudes toward outdoor learning were also mentioned by focus group participants. They observed that parents' opinions on the issue varied and said that one group of parents would like their children to spend as much time outdoors as possible:

"We often talk to parents. Because parents follow the Scandinavian approach and ask if they can bring their children [to kindergarten] dressed in raincoats and wellingtons." (Teacher 14).

On the other hand, other parents are strongly opposed to such classes. Unfortunately, statements like the one below prevail:

"I think parents limit their children a lot so that they don't get dirty or touch anything, because then they have to wash their hands." (Teacher 15).

"The issue is that if it's just a walk, it's fine, parents don't mind, but where there's a need to play and get dirty, there's no consent." (Teacher 16).

These opposing views of parents on outdoor education, which are sometimes difficult to reconcile, were aptly summarized by one focus group participant:

"In my opinion, sometimes it is difficult to fight with parents. Because one parent may insist that the child will catch a cold, and another parent will say that children don't spend enough time outdoors. But they should spend more time outside whether in the rain or in the sun. And then there is a major conflict, and we are caught in the middle." (Teacher 15).

Category 3: Children

Outdoor education has many benefits, as it supports the holistic development of children. It serves as a bridge in building relationships between people and the natural environment, fostering creativity and imagination, as evidenced by the following statement:

“We made a pirate ship using only the resources that the children could find in the garden. It’s great that the children can relate to what they usually have in the classroom. So, if we don’t have building blocks to build a ship, we will use sticks or stones. If we don’t have wool or tissue paper, we can use moss.” (Teacher 15).

However, many teachers are afraid to conduct outdoor activities as they are unable to ensure children’s safety and potential dangers that are difficult to foresee. This fear-based attitude was evident in the following statements:

“Sometimes I’m afraid that when we go outside and have a sensory garden with small stones, I’m afraid that one of the children might put a stone in their mouth.” ... “This fear that something bad will happen because the child is interacting with nature can make it a little difficult for us to connect with nature.” (Teacher 17).

“A significant obstacle, depending on the season, is children’s allergies. There’s a boy in my older group with a really long list of allergies, which he obviously has no control over, but it’s also impossible to do outdoor activities with him.” (Teacher 16).

Category 4: Preschool Infrastructure

The area surrounding a preschool usually serves as the main base for teachers for implementing outdoor education. The space provides a sense of security for both the staff and children, as everyone is familiar with it. The location of the facility (access to green areas, presence of smog), the building itself: the layout and arrangement of rooms (e.g. a large cloak-room) and financial resources also play a significant role in this context.

“More and more kindergartens are located in apartment buildings, with limited access to opportunities for interacting with nature. Our kindergarten is located in an apartment building and we have access

to a tiny garden, which does not belong exclusively to us, but is available to all residents of this neighborhood. ... Older children can go to the park, but it is located on a busy street.” (Teacher 13).

“I think we also often face the problem of air pollution.” (Teacher 2).

“In Finland, Denmark and Sweden, kindergartens are huge, with hangers for overalls and racks for rubber boots. In our case, we have a tiny cloakroom, and if all the children have wet jackets, I don’t know where we could dry them.” (Teacher 11).

“I would also like to mention the economic aspect. We saw in a video that these children were prepared, had appropriate clothing, and were able to manipulate things in the water. They were well equipped. This is what we lack. We don’t have the right resources.” (Teacher 4).

Discussion

This focus study describes focus group interviews conducted to better understand kindergarten teachers’ attitudes toward outdoor education. In this area, the study focused on three issues: teachers’ associations with outdoor education, implementation methods and the difficulties (challenges).

In the Polish scientific literature, there are publications (Michalak & Parczewska, 2019) that indicate a total absence or only marginal presence of outdoor educational activities. This study corroborates this to some extent. Focus group participants make efforts to take children outside and conduct nature-connection activities, but such lessons are not regular or frequent. Similar situations can be observed in other parts of the Western world, such as Scotland, Canada and Australia (Perlman et al., 2020). Nevertheless, teachers acknowledge that children need to spend time outdoors, which is admittedly important for the development of preschoolers’ knowledge and skills. They also point out the benefits of better communication and improved relationships with children, although they also note that children need time to adjust to the outdoor environment as a learning space (Bølling et al., 2019).

Interview participants also noted the positive impact of outdoor education on children's health and well-being. This viewpoint is supported by numerous studies that highlight the advantages of outdoor education for both children and teachers (Deschamps et al., 2022; Mann et al., 2022). Some teachers have mentioned increased job satisfaction, motivation, enjoyment, positive work atmosphere and well-being after conducting outdoor education (Fägerstam, 2014; Marchant et al., 2019).

Definitional approaches to outdoor education indicate three areas of its implementation: education in, about and for the outdoor environment (Donaldson & Donaldson, 2013). The teachers surveyed see outdoor education more as a way of learning in and about the environment (e.g., through experiments, physical activity, and observation) than as a way of learning for the environment (e.g., ecology and respect for nature). Focus group participants mentioned the educational potential (as a teaching method) and health benefits (sports) of nature more often than the need to protect nature and develop respect for nature's resources.

The respondents stressed the importance of areas located near and around the kindergarten, which are most frequently explored during outdoor activities. This is a natural attitude, as it provides a sense of security for both teachers who are taking their "first steps" in organizing outdoor activities and the children who participate in them. However, it should be remembered that the next steps should be aimed at exploring more remote areas, experiencing the natural world and culture not only locally, but also in a broader context, and organizing trips and camps. This approach to outdoor education is strongly recommended in the literature. On the other hand, a strong emphasis is placed on the importance of interaction with nature in the local environment, as it provides children with practical and concrete experiences. It is easier for a child to understand and observe the problems occurring where he or she lives than global issues such as the Amazon rainforest (Sabet, 2018). Implementing outdoor education also involves the use of various strategies and methods (Gilbertson et al., 2022). Elements of these (such as experiments, observations, games and sports) can be found in the statements of focus group participants, although they were not very diverse.

Statements obtained from surveyed teachers included opinions regarding parents' negative attitudes toward outdoor education. They are usually motivated by concerns about children's health, appropriate weather conditions and suitable clothing (including the possibility of getting dirty). The issue of optimal preparation for outdoor education, which involves providing children with appropriate weatherproof clothing, was also acknowledged by Parsons and Traunter (2019). The authors of a study conducted in the United Kingdom note the importance of collaboration between teachers and parents in developing strategies that promote active learning opportunities for children outdoors.

The discussion also raised the issue of children's safety as a potential barrier to outdoor education. Teachers' fear of not being able to fully protect the child outdoors has also been reported in other studies (Ernst, 2014; Kernan & Devine, 2010). The implementation of outdoor activities should always be preceded by a critical analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of this educational option. One must consider the risk associated with outdoor play and the concern for children's safety. Furthermore, the literature points to the need for an initial adjustment period after the introduction of outdoor learning, where disciplining and supervising children is significantly less likely once they have adapted to the new learning environment (Fägerstam, 2014).

The participating teachers were aware of their own shortcomings that contribute to their reluctance to implement outdoor activities. Their statements revealed the need for more in-depth knowledge on outdoor learning topics (training, workshops) as well as the availability of materials (tools), ideas or good practices that would serve as inspiration for developing their own outdoor education methods. The question of training teachers and building their confidence is extensively discussed in the literature (Lochman, 2003; Marchant et al., 2019). Special attention is given to training that takes place not only indoors, but primarily in nature (King's College London. Beyond Barriers to Learning Outside the Classroom in Natural Environments. Earth Learn Idea [Internet]. 2010; December 9, <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk>).

However, for such training to have the intended effect, it should be conducted on a long-term and regular basis, and the classes should be held

on the kindergarten premises, in areas adjacent to the facilities, as well as during field trips. Unfortunately, given the current workload of teachers due to various preschool duties, such lessons seems impractical.

Blatt and Patrick (2014) found that aspiring teachers who have positive experiences with outdoor activities often show more enthusiasm for organizing outdoor teaching in their future careers. Therefore, they suggest that teacher education programs introduce teacher trainees to outdoor learning environments during their studies through various projects, field trips and research tasks, thus enabling them to gain the necessary competencies in this area.

The implementation of outdoor activities requires adequate preparation, especially in terms of financial support. The surveyed teachers were aware of this, as they listed several difficulties related to the general infrastructure of kindergartens that hinder outdoor education. Polish facilities face more challenges than kindergartens in Scandinavian countries (e.g. Finland, Sweden), where the idea of outdoor education is deeply rooted and educational institutions are better equipped to facilitate connecting with nature. Polish preschool teachers lack basic amenities, such as cloakroom space, proper weatherproof clothing for children and green spaces, especially in urban areas. However, financial issues related to organizing outdoor education are not unique to Polish kindergartens and schools. Similar challenges have been observed in studies conducted by other authors, for example, in South Wales (Marchant et al., 2019).

This study demonstrates that, on the one hand, preschool teachers are aware of the benefits of outdoor education for the holistic development of the child. On the other hand, they strongly focus on the limitations and shortcomings that hinder its implementation in Poland. In the future, it would be desirable to conduct a larger-scale study that would compare progress in implementing outdoor education models with the current situation. Such studies could also serve as a source of best practice examples.

Conclusion

The teachers participating in the focus groups recognize that the implementation of outdoor educational activities in kindergartens is needed, if not indispensable. They see outdoor education primarily as an opportunity for experience-based learning and connecting with nature. Teachers are motivated enough to offer children outdoor activities so that they can play and learn at the same time. However, many see significant obstacles in the education system when planning outdoor learning experiences for their students. To make outdoor education more sustainable and integrated into preschool practices, it would be necessary to remove these barriers and provide support at all levels of the education system and society. This can be achieved by:

1. Adequately preparing teachers for outdoor teaching by offering them professional development opportunities and access to a community of experts who promote the value of outdoor education. Professional development allows teachers to expand their knowledge of how to organize and plan outdoor activities. Meanwhile, a community of practitioners offers opportunities for sharing experiences, providing support in challenging situations and celebrating successes. Experienced teachers can act as mentors, by sharing their knowledge and skills with others who are new to outdoor education.
2. The surveyed teachers said that children are not properly prepared for outdoor education, especially in terms of clothing. They mentioned that parents are often concerned that their children will get dirty. In order to mitigate these concerns, we propose to establish a rental service for outdoor clothing (e.g., rubber boots, raincoats). Additionally, appropriate materials for outdoor activities can be purchased with funds allocated for outdoor learning. Such measures would alleviate the financial burden on families and thus ensure equal access to outdoor education for all children. Another closely related inconvenience is the lack of adequate financial support, including

infrastructure, materials and tools for outdoor activities. Government institutions should provide the necessary resources for at least partial organization of outdoor activities outside the premises of schools and kindergartens.

3. Many adults have no experience with outdoor learning, as evidenced by the statements of the teachers participating in the focus groups. They observed a generally negative attitude among parents towards activities outside the traditional classroom setting. It is important for teachers and students to share their outdoor learning experiences, especially when they are successful. Promoting outdoor learning changes perceptions and expands opportunities for learning outside the confines of the building. Educating the public and integrating outdoor learning into preschool practices are essential in this regard.

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