

## **THE IMPACTS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING ACTIVITIES ON CHILDREN'S SELF DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Abstract**

This research concentrates on investigating the impacts of outdoor learning activities in the nature based Kindergarten School of Universe Al-Ghiffari Cirebon. The research is attempted to find out whether outdoor learning activities impact children's self-development or not. By doing triangulation as the method of this research, it will help to get the results more efficient, stronger, and credible. The results found that outdoor learning activities impact positively and effectively on children's progress across all areas of children's self developments. These areas include cognitive development, affective development, personal, social, and emotional development, and physical and behavioral development.

**Key words:** learning, outdoor activities, outdoor education, outdoor learning, self-development

### **Introduction**

In Indonesia, the education system is divided into three formal educations. They are primary education (elementary school), secondary education (junior high school and senior high school), and higher education (university or institute). In later development, education in Indonesia not only consist of three primary education level but also provides preschool and kindergarten level which are purposed to prepare children for entry into primary school. Of course, the way of

Teaching delivered in fun activities adapted to kindergarten age and social environment. Unfortunately, learning always takes

place inside the building where it only focus on textbook and examination. Unintentionally, children are demanded to listen and receive instruction from their teacher theoretically whereas at this age, they do not have ability to think about the world in an abstract way. They need concrete examples of what is being taught through real activities (Charlesworth & Lind as cited in Dietz, 2002). Learning in the classroom also can become stale, boring, and hard to understand. Meanwhile, children need fun, enjoyable, creative, challenging and adventurous ways of learning which can help them learn by experience and improve their curiosity.

However, learning process actually can take place anywhere including in outdoor setting. Concern with this situation, there are many school who applied concept of outdoor learning. It is mainly to alter a traditional and conservative school system into a creative and innovative area for learning which combines the theoretical and the practical parts. The concept of outdoor learning lets children to learn in the outdoors setting. It provides children to explore the world outside and learn with powerful learning experiences in 'real-life' situations where they learn through what they do, what they encounter, and what they discover. These assumptions are the main reason why the writer interests in investigating outdoor learning activities and its impacts especially on children's self-development.

According to Szczepanski (2006) outdoor education is an approach that aims to provide learning in interplay between experience and reflection based on concrete experience in authentic situations. It means that experience is become as a basic approach for learning. In the other side, Priest (1986) found a new definition of outdoor education which is upon six major points, as follows:

1. Outdoor learning is as a method of learning
2. Outdoor learning is experiential
3. Outdoor learning takes place primarily in the outdoors
4. Outdoor learning requires use of all senses and domains
5. Outdoor learning is based on interdisciplinary curriculum matter
6. Outdoor learning is a matter of relationships involving people and natural resources

From those explanations, he found that there have been two approaches to outdoor education. They were adventure education and environmental education. The adventure education involved outdoor pursuits and concerned on intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Meanwhile, the environmental education involved ecological studies and concerned on ecosystemic and ekistics relationships. Thus, he concluded that outdoor education was blending of both adventure and environment approaches into a program of activities and experiences which is called by the experiential learning process. This view is congruent with Nicol's study (2003). He purposed that outdoor education is called as outdoor environmental education. It is suited to outdoor education because it depends to a large extent on direct experience of the environment.

According to Dietz (2002), outdoor learning has complete learning environment which caters for all children's needs such as cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and physical. Wells (2009) has also reported that academic performance can increase when children experience and given time outdoors. It includes games and songs, sensory activities and play-based activities that encourage children to build relationships, develop independence, and increase environmental understanding. Some researchers also found that natural world is essential to the emotional health of children. Just as children need positive adult contact and a sense of connection to the wider human community, they also need positive contact with nature and the

chance for solitude and the sense of wonder that nature offers. When children play in nature they are more likely to have positive feelings about each other and their surroundings. They have greater freedom not only to run and shout, but also to imagine, think, and explore the world (Louvas cited in Duffy, n.d.). White and Stoecklin (n.d.) have also provided convincing evidence that the way people feel in pleasing natural environments improves recall of information, creative problem solving, and creativity.

Many researchers believed that outdoor learning gave great benefits for children. The study of Magntorn & Hellden (2005) about students' perspective on learning in nature that outdoors perceived as a significant part of learning because they can explore, discuss and link theory to practice. Meanwhile, according to Alba (n.d.) there are benefits of outdoor learning for children's development, such as being nurtured, respected, responsible, healthy, and safe. Alba also added that children feel better when they know that they have some control over how they feel and how they express it, and when they are confident. Outdoor environments and surroundings act as a rich stimulus for creative thinking and learning. This affords opportunities for challenge, enquiry, critical thinking and reflection. Children also become more focus when outside, especially in a natural space the multi-sensory experience outdoors helps children to retain knowledge more effectively. This views related to the study of Bilton (2004: 7) that "Children in a good outdoor play area will appear active, absorbed, motivated, and purposeful - a very satisfying sight.". Therefore, the

connection with nature made experientially with the real world outside and helping to develop skills, knowledge and understanding in a meaningful context.

Other studies focused on health and well being outcomes. Practitioners argued that natural open spaces and well-designed green spaces provide a locus for recreation, social interaction and community action. It can be source of employment and natural resources and highlighted as having a particularly positive influence on health and well-being. Their motor skills are better and they are less frustrated, restless and sick. Morris (2003) added outdoors is widely thought to enable one to escape from the pressures of modern living, achieve an enhanced school of relaxation and refreshment, tackle new challenges, and help reduce anxiety and stress levels.

### **Methodology**

The writer employed qualitative case study in this research. Therefore, purposive sampling was chosen. It was appropriate sampling because participants were chosen for a particular purpose. The main participants as well as main subject were kindergarten students of average 4 years old who learn in outdoor setting. Meanwhile, supporting participants; principal, teachers, and parents were needed to be key informants. They have capacity and competence in their field which can provide more reliable data about the focus of the research. Moreover, this research performed five steps to collect the data: observation, interview, questionnaire, focus group discussion, and documentation.

**Findings and Discussion**

The results of this research show that outdoor activities affect positively in four areas of learning and development as shown in the following table.

The outcomes of Outdoor Learning Activities	
Development Areas	Information
Cognitive Development	Displays progress in English exposure, literacy, numeracy skills and general knowledge and understanding.
Affective Development	The most important impacts include greater confidence, renewed pride in community, stronger motivation toward learning, and greater sense of belonging and responsibility.
Personal, Social, and Emotional Development	Develop more positive in social competence and relationships with each other, with the teachers and with the wider community, and increase critical and creative thinking, also problem solving.
Physical and Behavioral Development	Giving positive contributions in being active, healthy, and staying safe

**Cognitive Development**

The results found that outdoor learning give positive impact on children’s cognitive development especially in their academic achievements. However, this result is relevance with the study of Wells (2009) who reported that academic performance can increase when children experience and given time out doors. The other study of Dietz (2002) also proved this view that outdoor learning has complete learning environment which caters for all children’s needs such as cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social and physical.

Based on parents’ responses, they agreed that nature based school give greater contribution to their children’s English exposure. Teachers also argued every lesson that relates to the nature, it can give great advantages for children.

*“..... certainly, if we relate learning English with the nature, it will be great and children will be able to understand the lesson easily because they can directly learn with the real object by seeing, listening, and touching the objects.”*

Teacher also found that children display progress in English exposure not only when they are at school but also in their home. Children always applied what have they learned especially when they doing activities that usually use in English as they were at school. *“..... we always familiarize children with simple directions that are easy and simple to say, such as washing hand, before eat let’s pray, and so on. Those simple words make them easy to practice and apply in their home.”*

It is agreeable as one of parents said, *“.....at home, my children can say greeting and before eating, they always want to pray in English as well as they do in the school, if not, they won’t eat.”*

Moreover, outdoor learning displays good progress in children’s literacy and numeracy skills. As some of the interviewed with some parents said that every lesson that their children get in the school, then it can be applied in a concrete way.

*“..... when my child find some leaves fall, then he will try to count that, even he asks me to tell him the next numbers when he hasn’t known yet.”*

However, teachers argued it would be hard to identify specific outcomes. Because, every change that children have through the way they learn, playing, and behave, whether it is good or not, it showed outcome for children.

*".... when parents ask what have been achieved by their child, ....from children don't want to read and now they want to read, it's also showing good progress."*

The important is whenever children are asked about their learning, whether by their parents, teachers, or others, they are generally able to explain something that they had seen, learned or understood.

Teachers observed that outdoor learning improve children's general knowledge and their view of the world. Because it let children understand what's going on around them, why things are happening, how one thing depends on another, and how things are linked, those are the biggest things that have being achieved by the children and adding to their general knowledge and their view of the world.

*"..... the responses are relative. Whether tomorrow they will come with a smile or feel tired. But I believed that everything that they have been done now,..... they have had a great modal of their bravery, confident, and knowledge for the future."*

### **Affective Development**

Bilton(2004: 7) stated that "Children in a good outdoor play area will appear active, absorbed,motivated, and purposeful - a very satisfying sight." In this case, the most important impacts of outdoor learning isin affective development. It includes greater

confidence, renewed pride in community, stronger motivation toward learning, and greater sense of belonging and responsibility. According to the response of observation with parents, most of them said that by experiencing their children learning in nature gives greater confidence for their children.

*".... my child is never wants to be left so I always stay in her side even when she is learning in the class. But after school in here, she feels unconfident and shy when I was there and doesn't want me to accompany her anymore."*

Outdoor learning also can enhance children's pride in their community. It can be shown, for example, when children are giving assignment to explore the nature and finally they able to explain what things are there, what can they get from nature, whether it gives benefit or not for them, those abilities makes them to be appreciated in their community so that they will realize their ability. Besides, the other impact is about motivation toward learning. Some teachers said that outdoor learning emerges children's enthusiasm in learning. *"..... absolutely they very like and show greater enthusiasm when they do outdoor activities,... even they will angry if they don't come to school because of day off."*

In addition, the principle argued that the important way to enhance children' motivation is by instilling them with the perception of learning. If in children' mind learning is only sit down on the chair and always listen and do what their teacher said, then they will have a pressure and boredom. But when in their mind learning is something fun

as well as when they are playing then it would be fascinating activity.

*“Alhamdulillah, when they moved to this school from other school, ....they don't feel bored because of our concept is learning while playing. .... we also always do outing class.... they don't realize that they are learning”*

Moreover, from the interviewed with the teachers found that outdoor activities support the development of positive attitudes toward children's sense of belonging and responsibility. The positive attitudes are shown by children's caring and concerned about their environment. The example is when children have their own garbage. They know where they have to put it. Children also show their responsibility by their sense of tidy up, such as placing their shoes or bag in its place, even putting back the book they had read. On the other side, when they do green lab activities such as gardening and planting, they will have sense of being responsible for planting, watering and caring for the plants. *“..... by doing green lab, they will love their environment.”* In addition, one of parent added by experiencing in the nature, her son becomes more respect with all things in his surrounding. *“.... when he finds worms, he says to me that they are very important for soil enrichment that's why we can't kill them.”*

### **Personal, Social, and Emotional Development**

Based on the interview with the teachers, the results show that outdoor learning gives effect on children's personal, social, and emotional development. These outcomes develop

more positive relationships with each other, with their teachers and with the wider community through participating in school grounds improvements. This effect is supported by Wells (2009). He reported that outdoor learning can encourage children to build relationships, develop independence, and increase environmental understanding. Relates to this view, teacher said that personal independence as children learn to manage themselves in a different environment. For example, children show their awareness for the environment by watering the flowers or throw their own garbage in the dustbin. *“..... how we teach a child of self-awareness, if we ask him whose this garbage, he will answer that it is his, then he will put it to the dustbin by himself.”* The other example is when children have their own problem then they can solve the problem by themselves. It creates children's critical thinking by providing opportunities to step back and think about how they actually solve problem and how particular set of problem solving strategies is appropriated for achieving their goals. *“..... the other example is when we do outing class.... most of them ask me why this happens.... exactly we stimulate them to think critically as they will find the answer by themselves.”* Teachers also added when children find that not everything outside matches the models or the textbooks, this does not mean that what they have found is wrong. Instead, it develops awareness of the complexities of the real world and can help to develop children's critical thinking skills.

On the other hand, social relationships can be developed in a space that offers scope for communication. Practitioners believed when children play in nature they are more likely to have positive feelings about each other and their surroundings. When children do outbound activity, teachers believe this gives them opportunities to work together towards shared aim. It also develops children's skill such as motor skill, leadership, teamwork, and effective communication with each other. Also, when children are playing, they share materials and talk each other. These outcomes show that social relationships of children are good. However, teachers realize that children's mood and emotional are always change every time. But, by letting children experience in the nature and letting them to have some control over how they feel and express what activity that they love the most, give children relieve stress and improve their concentration.

### **Physical and Behavioral Development**

As an interviewed with the principle that concerns about children's behavior, she recognized there is a belief that learning outside the classroom can help to overcome difficult behavior rather than be an extra risk factor. Teachers supported this view by saying that one of the attractions of learning outside the classroom is that children behaved well because they are motivated and active. Children can experience the effect of physical activities on their body such as their heart beats faster, their breath more deeply after running, jumping, pushing themselves in the floor, or even lie down in the grass. These activities are not

necessarily being negative factors but rather as children's freedom to express their self. On the other hand, Alba (n.d.) concluded that the benefits of outdoor learning for children's development are being nurtured, respected, responsible, healthy, and safe.

Moreover, since the school does not forbid children to do outdoor activities it gives impact on their activity at home. Parents gave response that their children become more active in their home such as climbing a tree, jumping into the bed, and getting dirty in the outside. *"We forbid them to get dirty meanwhile in the school they are allowed.. because of they are accustomed to do this activity, so we don't feel worried."* They add by changing their view to not forbid their children to do outdoor activity, children have greater freedom to experience everything they want to do. So that it can be channeled well.

In addition to the outcomes already described, learning outside the classroom also contribute in being healthy, staying safe and making a positive contribution. It is also agreed by Morris (2003) that outdoor learning have positive influence on health and well-being. The example is shown when children undertake physical exercise such as outbound, swimming, doing other sport, healthy food, and so on, their motor skills are better and they are less frustrated. Teachers said that children who have access with nature are healthier than children who don't have that opportunity. Most of children also show greater enthusiasm to do outbound activities. Teachers believed those activities can increase their immune system and motor skill. *"..by doing outdoor activities, their immune system is better than those who are not."*

Children also show their other positive contribution through eating healthy food. “..... *there is child who doesn't like eat vegetable but after he sees his friend eat it then he also likes it.*” It shows that children's motivation to eat more healthily such as eating vegetables and fruit is increased. Other example is shown when children get their hand dirty after doing certain activity or when they will begin to eat, they will eventually wash their hand without getting instructions from their teacher. From these examples, children know how they concern and have to keep their health.

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