

Examining the Use of Outdoor Learning for Visual Arts Education
in the Irish Primary School

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Dr. Mary Grennan and Dr. Michael Flannery at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

Louise Skelly

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Abstract

There is a long-standing history between Visual Arts and nature. Despite this very natural, collaborative, and synergetic relationship, whereby there are only gains from an arts and environmental education perspective, outdoor learning for the Visual Arts is being underutilised in Irish primary schools. This study explores and examines Irish primary school teachers' perspectives and practices in relation to Visual Arts education and outdoor learning and aims to understand what are the barriers which create missed opportunities for both. In an era of curriculum reform in Ireland, this study aims to promote outdoor learning for Visual Arts and encourage its inclusion in the new *Visual Arts Curriculum*.

Keywords: Visual Arts, outdoor learning

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List of Abbreviations

ACARA: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

MIE: Marino Institute of Education

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PE: Physical Education

PVA: Polyvinyl Acetate

SESE: Social, Environmental and Scientific Education

SNA: Special Needs Assistant

SPHE: Social, Personal and Health Education

UK: United Kingdom

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

2D: Two Dimensional

3D: Three Dimensional

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Chapter One: Introduction

Rationale for the Study

The Irish *Primary School Curriculum* was launched in 1999 with its introduction into primary schools declared as “a significant landmark in the history of primary education in Ireland” (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p.vi). The current *Visual Arts Curriculum* is a constituent part of this. For children in Irish primary schools, the introduction of this curriculum brought with it a broadened Visual Arts experience, promoting a balance between making and appreciating art and working in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional media (Government of Ireland, 1999b). The curriculum also promotes giving children the opportunity to look and respond to the work of artists and craftspeople within their community and access to a variety of different art styles and materials, all of which can give inspiration to the child (Government of Ireland, 1999b).

In 2005, the *Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1* reviewed Visual Arts as part of its study. As a primary school teacher who qualified in the wake of the curriculum launch, and who has a special interest in Visual Arts education, the findings of this review were of interest to me. The review revealed that when it came to implementing the *Visual Arts Curriculum*, just over a third of teachers reported use of the natural environment to look and respond to art outdoors (NCCA, 2005). Environment based learning is a guiding principle of the *Primary School Curriculum* with the curriculum guidelines specifically stating that a “rich experience of different aspects of the curriculum outside the classroom adds enormously to the relevance and effectiveness of children’s learning” (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p. 15). Considering that Visual Arts can be considered as a way of understanding the world in which we live (Government of Ireland, 1999b) and that experiences outside the classroom contribute greatly to children’s learning (Dillon et al., 2005; King’s College London, 2011) these findings were surprising.

Thus, fifteen years on from this review, questions emerged. Were teachers making the most of the potential of the outdoors for Visual Arts education? If not, then why not? At a time when environmental concerns are at the forefront of much social and political discourse both nationally and internationally, and at a time when it is argued by some that children are losing their connectedness with nature (Louv, 2005; Moss, 2012; van Boeckel, 2013), making use of the natural environment for Visual Arts education through outdoor learning has the potential to provide gains for both Visual Arts and environmental education.

Outdoor learning, a methodology for teaching outdoors, can be described as “education in, about, and for the outdoors”(Donaldson and Donaldson, 1958, p.17) and there has been a growing trend internationally towards incorporating outdoor learning into curricula (Dillon & Dickie, 2012; Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2008). Within Ireland however, this has not been the case (Heritage Council, 2016). Given the dearth of research into outdoor learning for Visual Arts education from an Irish perspective, and given how outdoor learning and Visual Arts education has the potential to be mutually beneficial, research into this area is both warranted and relevant at this time.

Focus and Aims of the Research

The primary aim of this study is to explore and examine the perspectives and practices of primary school teachers in relation to outdoor learning for Visual Arts education. The research focuses on the direct experiences of teachers within Irish primary schools. The overarching question which gave impetus to this research is:

- What are the perspectives and practices of primary school teachers in Ireland in relation to the use of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education?

Arising from this question, the following sub-questions emerged:

- How do teachers understand outdoor learning and what do they perceive are its benefits?

- What are teachers' practices in relation to the use of outdoor learning for Visual Arts?
- What are the perceived barriers that exist to using outdoor learning for Visual Arts education, and what changes would be necessary to enable teachers facilitate its use more often?

To answer these questions, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate in order to capture the lived experiences of the practitioners. The insights of teachers will help gain an understanding of how, or if, outdoor learning for Visual Arts is being used within primary schools. The study also aims to contribute to teacher awareness, understanding, and appreciation, of all the benefits outdoor learning for Visual Arts education confers. In an era of curriculum reform, the insights gained in this study may also be of benefit to policy makers redeveloping a new *Visual Arts Curriculum*.

Format of the Study

The design of the study was centred around using a qualitative approach, which it was deemed to be the most appropriate way to gain a deep and rich insight into the direct experiences of teachers. Their insights were viewed in the light of academic literature pertinent to the study and the findings provided an insight into teachers' perspectives and practices.

Firstly, a comprehensive review of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature from both a national and international perspective was undertaken. This highlighted the gaps in literature pertinent to this area from an Irish perspective. It allowed for a greater understanding of the benefits of, and barriers to, outdoor learning for Visual Arts and gave an insight into the policies that underpin the practices of teachers. The review of the literature also helped shape the questions posed to participating teachers in the interview process, and ultimately provided a lens through which the findings could be interpreted.

Secondly, the next part of the process involved identifying potential participants and gaining their informed consent to be part of the study. Interviews took place during the

month of March, some within teachers' schools and some conducted over the telephone. Phone interviews were necessary, the reasons for which are explained in Chapter Three.

Thirdly, analysis of the data began. The approach undertaken was most closely associated with grounded theory approach, where a systematic approach of interpreting the text led to the identification of codes, then categories, and ultimately meaning being derived from the data (Denscombe, 2017). This interpretation of the participants' responses, grounded in the information they gave, allowed for patterns to be identified, which ultimately resulted in the emergence of themes. Conclusions were then drawn, and recommendations given.

Layout of the Study

The systematic approach taken in this study is presented in five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study. It presents the research rationale and the reasons it was felt the research was both relevant and necessary. It also defines the aims of the study and the format in which it is presented. Chapter Two explores the relevant national and international literature, both theoretical and empirical, which pertains to the topic of outdoor learning and Visual Arts education. Chapter Three presents the methodology used to derive the data and explains the rationale behind why a qualitative approach was adopted. It also explains the limitations of the study. Chapter Four presents the study's findings and discusses them in the light of the relevant national and international literature pertaining to the research topic. Chapter Five concludes the study, examining in more detail the emergent themes and making recommendations that may help institute any changes necessary to support outdoor learning for Visual Arts education.

Conclusion

Children's learning is fundamentally shaped and moulded by the environments in which they learn, both indoors and outdoors, and it is of vital importance that they are given opportunities to engage with nature, given their future responsibilities as custodians of the earth (NCCA, 2020). Schools are in a unique position to enable children to engage with the natural environment (Heritage Council, 2016; King's College London, 2010). The

opportunities to provide this connectedness to nature should not be missed. What adults say to children about the value of nature is important, but our actions should match our words (Louv, 2005). Learning in and through the Visual Arts can contribute greatly to the holistic development of the child (Hoffman Davis, 2008; Government of Ireland, 1999b) and allowing children to learn about our environment in quality Visual Arts provision can be mutually beneficial to both nature and to Visual Arts.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will present a comprehensive overview of the pertinent literature available in relation to outdoor learning both nationally and internationally, and in particular, how it can relate to the teaching of Visual Arts. It will be divided into three distinct but interrelated sections. It will begin by exploring outdoor learning in general, examining some definitions, as well as policies and practices that underpin outdoor learning, both from a national and international perspective. Included will be an exploration of the perceived or proven benefits of, and potential barriers to outdoor learning. Secondly, it will explore the nature of Visual Arts education and its significant role in the holistic development of the child. Finally, it will examine the potential for Visual Arts education and outdoor learning to collide and coincide, allowing for meaningful learning both in and through the Visual Arts, for 21st century children.

Art is a way of knowing, a means by which we can make sense of the world, and Visual Arts helps develop perceptual awareness in children, allowing them to understand the environment which they inhabit (Government of Ireland, 1999b). Environment-based learning is a guiding principle of the *Primary School Curriculum* in Ireland, with the curriculum guidelines specifically stating that a “rich experience of different aspects of the curriculum outside the classroom adds enormously to the relevance and effectiveness of children’s learning” (Government of Ireland, 1999a, p. 15). The natural world provides children with countless opportunities to experience beauty, with nature itself a wonderful resource for the aesthetic development of the child (Government of Ireland, 1999d; Wilson, 2012). Thus, combining environment-based learning in the outdoors with Visual Arts education in the primary school would seem to be a logical and natural partnership. According to the Heritage Council (2016), schools are in a unique position to educate their students about the natural world, and the autonomy of school means that they can

determine how much contact with the outdoors children will have. However, in 2005, the *Primary Curriculum Review Phase 1* reviewed the *Visual Arts Curriculum* in Ireland. Its findings revealed that when it came to using the outdoors for Visual Arts education, just over half of the teachers interviewed reported taking the children outdoors to look and respond to art in the environment and of those, just over 39% focused on the natural environment (NCCA, 2005). Therefore, as Visual Arts educators, teachers must ask themselves, are they making the most of the advantages and benefits learning in the outdoors and in particular outdoor learning can provide, or are there missed opportunities in both policy and practice to reap the rewards of learning in the outdoors?

Outdoor Learning

Examining the relevant literature revealed many definitions of outdoor learning. It also revealed the benefits and perceived barriers to outdoor learning, both nationally and internationally. Connectedness to nature was a defining feature of outdoor learning that featured prominently within the literature. These will be discussed in this section.

Outdoor learning definitions. Use of the outdoor environment for learning can be broad and varied. Outdoor learning is a subset of use of the environment and has some very specific benefits, which will be explored later in the chapter. What constitutes outdoor learning can be difficult to define. It is not simply taking what is learned indoors to the outdoors. It is a practice or methodology which includes experiential learning where the process of learning is through hands-on experience, and often includes environmental education (Humberson, Prince & Henderstone, 2016). The holistic development of the student is a fundamental principle of outdoor learning. “Challenge, enjoyment, relevance, depth, development of the whole person and an adventurous approach to learning are at the core of outdoor pedagogy” (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, p.7). It includes the “use of places other than the classroom for teaching and learning” (Department for Education and Skills, [DfES] 2006, p.01) and within a school setting this could encompass the use of school grounds, gardens or the local outdoor environment, both built and natural. Notwithstanding the call of the urban environment and its potential for Visual Arts

learning through architecture, sculpture or street art, for the purpose of this study, when discussing outdoor learning in schools, I will be referring to outdoor learning as experiential learning which is happening in the outdoors and which allows children to experience, understand, and respond to the natural world. This definition is consistent with Dillon and Dickie (2012) who succinctly define this type of outdoor learning as learning in the natural environment, as opposed to the built environment, which encompasses learning about living and non-living materials in places such as school grounds, parks, rivers, forests, open spaces and coastlines.

Connecting with nature. There has been a renewed interest in the last two decades, both in Europe and further afield, in the concept of outdoor learning in the natural environment from the perspective of teaching and learning (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2008; Waite, Passy, Gilchrist, Hunt & Blackwell, 2016). One such reason for this is the belief that children are losing their connection with the outdoors and with nature in particular. Richard Louv (2005) in his influential and noteworthy book *Last Child in the Woods* emphasises the importance of nature in a child's life by suggesting that children may very well need nature, just as much as they need food or sleep. Van Boeckel (2013) goes further suggesting that the problem of the growing disconnect between humans and nature is one of the most concerning ecological issues of our time. This reflects the theory of biophilia, posited by Wilson (1984) which is the hypothesis that humans have an innate need or natural tendency to connect to nature. In the UK, the National Trust commissioned a report that asserts that this precious contact with nature is vital, as the changing face of children's engagement with nature, in comparison to that of previous generations, is a cause for major concern for children's physical and mental health (Moss, 2012).

Why is this so important, particularly for primary school educators? Children's relationship with nature and how they experience the natural environment changes with age, with early childhood being an age of wonder for the child (Wooley, Pattacini &

Somerset-Ward, 2009). Childhood, particularly from the ages of five or six, to eleven or twelve, a time when children are in primary school, seems to be a special time or a window of opportunity when they can experience a unique connection with nature (Cobb, 1993). Cobb (1993) explains that during this period of childhood, the child experiences nature in a highly evocative way, by virtue of an intuitive sense of unity with nature. Children's experiences in their formative years shape their lives and determine their futures (NCCA, 2020). Indeed, children's experiences in the natural environment influence how they behave as adults and a connectedness with nature as a child can influence how they value nature as adults (Wooley et al., 2009). Thus, it could be conceivably suggested that children should be given as many opportunities to engage meaningfully with nature while this window of opportunity is still open.

Schools have a role to play in providing this access (Heritage Council, 2016; King's College London, 2010). Louv (2005) argues that humankind's relationship with nature is fundamentally shifting and our modern societies and educational institutions are not helping, inadvertently teaching young people to avoid nature, resulting in the phenomenon called 'nature deficit disorder'. The consequence of this, according to Louv, is having a detrimental effect on children's mental, spiritual, and physical health. The key to addressing this deficit is perhaps therefore to spend more time in the natural environment, as studies have shown that time spent in natural environments can increase children's access to, and engagement with nature (Waite et al., 2016). With such a strong urge or need to have a meaningful connection to the natural world, it would seem fitting that schools, where most children spend a considerable amount of their time, would play their part and give as many opportunities as possible to make and maintain those connections. Visual Arts education can play a role in this access, allowing teachers to take their lessons out into the natural environment, observing the colours, textures, lines and forms of nature, while simultaneously allowing children this precious access to the natural environment.

Other benefits to outdoor learning. Emerging from the theories of educational pioneers such as Froebel and Rousseau, this growing interest in the potential of the outdoor environment for education is evidenced in the increase of international research into the benefits that learning in the outdoors can confer. Research has found that outdoor learning does not just serve to give children opportunities to connect with nature. The *Natural Connections Demonstration Project* (Waite et al., 2016) was a four year comprehensive undertaking in the UK, intended to stimulate teachers to build more outdoor learning in the natural environment into both their practice and planning, and to support schools in this endeavour. Its findings demonstrate the multifaceted benefits of outdoor learning. Throughout its tenure, pupils reported experiencing increased feelings of connection to nature, as well as enjoyment of lessons and more engagement with learning (Waite et al., 2016). Improved well-being was also reported and teachers noticed improvements in behaviour and in overall attainment (Waite et al., 2016). These findings reflected previous research conducted in the UK, where a meta-analysis of 150 pieces of research on outdoor learning was commissioned. This comprehensive analysis (Rickinson et al., 2004) found that outdoor learning, when properly planned and well taught, can benefit learners socially, physically, affectively, and perhaps to a lesser extent, cognitively. In other words, children who learn outdoors “know more, understand more, feel better, behave better, work more co-operatively and are physically fitter” (Moss 2012, p.9). From an educational perspective, research has found that learning in the outdoors has overarching and considerable benefits. In fact, Natural England (2011) asserts that because the diverse benefits of outdoor learning complement each other, this may mean that learning in the natural environment’s overall benefit to society as a whole, is greater than the sum of its constituent parts. This phenomenon occurs, according to Natural England because the benefits to children can translate into benefits for schools, including better staff morale, a more attractive school to prospective parents, and monetary benefits to society as a whole, when the reduction of health and wellbeing issues are taken into account.

Of course, in a child centred curriculum, like the *Primary School Curriculum* in Ireland, the learning preferences of the child should be taken into account when planning and implementing the curriculum (Murphy, 2004; Government of Ireland, 1999a). Not all children of course will enjoy the outdoors and a minority do not like nor value learning outdoors (Dillon, Morris, O'Donnell, Reid & Rickinson, 2005). However, the majority of children do prefer being in the outdoors as opposed to being indoors (Heritage Council, 2016; Waite & Rea, 2007) and with children in Ireland spending over a thousand hours a year in compulsory primary school education, it would seem that allowing children more time outdoors would be preferable to confining them indoors, for the duration of their education. The reasons for this preference are varied but moving around freely and being physically active, which learning in the outdoors affords (Rivkin, 1995), is an obvious and attractive benefit of using the outdoor environment for children. Sjoblom and Svens (2018) also found that children in Finland reported preferring learning in outdoor environments, as it gives them the opportunity to move around more and make use of alternative materials and resources, rather than just using books.

From Scotland to Wales, from New Zealand to Finland, governments in the last two decades have sought to incorporate and integrate outdoor learning into their school curricula through curriculum reform (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2008; Welsh Government, 2015). Recent curriculum reforms in Finland have implemented a National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education Education, 2016) which takes a more holistic approach to education. Teaching and learning must be done in collaboration with the outdoor environment, including the natural environment as opposed to using just their schoolyards (Sjoblom & Svens, 2018). The University of Lapland offers pioneering programmes where students can choose an outdoor learning-oriented pathway in primary teacher education. Many universities offer free-standing courses in outdoor education so teachers coming out of universities would be well-trained and confident to implement learning in the outdoors (Sarivaara & Uusiautti, 2018).

In Scandinavia, culture, policy, and practice all combine to create plentiful opportunities for children to learn in the outdoors. Learning and Teaching Scotland (2010), keen to take advantage of what it calls the rich urban and rural environments that are available in Scotland, assert that all children must have the opportunity to have good quality outdoor learning experiences in their journey through education. Further afield in the Southern Hemisphere, the Australian curriculum has the same recognition of the value of outdoor learning, stating that any learning experience that can happen in the outdoor environment can make a positive contribution to a wide range of learning areas (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014). The common thread here or what is of note, is that these governments and their education systems are putting into policy what they want in practice. From an Irish perspective however, this has not necessarily been the case. Despite the fact that environment-based learning is highlighted as a guiding principle of learning in the *Primary School Curriculum*, “children’s relationship with the natural environment has received scant consideration in Irish law and policy”(Heritage Council, 2016, p.48). Given the global interest in learning outdoors and the belief that children are losing their connection with nature, it is unfortunate, if true, that Irish policy seems to be lagging behind our international counterparts in this area.

Environmental concerns of sustainability and climate change are at the forefront of much discourse presently, being both topical and relevant to the lives of young people today. Schools both in Ireland and internationally are aware of the importance of encouraging young people to engage with their environment. Green-Schools, known internationally as Eco-Schools, is Ireland’s largest environmental education programme being taught within many schools and Eco-Schools boasts over 16 million students participating in over 62 countries worldwide (Green Schools Ireland, 2020). The *Lima Declaration*, recognising the important role schools can play in this regard, has encouraged all governments to include the issue of climate change in their curricula

(United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2014). Could outdoor learning in Visual Arts contribute to this effort to combat climate change?

Opinions are divided as to whether access to nature alone will ensure that children will develop strong environmental values. While Gill (2014) asserts that the connections with nature that children can forge through outdoor learning can promote pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours as adults, Rickinson et al. (2004) are rather more sceptical that experiences in nature automatically translates into environmental awareness, appreciation or activism. A small action research study in Finland, where environmental learning is part of the core curriculum, found that integrating environmental education into teaching, in a classroom setting alone, does not increase the learners' interest in sustainability or lifestyle choices, as attitudes can be hard to change (Kankainen, Maatta & Uusiautti, 2017). Thus, simply teaching children about the environment is not enough, they must experience it too. Jan van Boeckel (2013) working in the field of arts-based environmental education in Finland asserts acquiring knowledge does not automatically lead to changes in attitude and therefore change in behaviours. Moreover, simply moving learning environments from indoors to outdoors does not guarantee the quality of the learning, as outdoor learning needs to be much more carefully designed than traditional lessons conducted in the classroom (Sarivaara & Uusiautti, 2018). To ensure it has the best chance of achieving its aims, environmental education must be well-planned and of good quality but more importantly must happen outdoors, where children can have first-hand experience of nature and the environment.

Barriers to outdoor learning. Paradoxically, despite the growing evidence of the benefits of outdoor learning environments, the opportunities afforded to children to learn outdoors vary from country to country, depending on a variety of factors, including policy, practice and indeed culture. Nordic countries including Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland have long and established traditions of embracing the outdoors, both in family life and in their education systems (Henderson & Vikander, 2007). The concept of 'friluftsliv', literally meaning 'free air life' or open-air living, is an important part of the cultural heritage

of Scandinavia (Sandseter & Hagan, 2015) and this is reflected in their school curricula. In Scandinavia, culture, policy, and practice all combine to create plentiful opportunities for children to learn in the outdoors.

Conversely, other countries in Europe are not doing as well. Described by Waite (2010) as the downward path of learning in the outdoors, the older the child, the less outdoor education they received. This trend may also be reflected in Irish policy, with the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) for pre-school and infant classes. *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) suggests that the majority of things that can be done inside can also be done outside, art activities included. Similarly, Early Childhood Ireland (2015) positively encourages the use of the outdoors for a variety of activities. Thus, the pre-school curriculum in Ireland puts an emphasis on learning outdoors in both its guiding principles and its guidance for teachers. However, despite the *Primary School Curriculum's* assertion that environment-based learning is one of its guiding principles (Government of Ireland, 1999a), the emphasis is not as pronounced.

So, just what are the barriers to outdoor education? Maynard and Waters (2007) argue that they fall into five main categories:

- practical difficulties including a lack of outdoor space, or suitable location.
- a lack of awareness or appreciation by teachers of the benefits.
- the weather, combined with a cultural resistance to being outdoors for long periods.
- fears of risk or harm.
- the pressures of an over-prescribed, target-based curriculum that prioritises measured performance.

Addressing these barriers, that surely exist in Ireland as well as in the UK, is important. While the issue of a lack of suitable space close-by cannot be rectified easily, teachers' lack of awareness or appreciation can. As we have seen, incorporating outdoor learning into initial teacher education programmes can be achieved, as is the case in

many Nordic countries. The problems of curricula are harder to overcome. In the case of Ireland, perhaps because environment-based learning is not overtly or comprehensively addressed in the curriculum but “subsumed into a wider range of learning principles” (Government of Ireland, 1999a, P.8) it unfortunately may get lost in a curriculum that teachers feel is overloaded (NCCA, 2005; NCCA, 2008; NCCA, 2020). Is Visual Arts education missing out on opportunities for meaningful learning because of this?

Similarly, from an English perspective, outdoor learning’s emphasis on child-centred pedagogy can unfortunately clash with the realities of an outcomes-based curriculum and research has found that despite the recognition that outdoor learning is valuable, academic performance and standards take precedence over the delivery of outdoor education (Prince, 2016; Waite, 2011). Where teachers are given more autonomy in deciding how to realise the aims of the curriculum such as in Finland (Sarivaara & Uusiautti, 2018) and where outdoor learning is a fundamental guiding principal of its curriculum, incorporating learning in the outdoor environment will undoubtedly be easier to implement than in a situation where one of these elements is missing.

The Heritage Council (2016) tells us that in Ireland, it is the character and the ethos of schools that can determine how much access to nature that children will get and that access can vary dramatically at individual school level. Similarly, in the UK it was found that the amount of learning outside the classroom depends on the particular school and the particular teacher a child has (King’s College London, 2010). The curriculum of course plays a role. Regarding how a curriculum addresses outdoor learning, many proponents argue that teachers should not be just passive acceptors of curricula but instead curriculum creators, and those who are passionate enough about outdoor learning can find ways to interpret formal and constraining curricula, in order to incorporate outdoor learning into their teaching (Prince, 2016). In other words, if there is a will, there is a way. This tension between policy and practice will be discussed later in this chapter.

Risk or perceived risk, is an issue that has been reported as a concern for teachers, with teachers reporting informally that the concern of litigation after an accident

impacts on their decisions to embrace outdoor learning more fully (Maynard & Waters, 2007). Looking at outdoor learning from an Irish perspective, Kernan and Devine (2010) assert that as societies become increasingly risk averse, the outdoors becomes more marginalised and children remain confined indoors in what effectively is an adult comfort zone, at the expense of spontaneity, freedom and fun. It has been suggested that the risks of learning outside the classroom have been exaggerated and risk itself should not be eliminated altogether, as unless children are given the chance to encounter challenges, they will be denied the experiences that will help them grow as people and become more resilient to life's ups and downs (Gill, 2010). It has also been claimed that more children are injured falling out of beds each year than out of trees, with the home ironically being the most dangerous place for a child to be (Moss, 2012). Perhaps this may be because children spend much more time in their homes or in bed, than in trees, but the message still resonates.

Additionally, cold, wet weather continues to be a reason why teachers are reluctant to take their teaching into the outdoors (Maynard & Waters, 2007). However, Kindergarten children in Norway spend a significant portion of their day in the outdoors whatever the season, indicating the importance of the outdoors as a pedagogical space (Moser & Martinson, 2010). If Scandinavian schools can embrace outdoor learning in their cold winters, surely with appropriate clothing, cold weather, within reason, should not be a barrier from an Irish perspective? Some research in early years educational settings in Ireland has indicated that the outdoors is viewed as an added extra, rather than a normal daily experience, primarily because of a cultural perception that the Irish are more of an indoor people (Kernan & Devine, 2010). Culture or perception, it seems, plays a role as a barrier to the outdoors.

Kernan and Devine (2010) assert that an interdisciplinary approach involving training, support and mentoring is necessary in order to improve outdoor learning. Within a primary school setting, strong policy could also play a role. Ultimately, schools have the power to be enablers or obstacles to childrens' access to the outdoors (Heritage Council,

2016), but teachers must have the appropriate knowledge, resources and policy guidance, to determine if the benefits of outdoor learning outweigh the barriers. Otherwise Visual Arts education may lose out.

Visual Arts Education.

Any discussion on the value of Visual Arts education should first and foremost examine what the aim of education is. Should education be about meeting the needs of the economy, teaching children what they must know for future employment? Indeed, should education's sole purpose be that of driver of the economy or should it be as Noddings (2003) suggests, about developing the happiness of the individual, both in their personal and professional lives? Striking a balance between the needs of the economy and the needs of the individual is of vital importance. "Education needs to do more than prepare young people for the world of work; it needs to equip students with the skills they need to become active, responsible and engaged citizens" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018, p.4). Ken Robinson (2011) a leading thinker in creativity asserts that a modern fit-for-purpose education system has three main roles, that of serving the culture, the economy, and the individual equally. From a national perspective the *Primary School Curriculum* expresses its vision of education in what it describes as three general aims- to recognise the uniqueness of the child, to enable the child to develop as a social being and to prepare the child for lifelong learning (Government of Ireland, 1999a). The curriculum was designed to provide a framework where these aims could be realised through each curriculum area, Visual Arts included.

The value of art. Just as outdoor learning and its benefits are multifaceted, so too are those of Visual Arts. Theories pertaining to art and the rationale for art instruction are many and varied, and according to Eisner (2002) there is no one single sacrosanct vision of why we should teach Visual Arts. Efland (1990) suggests three categories as to why we teach art:

- Expressionist - where art is seen as a vehicle by which we can express our emotions, free expression being the aim.

- Reconstructivist - where the desired outcome is to allow students to become critically aware, allowing art to become a powerful tool that can be transformative on both an individual and societal level.
- Scientific rationalism - where art is essentially a form of inquiry which helps to discover and create knowledge through our senses by questioning the world in which we live.

From a national perspective, all three of Efland's categories, to a greater or lesser extent, are represented in the aims and objectives of the *Visual Arts Curriculum* in Ireland. It suggests that the arts provide for "sensory, emotional, intellectual and creative enrichment and contribute to the child's holistic development" (Government of Ireland, 1999c, p.2). Most appropriately from an outdoor learning for Visual Arts perspective, the curriculum asserts that "Visual Arts education provides for creative and aesthetic experiences through exploring, investigating, experimenting, inventing, designing and making in a range of media" (Government of Ireland, 1999c, p.5). The provision of aesthetic experiences, through experiential learning using a variety of media, succinctly sums up outdoor learning for Visual Arts education.

However there are many more perspectives as to why the teaching of Visual Arts is so valuable. Visual literacy, the ability to interpret and get meaning from visual imagery is put forward as one such benefit to teaching Visual Arts and is presented as an important rationale in the recently introduced new *Junior Cycle Visual Art Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 2016a) for children in second-level education. The emphasis on producing and exhibiting art products that formed part of the rationale for art teaching in the 20th century has now been replaced with a focus on visual thinking or visual literacy, more suitable to the 21st century student, and excellent Visual Arts teaching should allow students to think visually which can help enhance all of their senses (Sandell, 2012). Visual Arts is about developing the senses, and according to Early Childhood Ireland (2015), when children experience the outdoors their senses are naturally stimulated by the perpetually changing sights and sounds, smells and tastes and of course touch of the

natural world. Arts education helps “develop the child’s awareness of, sensitivity to and enjoyment of visual, aural, tactile and spatial qualities in the environment” (Government of Ireland, 1999c, p.4). Experiencing first-hand natural phenomena such as the changing patterns of our weather and observing the seasons outdoors also allows for experiences that are very beneficial to children (Ouvry, 2003). Combining Visual Arts education and the outdoors therefore would be especially stimulating to the senses and a logical and natural collaboration.

Barnes (2015) is an advocate for the importance of developing visual literacy as he contends that with sharpened visual sensibilities, children can see much more and appreciate much more the ordinary things in life such as a tree in nature. In other words, art can make the ordinary extraordinary. Thus, allowing children to experience learning in the outdoors can only enhance their learning experience, adding a richness and sense of wonder to the *Visual Arts Curriculum*.

Creativity and skills. Visual Arts and creativity have long been associated with one another. Creativity, an innovative attitude or lens through which we can see the world (Jesson, 2012) and the role creativity has within education has become a huge talking point within educational discourse. The *Creative Ireland Programme*, a government-led five-year initiative, from 2017 to 2022, which aims to place creativity at the centre of public policy, believes that the arts are intrinsically important for the development of the creative capacities of each and every child, and as such, should be a vital element of education (Government of Ireland, 2016b). One way in which the arts has been credited for facilitating creativity is in the habits of mind or dispositions that they are believed to foster. Dispositions can be explained as attitudes, values or interests according to Claxton (2008) as opposed to skills which can be interpreted as a person’s ability to use their knowledge to carry out a task. These dispositions were identified by Hetland, Winner, Veenema and Sheridan (2013) as broad habits of mind, upon which high-school Visual Arts teachers in the United States placed particular emphasis. Naming them Studio Habits of Mind, Hetland et al. determined that the good quality Visual Arts teaching they observed

fostered the cognitive skills of envisioning, observing, expressing and reflecting as well as the working styles of exploring, stretching and persisting. Additionally, Hetland et al. observed that these dispositions encouraged students to embrace the opportunities to learn from their mistakes, allowing them to dare to be different, thus encouraging, rather than discouraging, risk-taking. Risk taking, as we have seen has also been identified as a disposition which outdoor learning fosters as it allows children to encounter challenges and problem-solve to overcome them. Of note is that these dispositions and skills are also highlighted in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020) as being of significant importance for our future generations.

Agency. Visual Arts can also give children a sense of agency. “The arts in education enable students to experience their significance as agents of effectiveness and change, to realise, ‘I matter.’” (Hoffman Davis, 2008, p.55). In her book, *Why Our Schools Need the Arts*, Hoffman Davis (2008) poignantly portrays a child holding a pencil in their hand, realising that what they do next will matter. Davis asserts that if children can recognise that they can be agents of change and understand they can bring about change on a piece of paper, imagine what a difference they could make to the world around them. Perhaps this really epitomises the power that Visual Arts really has. Recognising that they can be agents of change is a very powerful realisation, that can have resounding effects on a child’s life. Empowering children with a sense of agency to believe that they can make a real contribution to this world is a gift that will keep on giving.

Visual Arts and Outdoor Learning

We have seen the benefits of learning in the outdoors and similarly we have seen the important role Visual Arts education plays in the holistic development of the child. However, why should the triangle then that is formed between art, education and the natural environment be so powerful? How can engaging in art activities in the natural environment bring an added dimension to Visual Arts education that cannot be brought about in a classroom setting?

Materials. The materials available in the natural environment are an important factor of this extra dimension. As previously discussed, the *Visual Arts Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999c) heralded a new era for Visual Arts education in broadening the arts experiences of pupils. The power of materials in the Visual Arts cannot be underestimated. Children who can explore, experience and experiment with a variety of materials are more likely to create art that is more personal (Government of Ireland, 1999b). A variety of art materials and media will give children the opportunity to express themselves as individuals and according to Sandell (2012), excellent art educators will have experience using varied and assorted media in their teaching, which help those struggling with self-expression. However, while the range of arts experiences were broadened and the media in which they work encouraged to be more diverse, was the potential of natural materials and the ability to create with these, emphasised enough within the curriculum?

The abundance of nature provides an abundance of materials and an abundance of materials provides an abundance of possibilities. The agency that Hoffman Davis (2008) spoke of in relation to effecting change can also be applied to the choosing of materials. When a child can choose their own materials from the natural environment and not just choose from what a teacher has predetermined might be appropriate for the task, they are again experiencing their significance as agents of effectiveness. Thus it can help them realise, as Hoffman Davis asserts, that what they choose will matter. That they, in fact, matter.

So, just what materials in the natural environment can be of use to Visual Arts? The theory of loose parts can help elaborate on this. The concept was first coined by the architect Simon Nicholson (1971) who believed that all humans were inherently creative and that loose parts in any environment but in particular the natural environment, created endless possibilities which would allow this creativity to flourish. It was his belief that “in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it” (Nicholson,

1971, p. 30). Thus, the more choice of materials, the more creative and inventive one can be. Art educators have adapted this idea with van Boeckel (2013) listing materials in a play area that could include flowers, bushes, trees, grasses and ponds and Louv (2005) contending as one extends the environment to, for example, woods and streams and fields, the creative possibilities are extended in equal measure too. Schools with access to outdoor gardens, fields or in particular wooded areas could make use of the abundance of natural materials such as leaves, sticks, twigs, branches, wildflowers, weeds, pebbles, acorns or pinecones. Schools fortunate enough to be in close proximity to the coast could make use of rocks, feathers, stones, sand, seaweed, shells and water. All of these materials have the potential to stimulate the senses of sight, touch, smell, sound and taste. They also have the potential to facilitate the teaching of the visual elements of art, including shape, colour, tone, rhythm, pattern, and texture (Government of Ireland, 1999c). Using these materials in the outdoors where they naturally belong and where they can be both displayed and then left in place to return to the earth can be a very powerful message to a child. From a process perspective, one of the most inherent values of these materials is in the very fact that they can, according to van Boeckel (2013), be picked up, moved, carried, arranged and rearranged, taken apart, lined up and put back together in a myriad of ways and combinations that can only serve to inspire creative engagement. In another example of making the ordinary extraordinary, and giving agency to children, Hoffman Davis (2008) contends that in allowing students to utilise materials beyond their intended use, including materials we find in nature, we can encourage them to think more about their own lives and their surrounding environment.

Outdoor art. What is also inherently special about art created in the natural environment is that it has the ability to democratise art in a way that many others forms of art can not. It can be inclusive. What constitutes an inclusive learning environment according to Shevlin et al. (2009) is one which respects all pupils regardless of their ability, cultural ethnicity or socio-economic background. The numbers of children participating in artistic events or experiences is lower for children from lower socio-

economic backgrounds, as well as those from migrant backgrounds, with financial considerations being one of the main barriers (Smyth, 2016). According to Naidus (2009) art is often seen as the preserve of the privileged, just another commodity that seems out of reach of the ordinary person. Why should that be? How can this be rectified? The materials needed to produce art in the natural environment are free, readily available and in abundance and if a teacher can show a child the endless possibilities that can be created with nature's resources, this can open a whole new world for the child. Furthermore, should schools, museums or galleries be closed and art materials difficult to come by, the resources that nature provides can allow children to continue to engage in art and be creative in meaningful ways. This ability may be more important than ever.

The possibilities for outdoor art within the natural environment are many. Weaving using natural materials, sculpting cut grass, exploring tone and hue, creating patterns with stones or leaves are all possibilities within a school environment where nature is accessible. Where it is not accessible, possibilities exist to draw using chalk, drawing attention to shape, pattern, rhythm and texture, these qualities being "the language of artistic communication" (Government of Ireland, 1999c, p. 7). Shadows on a sunny day, rainbows after a shower, or clouds when it is cloudy can inspire, as can responding to the sights and sounds of nature in the outdoors, still allowing for "sensitivity to and enjoyment of visual, aural, tactile and spatial qualities in the environment" (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p.4). Examples of outdoor art or land art that children can create, can be seen in Appendix A, showing the potential use of natural materials in the outdoors for Visual Arts education.

Land art. In practice, how have artists used natural materials to create art in the natural environment? There is a long-standing relationship between Visual Arts and nature. Indigenous art such as Aboriginal art dates back many millennia, when natural materials were used to create art as a form of storytelling, helping pass on their culture to the next generations. Cave paintings from prehistoric times have also been discovered. In more recent times, in the mid 1960's, as a reaction to the commodification of art and in a

challenge to the notion of selling and exhibiting art in indoor settings, artists began to search for alternatives to the museum or gallery (Kastner, 1998). Land art was born, as artists began to use the landscape as a canvas. "Subject of both science and art, the landscape functions as both a mirror and a lens: in it we see the space we occupy and ourselves as we occupy it" (Kastner, 1998, p.11) so that the landscape and the piece of art are inextricably linked. Gradually according to Kastner (1998) this term 'land art' came to encompass other philosophical art movements, the most well-known of these being environmental art, art which can enhance or become part of the landscape but also make a statement on environmental issues.

English artist Richard Shilling, known for his works of art created with natural materials, emphasises the ephemeral nature of land art which he believes can teach us life lessons about the transience and fleeting existence of nature (Shilling, 2018). In this way environmental artists have sought to use art as an agent for change. Martin Hill, another environmental artist uses his work to highlight the issues of sustainability and emphasises that his "materials come from the earth to which they return" (Hill, 2017). Land artists both create and display their work in the outdoors, excluding the need for galleries and like Hill, many leave their work to naturally decay. Land art changes the perception of what we think art is. Andy Goldsworthy, a well known land artist also leaves his spectacular work in open spaces for the general public to enjoy. Again, the ability to be able to serendipitously happen upon a land artist's work in the outdoors democratises art and can help to dispel the notion that art is only for the rich or the privileged. Appendix B shows examples of land art by Richard Shilling.

Arts-based environmental education. However, can teaching art in the natural environment help children to connect to nature? Does the actual process of creating in nature really help towards creating young adults who are more environmentally aware and ecologically more friendly? The term arts- based environmental education, first coined by Finnish artist and teacher Meri Helga Mantere in the 1990s, is grounded in the belief that artistic activities can help foster sensitivity to the environment (Mantere, 1995). A study of

the impacts of arts-based environmental education in adults by Jan van Boeckel (2013) lead him to assert that it is doubtful that art activities in and of themselves allow for immediate connection with nature but that they can serve as an incubator for perhaps dormant sensibilities that may be present within adults. Van Boeckel contends that it is his hunch that participating in follow-up activities could ultimately transform environmental education and the way in which students interact with the natural environment. Thus, environmental art can plant the seed that may eventually grow. However, what is important not to forget is that adults may differ from children in so far as we have seen, as children are said to have a specific window of opportunity where they have a special connection with nature (Cobb, 1993) and it is feasible that children's experiences may not be similar to those of adults. For a national perspective, in a small scale study which directly involved children making art in the natural environment, primary school teacher Marie Claire Murphy found that not only was the experience more meaningful to the students than it might otherwise have been if reproduced inside in a classroom but that it also allowed the children to gain an appreciation of the fragility and transience of nature (Murphy, 2018). The children, Murphy (2018) noticed, also developed an enhanced awareness of their surroundings, which we have seen is one of the aims of the *Visual Arts Curriculum*.

Integration. The potential therefore for art created in the natural environment to increase environmental awareness is a real prospect. The pedagogical principle of integration is another guiding principle of the *Visual Arts Curriculum*, although again, like environment-based learning, it is subsumed into a broader range of principles within the curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999a). "At its most educationally beneficial, integration may be understood to involve teaching and learning in two or more subjects in a manner that achieves the objectives of each" (Ní Bhroin, 2012, p.59). On their own, the arts are inherently valuable but integrating them with other subjects allows them to fulfil their potential as an effective methodology for teaching and learning (Goldberg, 2017). Unfortunately however, teachers have not reported much success with the integration of

Visual Arts with other subjects (NCCA, 2005). The mutual benefits for Visual Arts and environmental education are obvious from an integrated learning perspective but are teachers or even the current *Visual Arts Curriculum* mindful of this gain?

Policy versus practice. Of interest therefore, is how Visual Arts education in the natural environment is dealt with from a policy perspective in the Irish primary school. The development of environmental awareness is seen as something which can complement those concepts and skills which the *Visual Arts Curriculum* aims to develop (Government of Ireland, 1999b). However, the phrase outdoor learning does not appear in the *Visual Arts Curriculum*. As stated previously, environment-based learning is incorporated into a wider range of learning principles in the *Primary School Curriculum* but as such is not explicitly addressed (Government of Ireland, 1999a). Closer analysis of the *Visual Arts Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999c) reveals this to be true. Nature and natural materials are referred to as important ingredients in the teaching of Visual Arts stating that “close observation of objects from nature is a constant theme in art education” (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p. 37). This is to be welcomed. Unfortunately though, this observation is nearly always suggested to take place within the confines of the classroom. The exemplars offered to teachers as to how they can implement the curriculum reveal this fact. It is suggested children observe flowers in a container, have indoor displays of natural items such as shells and leaves, bring grass indoors as a stimulus or look out the window on a rainy day to observe the weather (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p. 40-127). This reflects the findings of the Heritage Council (2016) which found that while all schools they observed seemed to have brought nature into the classroom, it was less clear how nature in the outdoors was being used as a resource for a holistic education.

The aforementioned *Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1* found that a minority of teachers took their class out to look and respond to the natural environment for Visual Arts education (NCCA, 2005). These findings can be of no surprise if policy does not explicitly support the practice. Admittedly, the *Visual Arts, Teacher Guidelines* (Government of Ireland, 1999b) do suggest that it may be feasible to expand the children's experiences of

art beyond the school building. This positive suggestion, it could be argued however, is negated by the overall sentiment towards, and treatment of Visual Arts in the outdoor environment. Teachers may not be using the potential of the outdoors for Visual Arts education as there may be a tension between the intent of the curriculum- that environment-based learning is a guiding principle- and that which is enacted. It may be the case that the guiding principles may be saying one thing but the curriculum guidelines are saying another? Or perhaps the curriculum guidelines should be stronger and more supportive of the mutual benefits Visual Arts and outdoor learning share?

In an era of curriculum reform however there is some hope. The *Primary School Curriculum* is currently in the process of being reviewed and redrafted. The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020) recognises among its key principles and competencies, not only the role of agency in learning, but also the importance of interaction and engagement with nature- as future generations take on the responsibility of custodians of the earth. Including and promoting outdoor learning for Visual Arts education would seem like a logical step towards these aims. Furthermore, the establishment of this connection between outdoor learning and Visual Arts could very well help strengthen Visual Arts education as a whole.

Conclusion.

The world is changing, with societies undergoing deep transformation and we must rethink education in response to this (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, [UNESCO], 2015). This means moving away from our preoccupation with numeracy and literacy, according to UNESCO (2015) and instead focusing on the skills and competences that will allow us to keep up with the demands of economic, social, and environmental sustainability in the future. This study has shown through examining relevant literature that high quality Visual Arts education fosters similar dispositions or habits of mind that mirror and reflect the skills outdoor learning promotes (Hetland et al., 2013). The triangle that is formed from the intersection of art, education and the outdoor environment therefore would seem to provide the optimum environment for these skills to

be nurtured. Visual Arts education in the natural environment also helps democratise art by providing children with resources that are free and in abundance. However there are barriers it seems. Risk, weather, and academic pressures exist (Maynard & Waters, 2007) to name but a few but perhaps the biggest barriers may be the policies and lack of education that exist to support outdoor learning in schools. This is especially true of Irish policy (Heritage Council, 2016). Although connection to nature and environmental concerns are to the forefront of social and political agendas presently, the *Primary School Curriculum*, and particularly the *Visual Arts Curriculum* does little to reflect this. Louv (2005) argues that parents, teachers, schools, institutions and our culture send one message to children about how they should value nature and yet, he contends, that our actions in truth, send another message entirely- and children he suggests, hear very well. This study, it is hoped will attempt to begin to answer the question as to whether this may very well be the case within Irish schools too.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This chapter will provide an overview of the research design for this study. The rationale for methodology choice will be outlined as well as details of the sample, ethical considerations, data analysis and limitations of the study.

The core objective of this study is to explore and examine the perspectives and practices of primary school teachers in relation to Visual Arts education and outdoor learning. As already outlined in Chapter One, the overarching question which gave impetus to this research is:

- What are the perspectives and practices of primary school teachers in Ireland in relation to the use of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education?

Arising from this question, the following sub-questions emerged:

- How do teachers understand outdoor learning and what do they perceive are its benefits?
- What are teachers' practices in relation to the use of outdoor learning for Visual Arts?
- What are the perceived barriers that exist to using outdoor learning for Visual Arts education and what changes would be necessary to enable teachers to facilitate its use more often?

Rationale for Study Design

Research paradigm. A research paradigm is a philosophical assumption that provides the framework in which research can take place and shapes how we seek information to answer questions (Creswell, 2013). There are many different approaches or paradigms in educational research. The two main paradigms which are often contrasted are positivism and interpretivism. Positivism believes knowledge to be objective or value-free and interpretivism explores perspectives and shared meanings in order to gain an

insight into a particular setting (Wellington, 2015). The paradigm underpinning this study was interpretivist. As this is a piece of research which sought to explore and examine the lived experiences of Irish primary school teachers regarding Visual Arts education and outdoor learning, the interpretivist paradigm was deemed most appropriate.

Qualitative research. The choice of methodology used in any study should ultimately depend on what it is you are trying to find out (Silverman, 2017). As already discussed, it was the perspectives of teachers that this study aimed to explore. Initially, it had been considered that a quantitative approach such as a survey, in the form of a questionnaire, could have been used to obtain this data. Access to a large sample which would be required for a questionnaire was a concern for the researcher. Response rates for surveys are often quite low and surveys can tend to favour breadth as opposed to depth (Denscombe 2017). Therefore, it was deemed that a qualitative approach would be the more suitable method in order to obtain a deep insight into the views of teachers as Visual Arts educators. Furthermore, the researcher hoped to allow participating teachers to expand on areas of interest to them, giving depth and detail, something which data produced through quantitative data, such as surveys, cannot do (Denscombe, 2017).

Qualitative research aims to obtain a more nuanced description of peoples' life experiences by working with words and not numbers (Kvale, 1996). The rich nuanced data that qualitative research can potentially uncover can be metaphorically described "as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures and various blends of material (Creswell, 2013, p.42). Qualitative research can help the researcher get a holistic perspective, allowing them to see things in context (Denscombe, 2017), something which is imperative when conducting research in a school setting. Qualitative research fundamentally empowers individuals to share their experiences, allowing for their voices to be heard and their stories to be told (Creswell, 2013), which was a core objective of this study.

As observed in Chapter Two, there is a wealth of literature relating to the benefits of, and barriers to outdoor learning from an international perspective. However, research

in the field of Visual Arts education and outdoor learning is less abundant, particularly from an Irish perspective. Grounded theory aims to approach the pre-existing ideas that the researcher has with an open mind, while collecting the data from individuals in real-world situations (Denscombe, 2017) and as such, this is what this study aims to do. Amongst its aims, this study aims to generate a general theory as to whether the barriers to using the outdoor environment may in fact result in missed opportunities for Visual Arts. The strategy of inquiry therefore most closely aligns to that of grounded theory.

Sample Selection.

Sampling was determined by the research approach, which was qualitative in this study. Non-probability convenience sampling is the most appropriate option for research in educational settings such as schools, as it can help in overcoming the difficulties that can be encountered in gaining access to your sample (Wellington, 2015). This sample was a sample of convenience. The researcher used existing connections to schools and personal contacts to find participants. Principal teachers, known to the researcher were approached, and a request was made to interview teachers on their staff. The principals in turn approached teachers to ask if they would be willing to participate. Interviews were to take place within the individual teacher's school. A personal contact was also used to invite another participant to take part. Although this was not a comparative study, the researcher hoped to get a broad range of experiences from teachers in different environments, locations, and classes, ranging from infant classes to more senior classes in the primary school. Locations included schools in urban, suburban, and semi-urban environments. Separately, the participant who helped complete the pilot was also chosen for convenience, coming from a personal contact.

During the period that had been designated for data collection, the unprecedented step was taken to close all schools within the Republic of Ireland, due to a global pandemic. As a result, some of the interviews with teachers could not take place as planned, which resulted in original participants being replaced with others. These new participants were also chosen for convenience, with personal contacts used to invite them

to take part. Consent was sought to interview these teachers. Ultimately, six interviews were face to face, and five were conducted over the telephone. Follow-up questions were asked of the participants during the period of the school closures and the researcher received responses from ten of the original eleven participants in the follow-up questions.

Participants. The participants of this study consisted of 11 primary school teachers. Each teacher had experience of teaching a mainstream class. All teachers had taught Visual Arts as part of the curriculum. The following table, Table 1, represents the teachers taking part in the study. The participants are referred to by number to ensure confidentiality. Junior refers to classes between Junior Infants, Senior Infants, First Class and Second Class. Senior refers to classes between Third Class, Fourth Class, Fifth Class and Sixth Class.

Table 1.*Teachers and schools participating in the study*

Participants	Present Class	Number of Years' Experience	School Situation	Green Flag	Green Area or Garden Available
Participant 1	Senior class	15	Semi-urban	Yes	Yes
Participant 2	Junior class	6	Suburban	Yes	Yes
Participant 3	Junior & Senior	20	Urban	Yes	Yes
Participant 4	Senior class	6	Semi-urban	Yes	Yes
Participant 5	Senior class	20	Semi-urban	Yes	Yes
Participant 6	Junior class	20	Suburban	Yes	Yes
Participant 7	Senior class	4	Semi-urban	Yes	Yes
Participant 8	Junior class	2	Urban	Yes	Yes
Participant 9	Senior class	10	Semi-urban	Yes	Yes
Participant 10	Junior class	2	Suburban	Yes	Yes
Participant 11	Senior class	6	Semi-urban	Yes	Yes

Role and Perspective of the Researcher

The researcher is a primary school teacher who has a special interest in both Visual Arts and the potential for learning within the Visual Arts that outdoor learning can afford. As such, the benefits of being an insider helped facilitate the recruitment of the participants. Other benefits of this insider status can also allow for participants to feel more comfortable, receptive, and understood, increasing the trust between interviewer and interviewee (Berger, 2013).

Previous knowledge and personal experience can be meaningful and significant tools in data analysis allowing for the researcher to gain insight into what the participants are trying to say (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). If the researcher is aware of this when devising the questions and shaping the conversation, it can allow for them to be better equipped to understand implied content, sensitivities, and nuances of language (Berger, 2013).

Description of Methods Used

Interviews. Qualitative research uses words and visual images and small-scale research that is limited in time and budget but wishes to explore the opinions and experiences of people, is best served using the instrument of interviews (Denscombe, 2017). Interviews were chosen as the instrument, as they allow for the participants to express themselves and their view of the world in a multi-sensory approach, allowing for verbal and non-verbal data to be collected (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018). Interviews have the potential to be structured in several different ways, depending on the desired flexibility or control the interviewer wishes to exert. Structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews are the three main choices available to the researcher wishing to interview. The researcher has tight control over the format of the questions in a structured interview; a semi-structured interview is less structured allowing the participant to elaborate on points of interest to them, while an unstructured interview lets the researcher to be as non-directive as possible (Denscombe, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the format in this study as they could provide for a more flexible approach to the process. These allow for the interviewer to have a clear list of questions that they want to pose, but they are flexible regarding question sequence, letting the interviewee elaborate on a topic or issue of interest to them (Denscombe, 2017). Allowing or prompting the participant to share their own opinions more fully on a particular topic can often provide richer data than a tightly structured interview which limits the participant's responses. These interviews were of the one to one variety. The main advantages of one to one interviews are that they are easy to arrange, easy to control and easy to transcribe (Denscombe, 2017).

It was intended that all interviews be conducted face to face. Of those that were conducted face to face, all took place in the individual teacher's school. However, the circumstances mentioned previously dictated that five of the eleven interviews had to be conducted over the phone. Undoubtedly, the non-verbal gestures and body language that would normally be available for the researcher to observe during a face to face interview

will be lost in a telephone interview. However, Lechuga (2012) argues that it is irrelevant whether interviews are conducted face to face or not. Phone interviews can be beneficial as they can not only enable the researcher to reach those who would normally be geographically out of reach, but they can allow for a heightened aural awareness, while still allowing for rapport to be developed (Lechuga, 2012). The researcher did not encounter any difficulties conducting the phone interviews and did not feel that the format in any way affected the collection or quality of the data.

All interviews were recorded using an Olympus Dictaphone. These audio recordings were then imported into a personal computer where they were transcribed for further analysis.

Interview Schedule

The interview schedule (Appendix C) was derived from the aims of the research. This is of vital importance as there should always be a close connection between the questions which are posed in the interview and the fundamental research questions, the former always serving the latter (Wellington, 2015). Questions were a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Some closed questions were asked at the initial stages of the interview in order to put the participant at their ease and to gather some basic information. As the questions progressed, they became more open-ended as the researcher sought to realise the purpose of the research- to examine the practices of teachers regarding Visual Arts education and outdoor learning. The open-ended questions allowed for elaboration if an issue was of particular interest to the participating teacher. The interviews included an opportunity for the participants to show the researcher where in the school vicinity they might have the opportunity to engage in outdoor learning. This could include the school garden, yard or other available space that was suitable and gave the researcher more of an insight into some of the barriers that the teachers may have mentioned in their responses.

Photographic Data

The researcher sought the permission from one school to take photographs of the available space within the vicinity of the school. The researcher also undertook to take photographs in two public parks which were mentioned by teachers as being a resource that they had made use of for outdoor learning. This gave teachers a further opportunity to share their experiences in images as well as in words. Photographs taken to illustrate some of the natural environments available to teachers are in Appendix D.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted which consisted of interviewing a teacher known to the researcher. The purpose of this was to check for any potential problems that might arise, both in the practicalities of interviewing and in the types of questions asked. No significant problems or difficulties were identified as a result of the pilot study. One small improvement, to clarify the researcher's definition of outdoor learning was identified as necessary in order to try and increase the quality of the data, and this was rectified.

Research Timeline

This study began in August 2019. The phases of the research are set out below in the following table.

Table 2*Research timeline*

Month	Phase
August 2020	Study began.
September 2020	Planning phase.
October- December 2020	Literature review phase.
January 2020	Sample selection phase.
February 2020	Interview schedule and pilot study phase.
March 2020	Data collection phase.
April 2020	Data analysis phase.
May 2020	Study completed.

Ethical Considerations

There is no moral relativism in educational research (Wellington, 2015). A researcher has a responsibility to follow ethical guidelines when undertaking any research and as such the researcher familiarised themselves with *The Ethics in Research Policy for Marino Institute of Education, 2017-2018* (Marino Institute of Education [MIE], 2018). The study was given ethical approval prior to any data collection taking place.

Educational researchers have a responsibility towards the participants and must consider any possible effects that their research may have on those who are participating (Cohen et al., 2018). The participants were all adults who gave informed consent, who were under no pressure to participate, who were given fair and equal treatment and who were assured of confidentiality, all of which are of the utmost importance when conducting educational research (Wellington, 2015). Appendix E shows a copy of the information letter and consent form which all the participating teachers read and signed. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the process at any time without having to give a reason. Informing participants that their data will be stored, accessed, retained,

and ultimately destroyed is also an important consideration (MIE, 2018) and this was communicated through the information given to teachers on the consent form. All data was kept securely in a password protected computer and all manual data was stored securely in locked cabinets unavailable to unauthorised persons. Any photographs which were taken did not identify the school or parks and as such this complied with GDPR regulations. Data will ultimately be destroyed when it is no longer needed for its original purpose.

Trustworthiness

It is imperative that the researcher recognises that they are an insider in the situation and as such they should be open to questioning their own position or assumptions about the research (Wellington, 2015). As the researcher was a primary school teacher with an interest in, and positive inclination towards, both Visual Arts education and outdoor learning, the researcher was aware that this may have an effect on the study, in both a positive and negative way. The notion of reflexivity recognises that if researchers are in the world that they are studying and of the world that they are studying, then they can potentially lose some of their objectivity, bringing their own values and biographies to the situation (Cohen et al., 2018). According to Denscombe (2017) we have no way of standing outside of our own experiences, identity, and values to reach a truly neutral vantage point. As a primary school teacher, the researcher was aware that their experiences, values, assumptions, and prior knowledge could have an effect on their objectivity. If the researcher takes care not to impose their own beliefs upon the data, the insight they may have can be used to positive effect.

Analysis of the Data

After the transcription of the raw data from the audio recordings was complete, the process of analysis commenced. Analysing qualitative data from interview transcripts is generally associated with grounded theory approach (Denscombe, 2017). This involves examining the text in detail and by a process of coding and categorising, allowing for the emergence of common themes that are present in the data.

The process began with the researcher becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, thereby immersing themselves in what the respondents had revealed through the data. Briefs notes were taken at this stage by the researcher as each interview was examined. Then codes or labels were assigned to each unit of data, each of which highlighted an opinion, action, event, or expression that the researcher found to have value. Appendix F shows an image of a transcript which is in the process of being coded. Then similar codes were placed into categories, from which themes or key concepts gradually emerged. The Literature Review played an important role in this process. It allowed the researcher to examine what national and international literature had to say about the topic and informed them if what the data had revealed, agreed with, or was in direct contrast to, their findings. The ability to examine the key concepts which have emerged from the data, through the lens of the Literature Review is an invaluable one; especially should recommendations be made as the research concludes.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this study. This is a small-scale study and therefore the results are not generalisable to the population of primary school teachers in Ireland as a whole. However, notwithstanding its scale, this research will provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of teachers, painting a vivid picture of Visual Arts practice in Irish primary schools. The advantages of having a practitioner as a researcher have already been discussed in relation to insider status. The researcher is aware that although face to face interviews can enable the researcher to gather the views of the participant, allowing them to feel that they are understood, it is also possible that the information garnered may have been affected because the researcher was also a teacher. It is possible that a participant may have felt that there was a possibility that they could be judged on what they might reveal. Thus, familiarity can be both a potential advantage and a potential disadvantage (Wellington, 2015).

Finally, the research was limited to female teachers as the researcher did not have any access to male teachers willing to participate. It is not possible to tell whether or not this might have had an effect on the findings.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodology which has been used in this study to gather the data. The justification for the choice of instrument has been presented and the different stages of the research process have been discussed, from the research design to the data analysis. The limitations of the study have also been highlighted. The findings of the study will be presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

The last chapter provided an overview of the research design for this study. It set out the rationale for methodology choice, the ethical considerations, how data was analysed, and the limitations of the study. This chapter will present and discuss the findings of the study derived from analysis of the data. It will consist of two distinct sections. The first section seeks to present the views, perspectives, and practices of the participants with regards to outdoor learning and Visual Arts. The second section seeks to discuss and contextualise these perspectives with regard to established theoretical and empirical literature in the fields of outdoor learning and Visual Arts education.

The core objective of this study was to explore and examine the perspectives and practices of primary school teachers in Ireland in relation to outdoor learning for Visual Arts education. Therefore, this chapter will examine and discuss the findings with regard to:

- perspectives in relation to outdoor learning.
- teachers' practices in relation to outdoor learning.
- perceived barriers to learning in the outdoors.
- the missed opportunities for Visual Arts education and changes that may be needed.

A qualitative research approach was undertaken in this study. It provided a rich, nuanced understanding of the questions posed, and empowered participant teachers to share their perspectives about Visual Arts education and the contexts in which this happens. Teachers' descriptions of their lived experiences, as Visual Arts educators, whether told through anecdote or explanation helped a detailed picture to emerge. A quantitative approach such as a large-scale survey may have generated statistics but may not have been as effective in gaining an in-dept insight into the respondents' perspectives,

behaviours, and experiences. In this discussion chapter, expression will be given to teachers' authentic voices, allowing for themes to emerge from the data. Perspectives from participating teachers will be presented where appropriate, with teachers being identified by their participant number, as shown in Table 1 in the previous chapter.

Perspectives on Outdoor Learning

This section will present the perspectives of the participating teachers with regard to outdoor learning and Visual Arts education. Having systematically analysed interview transcriptions to identify patterns of commonality or differences among teacher participants, four categories emerged from the data relating to perspectives. These include goodwill, understanding, perceived benefits and integration. This section will present these findings in the order listed above.

Goodwill towards outdoor learning. Participating teachers were overwhelmingly positive in relation to using the outdoor environment in general, indicating that they held it in high regard. Some teachers referred nostalgically to the experience they had in their own childhoods. One participant reminisced "I remember myself in primary school. We seemed to be constantly outside on nature walks and going places and it was such a brilliant way to learn" (Participant 1).

In particular, most teachers indicated that they were in favour of using outdoor learning for Visual Arts. One teacher enthused "Oh, I'm all for it. I love that. I would prefer to do that over be in the classroom... showing the children what's around them, what they can use...that they'll never get bored" (Participant 6). Additionally, another stated:

I know if it was me, I'd love to be getting up and getting out instead of sitting in a classroom...last year I did a Summer Course, arts related....where we were sent down the town to look at the environment.. I found it really good and interesting. Even as teachers, we all enjoyed doing it... (Participant 7)

Such comments emphasise the high regard in which outdoor learning for Visual Arts was held by participating teachers. However, this also highlights a contradiction between their

acknowledgement of outdoor learning for Visual Arts as a worthwhile and positive practice and the frequency with which they provide such opportunities.

All of the teachers expressed that facilitating Visual Arts education in the outdoors was something that they felt they should do more of. Many explained that the reason they didn't use it often was that it didn't occur to them. One teacher explained "I think it's a great idea and it's probably something that at times, I wouldn't generally put to the forefront of my teaching... I think it's definitely something I should be thinking of more" (Participant, 11). Another participant summed up the missed opportunities for Visual Arts saying "Oh, I'd definitely be up for it. I'm raging I didn't think of it more when I had a class. We did other things outdoors but not Visual Arts. I think it's a missed opportunity" (Participant 3). Such comments reflect an acknowledgement by participants that while they recognise the benefits that outdoor learning confers; it wasn't a methodology that they often chose to deliver the *Visual Arts Curriculum*.

Understanding of outdoor learning. In relation to understanding the difference between simply using the outdoor environment as a venue and using outdoor learning as a methodology, the data revealed that the majority of teachers did not make a distinction between the two. Some described outdoor learning as simply a way of complementing what was learned in the classroom. According to one teacher, outdoor learning was fundamentally "to help consolidate learning what you're doing in the classroom" (Participant 10). Simply moving what was taught indoors to an outdoor context was what some understood as outdoor learning. However, some had the belief that there were two different ways of looking at outdoor learning. One respondent appeared to try and unpack the differences between use of the outdoor environment and outdoor learning itself, musing:

So basically, what they are learning inside you're just doing it outside but I suppose other ways you come across would be more kind of exploring or

exploratory...things that you could only learn outside that you wouldn't have the physical resources or natural things that you would find indoors. I suppose there are two different ways of looking at it. (Participant 8)

Another respondent appeared to have an understanding outdoor learning was both learning which simply uses the outdoors as a venue, but also learning which responds to the outdoors:

...if you're outside rather than in the classroom, you might be teaching a very similar lesson, you might be outside just doing a literacy lesson, it was just too hot that day and you brought the books outside to read... it's a bit of both.... being physically outside of the classroom but also using what's there for you as well, as in what's around and responding to the world around us. (Participant 5)

Using the outdoors as a venue and outdoor learning as a methodology is conflated here.

Analysis reveals that while all respondents have a positive disposition towards using the outdoor environment for learning, only some had an accurate understanding of the difference between use of the outdoor environment for learning and outdoor learning as a methodology. It is suggested that this lack of understanding can mean teachers may lose valuable opportunities to avail of the benefits of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education.

Perceived benefits of outdoor learning. Data analysis revealed that teachers' positive attitudes toward outdoor learning and use of the outdoor environment in general were connected to the many benefits they reported learning outside conferred to their students. The perceived benefits of learning outdoors included physical, social, emotional, and educational benefits. For example, some teachers commented that outdoor learning allows the children to not only avail of fresh air but that the freedom and physical space that the outdoors provides, was of benefit to learners too.

In relation to Visual Arts specifically, one teacher commented that physical space and increased learner autonomy that outdoor learning encourages, would benefit children from a Visual Arts perspective:

It's probably one of those subjects itself where if you could not have the children in such a confined space and if they could, like some children would probably work better if they could almost sit in an area on their own... Artistic, very artistic children you can often see them, they're the ones standing up and moving around the table. (Participant 1)

Another teacher reported on the social benefits they witnessed that the outdoor environment gives to some children who may be shier or quieter indoors, describing how outdoor learning may be a preferred way of learning for some children:

The shier ones are less likely to hold back, they'll all get involved and throw you out an answer... it's different children who feel that they can, you know, show the way outdoors, they have different skills. It's a different set of kids maybe that come to the fore. (Participant 3)

Most teachers referred to the emotional benefits children derive from learning outdoors. The enjoyment that children get from the outdoors was described by most teachers. According to one teacher "The kids love it. Number one, they love getting out of the classroom" (Participant 2). In terms of fostering wellbeing, this is of significance. Many teachers spoke of the educational benefits that learning in the outdoors provided. One teacher specifically mentioned its benefits from an increased learner autonomy, increased agency, and criticality perspective, asserting that:

...sometimes when you are outside and you set a task for them, you're allowing them to take ownership of their learning and I find that when you allow that, they do question more and they will have far more deeper and higher-order questioning, as it's their minds critically thinking of what the environment is and the answers to it. (Participant 11)

In addition, most teachers recognised the experiential nature of outdoor learning. While not mentioning creating, constructing or making specifically, one teacher connected outdoor learning with a hands-on approach, stating that the children “usually react well to the hands-on approach to being outside the classroom and getting to do it rather than just write about doing it” (Participant 5).

Integration with other subjects. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most teachers did not mention the opportunities for integration that outdoor learning for Visual Arts education provides. While there are many references and suggestions for Visual Arts integration with Social, Environmental, and Scientific Education [SESE], there is no reference within the *Visual Arts Curriculum* documents (Government of Ireland, 1999b; Government of Ireland, 1999c) to outdoor learning specifically. Nor do any of the exemplars provided within, illustrate creating with natural fibres in the outdoors, although collecting and working with found natural fibres in the classroom is mentioned (Government of Ireland, 1999b; Government of Ireland, 1999c).

Only one teacher spoke of the potential integration benefits explaining “I think there would be great benefits and I think there would be great linkage along with your SPHE and your SESE. It lends itself to more than one subject” (Participant 3). In particular, the possibilities for integrating Visual Arts and environmental education or the potential of Visual Arts to increase environmental awareness was not initially mentioned. Findings revealed that there was little awareness of the work of any land or environmental artists. However, the follow-up questions, which included photographs of pieces by land artists, revealed that the majority of teachers could see the potential of land and environmental art for both Visual Arts education and environmental awareness. One participant summed up its potential both insightfully and eloquently:

Those pictures are beautiful. I think they would make the children question what art is. Do you need to paint or draw on a piece of paper for it to be art? Those pieces highlight colour, texture, and pattern. There would be great integration with environmental awareness. (Participant 9)

With respect to teacher perspectives on outdoor learning, content analysis indicates that participants do value the potential of outdoor learning for a variety of reasons including Visual Arts integration with SESE, but only when probed or presented with photographs of land art or environmental art do the majority see its true potential for teaching Visual Arts beyond the collecting of natural materials to make indoors.

Practices in Relation to Learning Outdoors for Visual Arts

Having systematically analysed interview transcriptions to identify patterns of commonality or differences among teacher participants with regard to current outdoor learning practices for Visual Arts, two categories emerged including types of activities and frequency of practice.

Types of activities. While the majority of teachers reported that they used the outdoor environment for subjects such as Physical Education [PE] and SESE, more than half of participant teachers reported that they wouldn't tend to use the outdoor environment for Visual Arts learning. Again, this is not surprising considering how little prominence it is afforded within the *Visual Arts Curriculum* documents. One teacher explained "I wouldn't tend to. Well, apart from maybe kind of doing leaf prints and stuff like that. So, bringing the outdoors in, yes, but I wouldn't tend to go outside to do Visual Art" (Participant 9). Another reported "We would be more inclined to bring stuff in... there is nothing I can really think of that we physically went outside to do" (Participant 8).

Few teachers reported going outside into the natural environment to gather natural materials for Visual Arts. Of those that did, the majority reported bringing these back indoors to make use of them. For example, one teacher reported "...using different materials to create collages such as twigs, bits of bark, stones ...I asked the kids as well to go out and bring in stuff from the natural environment" (Participant 7). Bringing items indoors was a practice that was repeatedly mentioned. Another teacher explained their practice:

So, let's say they might find something in the school vicinity, and they might try and sketch it or like when we went outside to look at the daffodils...If it was

possible to bring it indoors, I would. So, let's say we went outdoors to look at those daffodils. I picked one and brought it back indoors. (Participant 10)

Thus, teachers are not inclined to use natural materials in the natural environment, instead making use of them within the confines of the classroom. Considering that this is what the *Visual Arts Curriculum* emphasises, this is of no surprise.

Few teachers reported that they used the natural environment to create with natural fibres outdoors. One teacher reported that when they did however, they also brought out traditionally used material such as glue and paper and brought their creations back indoors to hang:

With the materials we would have used PVA glue and we would have brought out our sheet of paper and we collected our, you know, all the different pieces and they would have stuck all the bits of pieces on whatever they were constructing.
(Participant 6)

Another recounted using natural materials to print in the outdoors many years previously, with the help of an artist who was facilitating art lessons within the school:

[It was] hugely beneficial, they loved the idea of getting out of the classroom to do work, they didn't think you could do art outside...I think they could identify that there was a connection between the materials we were using and where we were using them. (Participant 5)

Of interest here is the recognition by both teacher and students that there was an intrinsic connection between the outdoor environment in which they were working and the natural materials with which they were working. Not only were students exploring and questioning the nature of what constitutes art, this was Visual Arts education allowing for a true connection to nature.

The majority of teachers recognised the potential of using the natural environment for observational drawings or sketching in the outdoors. Of those who reported using the outdoors for Visual Arts, the majority used it for drawing flowers or plants in the school grounds. For example, one teacher explained that "The only way I would have used it for

Visual Arts really would be bringing them out to make drawings of the plants and flowers” (Participant 2). Again, another reported similar practices explaining “So, we’d do some sketching, or still-life or what they could see, we did that” (Participant 11). This is significant because although the majority of teachers recognise the potential of the outdoors for Visual Arts education, they are using it in a limited way, mostly for the two-dimensional [2D] strands such as drawing.

Frequency of practice. Teachers reported that their engagement in outdoor learning or using the environment in general depended on external variables. These included the weather, seasons, class composition and quality of the natural environment.

Most teachers referred to the weather when referring to how frequently they used the outdoor environment for learning. One reported that “It depends on the term...so generally now- from March to June is when we’d get out, while the sun is shining, and we can benefit from it” (Participant 11). This indicates a pattern reported by the majority of teachers, that use of the outdoor environment is heavily dependent on good weather. Similarly, another explained that using the outdoor environment did not happen frequently and when it did, it was often seen as a reward or as a venue to relax and unwind for the children:

I’ll probably go out four or five times a year...sometimes in the summer months it is a nice reward just to go out to the garden for a while. Whether it be like a specific lesson or just letting them have a little break in the garden, but generally it’s not a whole lot. (Participant 2)

Some teachers explained that class composition and school location were important factors in their decision as to how often they chose to use the outdoors. One teacher believed that “it comes down to the kind of the attitude [of the teacher], maybe the resources and the location of the school and just the class you might have that particular year” (Participant 8).

With respect to teacher participants’ practice of outdoor learning, content analysis indicates that use of outdoor learning for Visual Art is infrequent and limited.

Perceived Barriers

Having systematically analysed the interview transcripts to identify patterns or differences among teacher participants with regard to perceived barriers to outdoor learning for Visual Arts, a total of eight categories emerged. These were risk, personnel support, ideation, teacher education, policy, curriculum constraints, weather, and need for change.

Perceived risk. For the majority of participating teachers, risk, and the possibilities of endangering the children within their care impacted on their decision to make use of the environment for outdoor learning. In relation to a local park one teacher explained:

I wouldn't consider bringing the children there just because of the litter and the, I suppose, how do I put it, evidence of anti-social behaviour... there's elements of litter, there's broken glass, there's burnt out cars. It's just not a safe place that I'd like to bring the children. (Participant 2)

This very real risk was echoed by some of the teachers who spoke about bringing their students outside the relative safety of the school grounds. However, even within the school grounds themselves some of the teachers saw risks. One participant echoed the fears others reported when they admitted:

If there's a child that's a flight risk you're not going to actively leave them near an open gate on the school grounds if you know they're a flight risk... so that does again hold back the rest of the class for maybe access to the outdoors because you can't risk one for the sake for the sake of all the others. (Participant 5)

This was not a unique perspective, highlighting that despite the goodwill shown towards outdoor learning and despite the potential benefits, the fear of an accident or incident outdoors plays a role in teachers' decisions to use the outdoors. This was summed up concisely by one participant who said "Like that, fear...there has to be a risk assessment to take them out and you're afraid of your life that something will happen when you're out with the kids" (Participant 1).

In contrast, a teacher who experienced how kindergartens in Norway operate, commented on the difference between how Scandinavian countries view risk to children. They recounted that “They would have a fire where their lunch was cooked. They had bathrooms which were outside. The children were preparing wood, and these were only five- or six-year olds. But they knew danger I suppose” (Participant 8). The contrast is a striking one and perhaps may be attributed to cultural differences between the two countries.

Personnel supports required. The need for extra personnel to support the class teacher featured frequently in teachers’ answers. The majority of participating teachers expressed the need to have the support of another adult to help facilitate outdoor learning for Visual Arts. One teacher admitted that:

Sometimes you need extra personnel just to help supervise. So, if you’re a teacher with a SNA and you want to bring them into the park or down to the beach you’re fine but if you’re a teacher on your own with, you know, 30 children and three messers, you’re going to be a bit more reluctant. (Participant 3)

Similarly, another expressed what the majority had reported in relation to needing extra personnel explaining that “For something like that I probably would want someone to help as you know just to keep an eye on them that they don’t go wandering off” (Participant 9), indicating that teachers did not feel confident to take their classes outside the confines of the classroom without more support from personnel.

Ideation. Most teachers expressed the need for ideas to help support them in their use of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education. Suggestions included teacher support from within the school itself and from online resources as well. One suggested “Say a group of teachers lead or maybe discuss it for maybe five to ten minutes for possibly once a month and swap ideas” (Participant 11). Another teacher admitted needing more help explaining that:

When you’re obviously teaching art and normally a lot of the stuff is indoors and based in class that they do inside, so unless there was some sort of website that

will give you more ideas about what you could do outside in terms of Visual Arts because I feel like, I suppose I have a very narrow kind of vision of what I could really do with them for such a young class as well outside. (Participant 10)

This is important as it indicates that the quality and scope of outdoor learning for Visual Arts will be affected by the teachers' ideation and confidence in generating creative ideas.

Teacher education. Initial teacher education plays a significant role in preparing teachers to execute the curriculum in the field. The majority of teachers reported that during initial teacher education there was either an absence of, or very little time spent exploring teaching Visual Arts in the outdoors. One teacher recalled:

I don't know if it was ever used in college when I was being trained in college. Everything was indoors in an art room and if that's how you have been trained that's how you think then. It takes a lot of thinking then to break out of that and I didn't break out of that. (Participant 3)

This statement is significant as it offers an insight into the importance that teachers reported they placed on their initial teacher education. Another participant mused that "It was never said not to do it. But it was you wouldn't have spent an awful lot of time talking about outdoor learning in relation to Visual Arts in particular" (Participant 5).

Any education for Visual Arts in the outdoors that was reported during initial teacher education was limited in its scope. Mirroring their reported practice, one teacher remembered:

For Visual Arts I just remember we had to go out and sketch lines...And another time we went outdoors looking at pattern... But it wouldn't have been activities outside, it would have been more going out to find something and then I suppose coming back to do your discussion. (Participant 8)

Thus, the frequency and quality of practice mirroring initial teacher training was a common theme that emerged from the data.

Some teachers expressed that they would not be totally comfortable facilitating Visual Arts outdoors. One admitted "Art probably isn't my forte either. So, I'm probably

more reluctant” (Participant 1). In relation to outdoor learning in general, one teacher commented:

I probably wouldn't be as comfortable myself... I suppose it's not a huge area of interest, well not interest but it really wouldn't be something I'd be familiar with... I need to get more experience in it and learn more about what I could do outdoors.
(Participant 4)

Policy. Again, the need for extra supports emerged from the data. Some teachers expressed the view that they felt policies in relation to Visual Arts education in the outdoors were insufficient or lacking and they were needed in order to provide more support. Both school policy at a local level and policy which guide them in the *Visual Arts Curriculum* were mentioned. In relation to local policy one teacher commented:

It would be great to have that kind of discussion in the staff room at a staff meeting and maybe have a sort of policy on making an effort to go outdoors, how often we could try and get outdoors and what we could do with the natural environment and stuff. (Participant 2)

The importance of the guidance and support which policy gives to teachers is represented here.

Curriculum constraints. In relation to the *Visual Arts Curriculum*, one teacher spoke of what they saw as a constraint:

It's not something I thought of a lot. I think because Visual Arts is so much bound up in the strand units... I think an awful lot of what happened in the class when I was teaching Visual Arts was you know, 'Now we'll cover paint so we're going to paint a picture, now we're doing fabric and fibre so we're going to do this weaving'... (Participant 3)

Although it cannot be inferred from this insight that all teachers implement the *Visual Arts Curriculum* in this particular way, nevertheless the insight is an interesting one. Similarly, another teacher said:

I suppose like a lot of the stuff that you see in the curriculum, not many of them, I think, would explore the idea of being outside for it.... My initial instinct is to be doing it in the classroom. My initial instinct doesn't lead me to think of doing it outside. (Participant 10)

The importance of guidance, or lack thereof, within the curriculum again is of note here.

Some teachers expressed the view that although they believed that outdoor learning would be of huge benefit to children, curriculum pressures often took precedence. For example, one lamented "I suppose, because teachers feel they have so much to cover they don't have the time to be nipping off for a day to the countryside, which would be invaluable to kids learning" (Participant 1).

Commenting on how often they used outdoor learning for Visual Arts one participant admitted, echoing what was reported by other participants:

How often? Not as often as I'd like. Like I said, curriculum restraints and stuff like that. I know you can definitely bring the curriculum outside. But it's just a time factor. So, I'd say I only go out four or five times a year. (Participant 2)

Weather. The majority of teachers reported that bad weather was a challenge to facilitating outdoor learning for Visual Arts education. One teacher argued that "I think wrapping up and layering is fine if it's cold but it's different if it's wet. Wet puts you off you know..." (Participant 1). Another explained:

I think it depends on the weather. I think you always need a Plan B. I think it's lovely to bring the kids out but there's nothing more annoying than being outside and the page you've tried to start something on has blown away. (Participant 3)

Thus, despite the evident goodwill towards outdoor learning, it was reported by the majority of teachers that its use was weather dependent. One teacher who had travelled to a Norwegian outdoor Kindergarten as part of their initial teacher education programme commented on what she believed were cultural barriers to outdoor learning claiming "I think Scandinavian countries have a completely different outlook and that comes down to the parents, but I definitely think over here there's a different attitude- you know fear of the

cold and the rain” (Participant 8). This brings into focus cultural attitudes towards weather.

Changes needed. Participating teachers, as we have seen, expressed the need for extra supports with regards to ideas, education, and personnel support. Teachers also expressed the need for other changes that would be necessary to help facilitate Visual Arts in the outdoors. Equipment and courses relevant to Visual Arts in the outdoors were mentioned. For example, one suggested “If there was a week-long summer course of art in the outdoors, I think teachers would love that for a week and I think it would inspire teachers creatively” (Participant 3). Another mused “I suppose there’s no such thing as bad weather, it’s bad clothes...if we had a bank of you know clothes or wellies or something there, that would be great” (Participant 2). Similarly, another suggested “I’d like to make it a more comfortable experience for them outdoors. You know clipboards or little cushions to lean on outdoors” (Participant 6).

Other Findings.

One final finding which was of interest was the perception of using the outdoors in general in schools. One teacher reported that there was sometimes a perception amongst teachers that learning in the outdoors was not really learning at all:

...Maybe some teachers are a bit afraid to be bringing the class out, you know, a whole lot because maybe some people might view it as they’re not getting the teaching done, that they need to be in the classroom. (Participant 2)

This reflects research from Wales, which found that teachers valued subject-based lessons that were done inside the classroom as real work, as opposed to work outside, which was not as valued (Maynard, Waters & Clement, 2013). Similarly, in relation to students’ perceptions, another expressed that “Occasionally there’s a danger that you’re doing outdoor learning and they think it’s not learning at all. So, groups have to be carefully managed to make sure something good comes from it and it wasn’t just larking about outside” (Participant 3). Although this will not be discussed in detail, it is nonetheless a finding that could benefit from further study.

Discussion

This section will discuss and contextualise the findings derived from the data with reference to the relevant literature within the fields of outdoor learning and Visual Arts education. It will be divided into three subsections which will discuss perspectives and understanding, practice in relation to outdoor learning and Visual Arts, and perceived risk and barriers. The possible missed opportunities for Visual Arts will be threaded throughout these subsections.

Perspectives and understanding. In terms of teachers' perspectives and understanding of using the natural environment for outdoor learning, it is evident that those involved in this study demonstrate considerable goodwill towards the concept of outdoor learning. Teachers report that not only do they enjoy bringing the children outdoors to learn but that they also enjoy it themselves. This finding reflects those of the aforementioned study, *The Natural Connections Demonstration Project* (Waite et al., 2016) which reported that outdoor learning in the natural environment was regarded positively by teachers and students alike. The nostalgia for their own childhood experiences of learning in the natural environment, which is evident in some teachers responses, resonates with that which Louv (2005) found when speaking to teachers during his research. Teachers do display an awareness of some of the aforementioned social, personal, and educational benefits of outdoor pedagogy (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010) which contributes to the goodwill towards outdoor learning.

Notwithstanding this goodwill, teachers in this study do consider that they are not doing as much outdoor learning as they could or should. Understandably, many of these reasons relate to weather, class composition, ideas and general support available to them. What is markedly present in the interview findings is the idea that to use outdoor learning to facilitate Visual Arts education is not a natural instinct, nor something that occurs to teachers to do. Teachers report that they use outdoor learning for other subjects, in particular for SESE but for Visual Arts it is much less common. This finding is not surprising for a variety of reasons. Considering the lack of education and ideas as

expressed by the majority of teacher participants- something which we will examine further at a later stage in this chapter- and considering that it is not promoted within the *Visual Arts Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999b; Government of Ireland, 1999c) it can be of no surprise that there are missed opportunities for Visual Arts education.

The finding that an ambiguity exists in relation to the understanding of use of the outdoors as merely a place or context in which to teach curriculum content, and outdoor learning as an experiential learning methodology, is an interesting one. Participant teachers did report using the outdoor environment for taking what they were teaching indoors outside, but often confused this use as using outdoor learning. It points to a gap in knowledge in relation to outdoor learning as a methodology, something which we have seen Maynard and Waters (2007) regard as one of the barriers to outdoor learning. Teachers using the same pedagogical approaches outdoors as they do indoors miss opportunities to not only view children's learning in a more holistic way but also to realise the full potential of the outdoor environment (Maynard & Waters 2007).

Gaps in knowledge are also evidenced in the fact that most teachers are not familiar with the work of any land or environmental artists. It could be reasonably suggested therefore that teachers do not use such artists' work as stimulus for either learning within the Visual Arts, or realise their potential for environmental awareness education. Using other artists work to scaffold teacher ideation for creativity within Visual Arts can be a very effective stimulus (Flannery, 2018). When presented with examples in follow-up questions, many teachers then identified the learning potential that these pieces have. In terms of Visual Arts, colour, texture, pattern, and indeed the nature of what constitutes Visual Arts, were described as potential learning opportunities. The possibilities for integration with environmental education and awareness, was also mentioned, for the first time, in response to the follow- up questions. The Primary Curriculum Review (NCCA, 2005) found that teachers reported little success integrating Visual Arts with other subject areas. The fact that environmental awareness was not mentioned initially suggests that a gap in knowledge exists. This does not seem to be as a result of an absence of

environmental awareness as all of the teachers interviewed report that their schools were part of the Green Schools Programme (Green Schools Ireland, 2020) which promotes environmental awareness. Evidence would suggest that it relates to a lack of education in the field, as well as a lack of resources and ideas, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

It is suggested therefore that despite the goodwill towards outdoor learning in the natural environment for Visual Arts education there are some gaps in knowledge and understanding that would prevent teachers from realising its full potential. Ultimately it is suggested that this is resulting in missed opportunities for Visual Arts education.

Practice. As was noted above, of those teachers in this study who reported using the outdoor environment for Visual Arts education, most reported that it was not a frequent occurrence. Additionally, how they use it is in a partial and sometimes limited way, reflecting the research of Maynard and Waters (2007). Using outdoor learning as a methodology was also infrequent. In light of the practice reported by respondents, the following figure, *Figure 1* conceptualises the nuance and variety of practice in relation to responding to the natural environment as reported by teacher participants. The inner circle represents a deeper richer form of outdoor learning, with the middle and outer circles showing incrementally more nuanced outdoor learning practice, as reported by teachers.

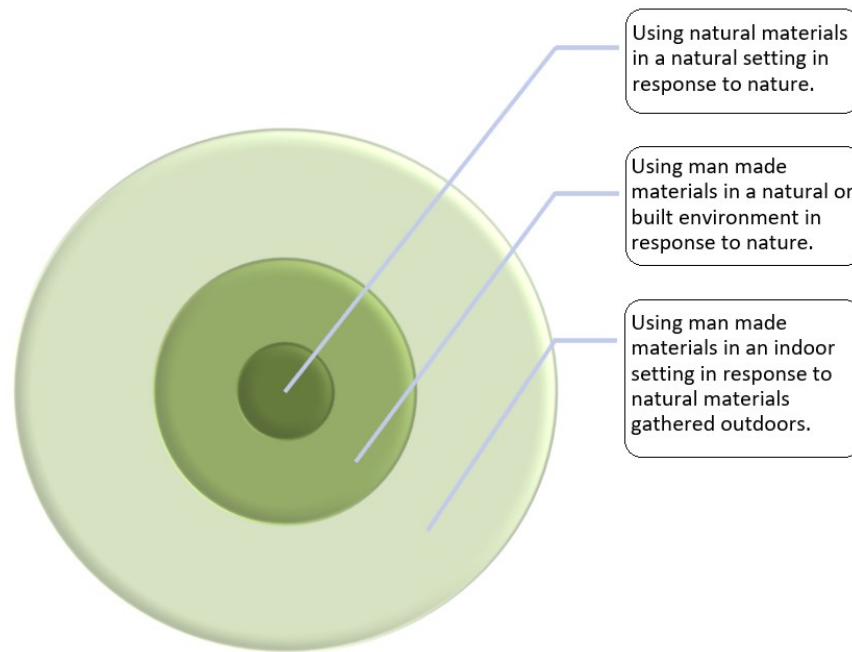


Figure 1. Variety of practice as reported by teachers.

Of significance is that while some teachers in this study report making use of natural materials such as flowers and leaves for Visual Arts lessons, these loose materials are more often than not brought inside and used within the lesson indoors. Thus, although not exactly to scale, responding to the natural environment reportedly takes place within the middle, and to a larger extent, outer circles of *Figure 1*. This reflects the findings of the Heritage Council (2016). As we have seen, few teachers report sending or bringing children outside to gather materials. Where there is a practice of collection, use of these materials happens most often indoors. This makes use of the natural environment but does not wholly subscribe to the methodology of outdoor learning. Thus benefits such as moving around freely and being physically active (Rivkin, 1995), making use of alternative resources and materials (Sjoblom and Svens, 2018) in the outdoors and the sense of agency and independence which outdoor learning can afford (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010) are all missed opportunities if outdoor learning is underutilised.

Observation and drawing is the most common practice teachers engage in when outdoor learning does take place. Children are encouraged to observe natural materials in

the outdoors. Daffodils and flowers are used for still life drawings. This was reported as one of the main activities in which children took part in the outdoors. Sketching of the built environment for the purposes of developing an awareness of the visual elements such as line, shape, and space was also undertaken by one teacher. The *Visual Arts Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999c, p5) as we have seen consists of six strands through which it is hoped the child can explore and interpret the world. These strands include drawing, paint and colour, print, clay, construction and fabric and fibre. All strands are given equal importance. From the data collected it appears that the strands of clay, print, paint, fabric and fibre and construction are being underutilised within the natural environment. Constructing with natural materials has value and as we have seen, children who can explore, experience and experiment with a variety of materials are more likely to create art that is more personal (Government of Ireland, 1999b).

Using natural materials to create art can also democratise it, making it available to those who cannot afford or cannot source traditional man-made materials such as paint or paper. Encouraging students to utilise materials beyond their intended use, including materials we find in nature, can help them to think more about their own lives and their surrounding environment (Hoffman Davis, 2008). Unfortunately however, three-dimensional work with either clay or natural fibres is rarely explored outside. This echoes the findings of the Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1 (NCCA, 2005) which found when looking and responding to the natural environment whether indoors or outdoors, teachers favoured the 2D strands, despite children's enthusiasm for clay and construction. The recommendation that "further support and ideas for using the 3D Visual Arts strands (clay, construction, fabric and fibre) would support teachers in continuing to implement the full Visual Arts Curriculum" (NCCA, 2005, p.21) would seem to reflect the wishes of the participating teachers.

According to the data, the key reasons why practitioners practice in this way are twofold. Teachers report that weather has a bearing on how often they used the outdoors, reflecting the findings from national and international research (Kernan & Devine, 2010;

Heritage Council, 2016; Maynard and Walters, 2007). Many feel that weather hampers what they can achieve in the outdoors in Visual Arts, if materials and most importantly children, were to get wet. They also felt that bringing materials outdoors would be cumbersome or fraught with difficulties. Making use of natural materials alone did not really feature in their answers. Secondly, teachers reported that they felt short of ideas of how they could use the natural environment and this they put down to lack of education in the field of outdoor learning. From an Irish perspective, teachers' knowledge and confidence in the Visual Arts was reported as a challenge in the *Primary Curriculum Review Phase 1* (NCCA, 2005). Most interestingly however is that in all but one case, teachers' own initial teacher education almost identically mirrors their practices. Most either spoke of there being no emphasis on outdoor learning for Visual Arts during initial teacher education or only a limited emphasis, concentrating on sketching objects in the built or natural environment.

Findings in relation to practice therefore reveal that in terms of Visual Arts practice teachers are only making use of the outdoor environment and indeed outdoor learning, in a partial or limited way, mirroring the education they have had themselves. This is resulting in missed opportunities for the child to develop a sensitivity to the elements of art in a variety of different contexts, using a variety of different materials as deemed important for Visual Arts education (Sandell, 2012; Government of Ireland, 1999b).

Perceived risk and barriers. Risk presents itself as an important consideration for teachers when contemplating using the outdoors for Visual Arts education, reflecting studies from a national and international perspective (Kernan & Devine, 2010; Moss, 2012). Litter, dangerous objects and fear of accidents were presented as reasons why teachers were cautious about the use of the outdoor environment for outdoor learning. These factors are of course outside of teachers' control. Risk of children misbehaving or running away from teacher supervision can be mitigated however. Most teachers believed that a lack of personnel support in the form of another responsible adult was a barrier to facilitating a lesson in the outdoors. Support from other adults working with a class, such

as SNAs, provide support for teachers when a particular child in the class has additional needs. It is often those children, who need to be assisted physically or closely monitored, that teachers worry about most during outdoor sessions. For many teachers however extra help is not always available, understandably leading to some often prioritising safety over the benefits of the outdoors. This reflects the aforementioned findings of Kernan and Devine (2010) who assert that in risk averse societies, the outdoors becomes marginalised and children remain confined indoors. Unfortunately outdoor learning for Visual Arts misses out.

Additional support in the form of ideas and teacher education was also identified by teachers as vital in order to help facilitate outdoor learning for Visual Arts. Ideation, the capacity to generate and develop ideas is an essential part of creative teaching and learning (Barnes, 2015) and these ideas are a missing element according to teachers interviewed in this study. Teacher education is an effective component for the development of these ideas (Flannery, 2018). The participating teachers recognised this, suggesting that help in the form of online resources or continuous professional development courses would greatly assist them in the development of ideation for Visual Arts in the outdoors. The need for more art education courses to improve the practice of in-service teachers has been a common theme in Visual Arts research literature in Ireland (Ní Bhroin, 2012). Teachers lack of confidence in their abilities and knowledge in the Visual Arts again echoes the findings of the *Primary Curriculum Review* (NCCA, 2005) which found teachers also felt that additional education in the Visual Arts would be of great help to them in implementing the *Visual Arts Curriculum* in general. Internationally, research has also shown that teachers lack of self-confidence in teaching the arts is a hindrance to effective teaching and learning (Alter, Hayes & O'Hara, 2009). Additionally, research has also found that teacher confidence and self- efficacy in relation to facilitating lessons outdoors is also an issue (Dillon & Dickie, 2012).

Support in the form of policy, and in particular the structure and content of the *Visual Arts Curriculum* was seen as a barrier to implementing the curriculum. Although the

Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999a) asserts that environment-based learning is one of its fundamental guiding principles, the lack of guidance within the *Visual Arts Curriculum* for learning in the outdoors was noted by some teachers. Although these practical guidelines and exemplars are quite rare in most Visual Arts curricula and are designed to give guidance rather than be prescriptive (Ní Bhroin, 2012), nonetheless they are considered valuable by teachers in this study. It is understandable and not surprising therefore, that teachers report facilitating a Visual Arts lesson in the outdoors does not occur to them. Exemplars which are based on the indoor context and suggestions to bring natural materials indoors rather than use outdoors, can and do influence teachers' choices, according to these findings. It is argued therefore that promoting outdoor learning more within the curriculum would scaffold its facilitation and implementation going forward.

Weather was reported as playing a significant role in the frequency and quality of practice, reflecting Maynard and Waters (2007). The unpredictable nature of the Irish weather and the cold and rain were presented as significant challenges, despite the goodwill that teachers had towards outdoor learning. Practitioners explain this in terms of concerns for the children within their care. Others frame it in terms of culture, where it is the Irish fear of the cold and rain that prevents teachers from going outside. Determining whether this is a cultural resistance of the Irish who perceive themselves to be an indoor people staying within their 'adult comfort zone' (Kernan & Devine, 2010, p.13) or a genuine instinct of a caring profession eager to ensure the wellbeing of those in their charge, is a difficult determination to make. Perhaps those practitioners working with children day in day out, should be given the benefit of the doubt. Should the latter be the truth and concern is the motivating factor, then this can be mitigated somewhat by support from additional resources, including clothing and purpose-built shelters which teachers have suggested they desire.

Thus, teachers have low self-efficacy with regards to outdoor learning in Visual Arts due to lack of relevant education, ideas, policy support and resources. These present

barriers and challenges to practitioners. Unless more support is provided, facilitating Visual Arts in the outdoors more often will continue to be a challenge, resulting in missed opportunities for Visual Arts and engagement with nature.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the findings derived from the data, through the lens of relevant literature. From this analysis, various themes have emerged. Many of these findings echo and resonate with the existing literature. This study set out to explore and examine the use of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education. It has found that despite the goodwill expressed by teachers towards outdoor learning for Visual Arts education, barriers exist that result in missed opportunities for Visual Arts education. The next chapter will outline the emerging themes further and address any appropriate recommendations.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The core aim of this study was to explore and examine the perspectives and practices of primary school teachers in Ireland in relation to outdoor learning for Visual Arts education. It sought to examine teachers' perspectives and practices in relation to using the outdoor environment in general and then explored to what extent outdoor learning was used in Visual Arts education. Furthermore, the study examined what barriers teachers identified as challenges, which ultimately result in missed opportunities for Visual Arts. Finally, it identified what changes would be necessary in order to allow teachers to improve the quality and frequency of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education. This final chapter summarises the themes which emerged from the findings of the study and makes recommendations that may help institute the changes necessary.

Conclusions

Firstly, with respect to teacher perspectives on outdoor learning, this study finds that participants did value the potential of outdoor learning for a variety of reasons including increased pupil wellbeing, agency, and independence. However, a deep and rich understanding of just what outdoor learning was, was not in evidence, with some confusion between using the environment as a place to teach and using the methodology of outdoor learning. Nor did participating teachers report an awareness of the diversity of art forms available for the teaching of Visual Arts. Most were not familiar with any land or environmental artists. Only when probed or presented with photographs of land or environmental art did the majority see its true potential for teaching Visual Arts. Thus, despite the goodwill towards outdoor learning in the natural environment among teachers for Visual Arts education, both gaps in knowledge and a lack of understanding prevent many teachers from realising its full potential, resulting in many missed opportunities.

Secondly, this study found that despite environment-based learning being a fundamental guiding principle of the *Primary School Curriculum* (Government of Ireland,

1999b) the use of the outdoor environment for Visual Arts education revealed it was only used in a partial or limited way. Although nuances of outdoor learning are practiced, the quality of outdoor learning was limited with respect to the types of activities and learner agency involved. This is perhaps not surprising, given that outdoor learning does not feature within curriculum documents and environment-based learning is not overtly or comprehensively addressed in the curriculum but “subsumed into a wider range of learning principles” (Government of Ireland, 1999b, P.8). Although the exemplars presented to teachers in the *Visual Arts Curriculum* are designed to be guidelines and not prescriptive (Ní Bhroin, 2012), nonetheless it is true to say that teachers within this study placed a value on them. The absence of any examples of outdoor learning or creation within the natural environment in these exemplars therefore does affect the type of learning that takes place in the outdoors. Perhaps because of this absence, within initial teacher education where teachers are taught to enact the curriculum, opportunities to explore the true potential of the outdoor environment for Visual Arts education are lost. This study found that participant teachers’ practice mirrored their initial teacher training in this field. The NCCA is currently undertaking a process of reviewing and redeveloping the *Primary School Curriculum* and a draft framework has been published (NCCA, 2020). This reform provides policy makers with a unique opportunity to include and promote outdoor learning within the *Visual Arts Curriculum*. The key competencies proposed in the draft curriculum will build integration into the structure of the curriculum (NCCA, 2020), allowing for an easing of curriculum pressures and overload as reported by teachers in this study as a barrier.

In this era of curriculum reform therefore, this research emphasises the importance of the inclusion and promotion of outdoor learning within the new *Visual Arts Curriculum*. Ultimately, not alone could it broaden children’s understanding of what constitutes art but could enhance their connection with the natural world, increasing pupil wellbeing, and encouraging creativity. While the current *Visual Arts Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999b) offers children the opportunity to create and respond to art in a variety of media,

opportunities to foster an appreciation for the beauty of the natural world and to realise the artistic potential of natural materials were missed. The new *Visual Arts Curriculum* has an opportunity to remedy this.

Thirdly despite the goodwill among participating teachers towards outdoor learning for Visual Arts education, their practice is determined by the weather, their proximity to nature, the perceived level of risk, the amount of teacher supports available, complexities of class composition and teacher ideation. Weather and proximity to nature can be mitigated to a certain extent with appropriate clothing and organised trips to natural areas beyond the school grounds, if possible. Supporting teachers with the other challenges they report is also well within the bounds of possibility. Extra personnel, where available, can help mitigate the risks participants described, allowing teachers to feel more confident taking their students beyond the confines of the classroom. Teacher ideation can also be supported through both initial teacher education (Flannery, 2018) and online supports and courses for continuous professional development. Low teacher self-efficacy can therefore be alleviated by providing more supports.

The following figure, *Figure 2* has been devised to offer an overall view of the supports needed to improve the quality and frequency of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education.

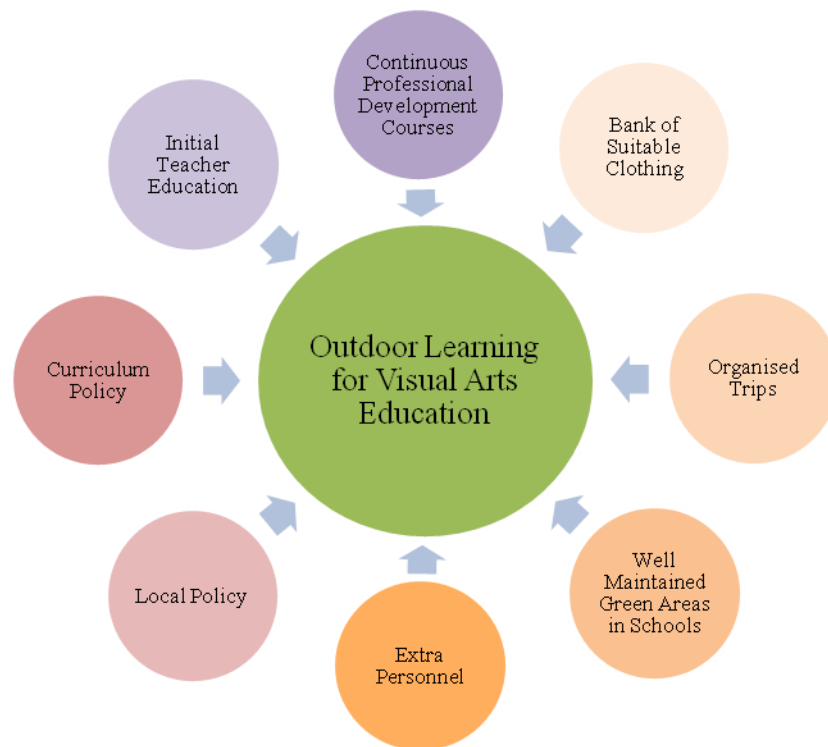


Figure 2. Supports needed to facilitate outdoor learning for Visual Arts education.

This small-scale study provides an insight into the perspectives and experiences of a group of primary school teachers. The study consisted of 11 participants and therefore generalisation cannot be presumed. However, despite the relatively small sample the study gave an insight into the lived experiences of Irish primary school teachers and highlighted the nuances of educational activities which take place within the natural environment. A correlation was found between what the body of literature critically examined for this study revealed, and the responses of participating teachers, with regard to perspectives, practices and missed opportunities. Further research into this topic on a wider scale, where generalisation could be presumed, could complement and add to this study, and perhaps not only help promote outdoor learning in the Visual Arts but also highlight its importance to policy makers at this time of curricular reform.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this research which has given a voice to the perspectives of teachers, it is recommended that in order to help improve the quality and frequency of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education, the following three measures should be considered:

At national level:

- In this era of curriculum reform, the inclusion and promotion of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education within the new *Visual Arts Curriculum* should be given serious consideration. This would provide teachers and schools with more guidance and supports to facilitate the practice.
- Initial Teacher Education programmes should promote outdoor learning as a methodology for Visual Arts education. This could provide teachers with more ideation and education which teachers reported as a serious barrier to practice.
- Continuous Professional Development courses, including Summer Courses should be made available to help with teacher self-efficacy and ideation for outdoor learning in the Visual Arts, allowing teachers to feel more confident to facilitate Visual Arts lessons outdoors.

This study proposes three key recommendations at a local level, where school leaders and Boards of Management have the ability to put in place supports for teachers.

At local level:

- Schools should develop their own outdoor learning policy at a local level to help encourage the use of outdoor learning for the Visual Arts, thus providing more guidance to teachers.
- Schools should provide support for teachers by maintaining green areas within the grounds, provide extra personnel for outdoor learning practices whenever possible

and invest in suitable clothing for the outdoors. These supports could mitigate some of the barriers teachers face facilitating a Visual Arts lesson outdoors.

- Schools whose locations do not easily facilitate outdoor learning should, where financially possible, encourage organised trips to diverse natural environments. This is particularly important for schools where a natural environment is not easily accessible.

Additionally, at classroom level, where teachers can also take steps to increase the frequency and quality of outdoor learning for Visual Arts, the following recommendation is proposed.

At classroom level:

- Teachers should take advantage of the opportunities that the integration of subjects can bring, especially when curriculum overload is seen as a barrier. Integrating Visual Arts with other areas of the curriculum allows for the application of knowledge and skills from other areas of the curriculum. In particular, integrating Visual Arts with SESE can facilitate interaction and engagement with nature, allowing the beauty of the natural world to be of benefit to Visual Arts education.

Notwithstanding the small-scale nature of this research, its findings have significance. It has highlighted the benefits and relevance of outdoor learning for Visual Arts education and can contribute to teachers' awareness, understanding and appreciation of outdoor learning for Visual Arts going forward. This study is of particular relevance in an era of curriculum reform when there is a unique opportunity within a redrafted curriculum to confer the many benefits of outdoor learning for Visual Arts upon children in their formative years.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Outdoor Art for Children



Stone Spirals



Stone Stacking



Leaf Arranging



Leaf Wreath



Weaving



Ice Sculpture

Appendix B

Examples of Land and Environmental Art by Richard Shilling



Appendix C

Sample Interview Schedule

Initial Questions:

1. What class are you teaching at the moment?
2. How many children are in your class?
 - Do you have any extra assistance in the class?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. What outdoor space is available locally to you for outdoor learning? This could be in the school grounds or in walking distance.
5. Does your school have any Green Flags?

Main Questions:

1. Do you ever use the outdoor environment in your teaching?
 - Can you give me an example of what you might have used it for?
 - What do you see as the benefits of using the outdoors?
2. What is your understanding of outdoor learning?
 - Just for the purposes of this study this is my definition of what of outdoor learning is or what I mean when I refer to outdoor learning, as everyone may have a different idea as to what it entails. Show definition.
3. Based on this definition what are your practices in relation to outdoor learning in general?
4. What are your practices regarding the use of the outdoor environment for Visual Arts in particular?
 - Would outdoor learning be part of your practice?
 - Do you think it might be beneficial to your Visual Arts teaching?
 - What might those benefits be?
5. Do you know the work of any land or environmental artists?
6. How would you feel about facilitating a Visual Arts lesson in the outdoors?
7. Would you have any reservations about using the outdoor environment for Visual Arts?
8. What supports or extra measures do you think could be put in place to help support the practice of outdoor learning for the Visual Arts?

9. Have you ever done any courses or had any Initial Teacher Education in relation to outdoor learning for Visual Arts education?

Definition of Outdoor Learning

Notwithstanding the call of the urban environment and its potential for Visual Arts learning through architecture, sculpture or street art, for the purpose of this study, when discussing outdoor learning in schools, I will be referring to outdoor learning as learning which is happening in the outdoors and which allows children to experience, understand and respond to the natural world.

An example of this in Visual Arts education could include responding to nature in the outdoors or using natural materials in the outdoors to make art. It could also involve facilitating a Visual Arts lesson in places such as school grounds, parks, rivers, forests, open spaces and coastlines.

Follow-up Questions: Land and Environmental Art

What do you think the learning potential of these works of land and environmental art would be, if you were to address them in the classroom?



This land art is called *Jardin de Capteurs* or *Agriculture Composition* by environmental artist Jean Paul Ganem. The artist turned fields of human waste and pollution into colourful landscapes made up of compositions of different colours and kinds of plants.



This work has been called *Fall Leaves* and is by the famous environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy. He uses Autumn leaves to create beautiful transient and ephemeral pieces.



This land art entitled *Spiral Jetty* is by the artist Robert Smithson. It was made by using a bulldozer to move tonnes of material onto the lake.

Appendix D



A local park used by one participant for outdoor learning.

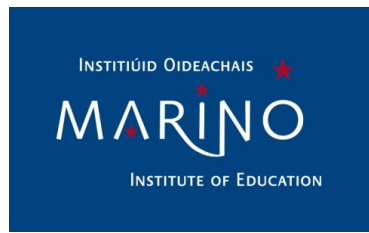


A park used by another participant for a nature walk.



The natural environment available in one particular school.

Appendix E



10/02/2020

Dear Teacher,

My name is Louise Skelly and I am a primary school teacher doing a Master in Education Studies (Visual Arts) course. I am writing to you to ask for your help with a study I am undertaking as part of this programme. It will form part of a dissertation that I will submit to Marino Institute of Education. The research involves exploring the use of the outdoor environment in Visual Arts teaching within a primary school setting and I hope that the findings will inform teachers' practice in Visual Arts going forward.

The study will involve interviewing you on a one to one basis for approximately 30 minutes and the interview will be recorded. I hope to do this during the month of March. The interview will involve asking some general questions about your teaching experience along with exploring your opinions, attitudes, and current practice in relation to outdoor learning for Visual Arts. I would also like to view any space outdoors that is available to you to use for learning outdoors and take some photographs of this space.

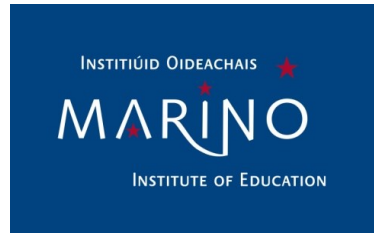
Confidentiality is important and as such, care will be taken not to identify either the school or its geographic location in the collection of the data. Your responses will be confidential. The data collected and any photographs taken will be used only for the purpose of the study and will not be disseminated to any other third party. Your data will be stored in a password protected computer and screens, printouts or files will not be visible to any unauthorised person. Personal manual data will be held securely in locked cabinets. The data will be destroyed according to college guidelines when it is no longer needed for its original purpose. There will be no risks from, or direct benefits to, participating in the study. Interviews will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner and you will have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage without having to offer a reason. The study will also have been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino Ethics in Research Committee and should you have any concerns, they can be contacted at MERC@mie.ie.

I am hoping that you will be willing to participate in this research as your opinions are important and will be a valued part of the study. Your participation will be sincerely appreciated. Should you wish to participate you will be asked to sign the information/consent form below, indicating that you have given informed consent.

If you consent to participating, you may contact me at the following email address _____ or phone number _____. Should you require any additional information or wish to clarify any details please feel free to contact me at the above email address or number.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Skelly.



Statement of Consent

Please read the statement below and indicate whether you would be willing to participate in the study as described.

I consent to participate in the study by agreeing to be interviewed, as described above.	Yes	No
I consent to be audio-recorded during the interview process.	Yes	No
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any stage without having to give a reason.	Yes	No

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F

An Example of the Initial Coding Process

338	Participant 3	
339	I think Aistear may have opened people's eyes a bit.	LS Louise Skelly Curriculum policy
340	Researcher	
341	You use the phrase "it didn't dawn on me". Any ideas why it didn't dawn on	
342	you, that you could have used the Visual Arts Curriculum for outdoor learning?	
343	Participant 3	LS Louise Skelly Initial teacher Education
344	I don't know if it was ever used in college when I was being trained in college.	
345	Everything was indoors in an art room and so if that's how you have been	LS Louise Skelly Taught indoors
346	trained that's how you think then. It takes a lot of thinking then to break out of	
347	that and I didn't break out of it!	LS Louise Skelly Practice mirroring education
348	Researcher	
349	And you mentioned this training there and have you ever done any and CPD	
350	training for Visual Arts in particular?	
351	Participant 3	
352	Yes, I did actually, about four years ago maybe?	
353	Researcher	
354	And would you have done anything about outdoor learning or being brought	
355	out yourself on those courses?	
356	Participant 3	LS Louise Skelly Continuous Curriculum Development Course
357	No on that course we weren't outside, but it was a lovely course, with a lot of	
358	ideas and a lot of different stimuli so maybe I would have made the leap to	
359	outdoors myself. Certainly, of the things we did was to look out the window	
360	and use the stimulus of what we saw out there.	
361	Researcher	LS Louise Skelly Outdoor stimuli
362	And would you have tended to do that with your classes as well then, "look	
363	out the window and use stimulus"	