

# EXPLORING OUTDOOR CLASSROOM LEARNING AS AN EXTENSION OF INDOOR CLASSROOM LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL

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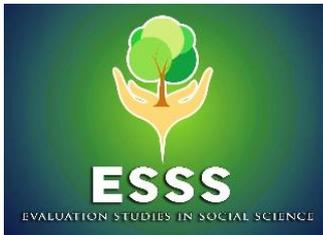
## ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECE) classrooms are under pressure and stress due to the domino effect on primary school preparation and the curriculum's focus on academics, particularly early literacy, and numerical competence. In recognizing the significance of outdoor experiences for children, the study aims to gain an overview of preschool teachers' diverse viewpoints and experiences in exploring outdoor classroom learning as an extension to classroom learning. This qualitative case study interviewed six preschool teachers on their perspectives and experiences with learning outside the classroom. It comprises a thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers. Two themes emerged from the thematic data analysis, which describes teachers' thoughts and experiences. The study's findings revealed that preschool teachers demonstrated a fundamental understanding of outdoor education and offered well-targeted examples of numerous implementations of learning methodologies outside the classroom. Most consider outdoor classroom learning more than environmental education, but a multidimensional approach combined with various goals, philosophies, and actions. Outdoor education, according to teachers, benefits children and has a significant value for children's holistic development. Significant constraints were discovered, including appropriate locations, insufficient infrastructure, materials, time constraints, staff resources, and inadequate pedagogical skills and training. Furthermore, the most troubling aspect is parents' attitude and the absence of support from authorities, such as the necessity to realign the curriculum and policies.

**Keywords:** *early childhood education, outdoor classroom learning, holistic development, outdoor education, preschool teacher*

## INTRODUCTION

The early years are the most critical. The child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development accelerates during this formative period due to more intense significant changes. According to research, early childhood is a key period in which a child develops important abilities and self-concepts that will influence their subsequent development (Yıldırım & Akamca, 2017). In addition, preschool is the first experience children have with formal education. As a result, the quality of education and opportunities available are critical since they benefit not just children but also their families and society as a whole (Miranda et al.,



2016). Preschoolers should have access to learning environments that foster their development and encourage them to explore. High-quality preschools are associated with children's well-being, greater social-emotional balance, and improved cognitive and language skills, according to a study by Gialamas et al. (2014).

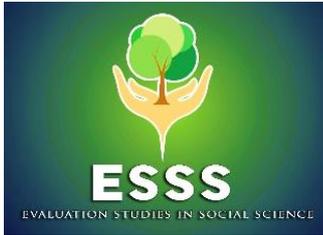
Outdoor activities increase academic achievement, emotional well-being, social relationships, and physical activity level in children, according to a study by Rickinson et al. (2004), and Waite (2011). One prominent theme in out-of-classroom education methodology is experiential education. The researcher was curious how changing outside settings influences teaching practices and children's play and learning experiences. Both teacher-led and unstructured activities in outdoor settings are regarded as developmentally acceptable approaches for instructors to provide children with pedagogical, cognitive, emotional, and physical benefits.

Learning does not necessarily take place in a traditional classroom setting. According to Von Benzon (2017), today's preschool design restricts children's freedom of movement and guarantees maximum supervision of children by the teacher (Saleh et al., 2018; McClintic & Petty, 2015). Children are separated from the outer world by these enclosed walls and doors. Children that participated in learning by utilizing the nature teaching technique and environment enhanced their understanding and interest by up to forty percent, according to research conducted in Indonesia (Saleh et al., 2018; Spalie et al., 2011). Traditionally, instruction was limited to the four walls of the classroom and was primarily verbal. Extending classes into the outdoors creates an environment for learning greater insight, understanding, and more obvious significance in areas of knowledge that are typically read and discussed but rarely experienced.

### **Outdoor Classroom Learning in Malaysia**

Malaysia's educational system includes preschool, primary, secondary, and university education (Masnan et al., 2018). Malaysian educational practices are mostly based on conventional techniques and methodologies, emphasizing academics. For example, the Malaysian preschool learning system mostly employs an indoor learning method (Spalie et al., 2011), stressing theoretical practice over practical lessons (Abu-Yazid et al., 2021). This approach stifles children's creativity and imagination, thus impacting their growth and learning.

Most children between the ages of one and six attend preschool, with enrollment increasing in the one to three age group. Furthermore, conventionally, preschools for children ages one to three years old have been more care-oriented (Abdul Mutalib et al., 2017). In Malaysia, there have been few studies on non-classroom learning (Saleh et al., 2018). Some studies took various ways to study outdoor learning as an alternative learning modality in



preschool design. However, the majority of studies have concentrated on curriculum creation and knowledge delivery. As a result, children are currently spending far more time being taught and graded on mathematics and literacy abilities (Azlina & Zulkiflee, 2012) than they are learning through play and exploration, utilizing their bodies, and using their imaginations.

However, in recent years, there has been a concerted attempt to make school curricula more engaging, creative and relevant to children's needs in accordance with the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPSC). NPSC is aimed to prepare students for the twenty-first century by emphasizing thinking skills, living skills, and jobs based on moral ideals (Education, 2017). For example, in 1998, the Malaysian education system incorporated environmental education across the curriculum for primary and secondary schools by publishing the Education Teacher's Guide. The preschool level of the book was launched in 2005 (Masnan et al., 2018). Nonetheless, most outdoor learning in Malaysian preschools focuses on physical activities, nature, green environment education, and sustainability.

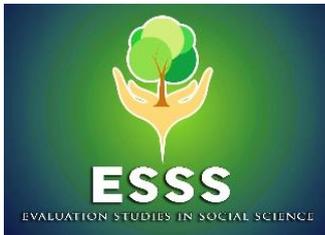
Although the new NPSC curriculum supports experiential learning and outside activities, there is no systematic use of outdoor education approaches in preschools. As a result, this draws attention to the question of 'why' preschool teachers do not incorporate outdoor classroom learning into their everyday lessons. Preschool teachers do not leave the classroom very much, except for occasionally school activities such as visits to natural gardens or educational visits to community places such as the fire department, public library, or police station.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

The researcher employed a qualitative case study to conduct the study. The qualitative study uses a variety of approaches to determine a specific study purpose and research topic, although further exploration and discoveries are permitted. Because the study examines and comprehends the teacher's point of view, qualitative study analysis is most suited because it explains phenomena depending on a person's interpretation of their experiences in each setting (Stake, 2010).

The case study approach was chosen because it is well-suited to explaining and identifying significant difficulties in an individual, organizational, or institutional setting while properly fulfilling the research objectives. In addition, it allows for an in-depth examination of the trend using various evidence acquired from interviews with people involved and document and artifact analysis (Yin, 2009). Since the research question focused on the perspective and teacher's experiences, and the purpose of the study is to explain rather than predict, the variables examined cannot be immediately identified or combined with the events being



investigated. Thus, qualitative case studies are particularly appropriate because it provides insight into the topic through the investigation of phenomena in their real-life contexts, which is particularly useful when the boundaries between phenomena and contexts become blurred (Yin, 2009).

### *Participant*

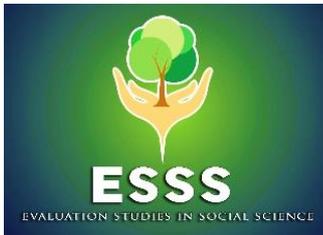
Purposive sampling was used to select participants because the purpose of the study is to acquire a deeper understanding of (Neuman, 2014) teachers' opinions on exploring outdoor classroom learning as an extension of indoor classroom learning rather than to generalize the findings (Bakar, 2014). In addition, because there were six (6) participants in the study, purposive sampling was preferred to be realistic in perspectives and experiences teaching young children (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, three of the preschool teachers with more than four years of experience and three principals/operators with a preschool that has been operating for more than four years were chosen. Two preschools are located in Bintulu, Sarawak, while one is located in Miri, Sarawak.

### *Data Collection*

The majority of the data for the study was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Because of the Covid-19 standard operating procedure (SOP) that limits the schoolteacher's engagement with outsiders to prevent the danger of infection to the children in the school, participants chose to conduct interviews through video meetings in this study. The interviews were conducted via video sessions using the Zoom application, and interviews were captured using Zoom meeting recording software.

A semi-structured interview is an open-ended interview akin to a conversation about a specific topic. A semi-structured interview was done with six (6) participants to capture their thoughts in their own words. These will allow the researcher to illustrate the significance of the experiences by providing participants with time and space to reflect on and discuss critical past experiences connected to exploring outdoor classroom learning as an extension to indoor classroom learning. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews combine the benefits of structured and unstructured interviews by allowing participants to be asked different interview questions under specific circumstances to elicit the best possible response (Camfield, 2014).

Each interview with a participant was conducted during a single interview session. The session will last between forty and sixty minutes. The interview starts with open-ended questions about the participant's personal experiences with outdoor classroom learning in general. It was done to encourage a more in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives on



the subject in general. Then, for a thorough grasp of the subject, the researcher delves deeper into the participant's response and pursues challenging or inventive responses with follow-up questions (Adams, 2015). The follow-up questions let the researcher delve deeper into the respondent's responses. According to Westcott and Littleton (2005), the interviewer should probe for challenging or creative solutions with follow-up questions to fully understand the respondent's thoughts on exploring outdoor classroom learning.

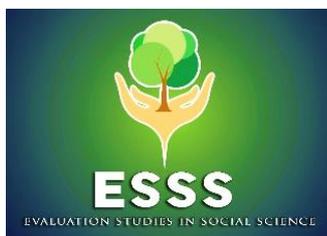
### *Data Analysis*

Before transcribing the audio recordings verbatim, the author listened to them twice. Transcripts were matched to the audio recording and distributed to participants for revisions; no participants commented. Transcripts have been translated into English. This study employed thematic data analysis to identify themes or patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a strategy for identifying, evaluating, and reporting patterns (themes) within data that organizes and explains data sets in (rich) detail to the bare minimum, according to Boyatzis (1998). However, it frequently goes beyond this and interprets many aspects of the research problem (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a result, theme analysis methodologies were appropriate since they can answer questions such as: what are the thoughts and perceptions of preschool teachers regarding an event? What are their motivations for employing or not using the approach? (Ayres, 2007). The analysis followed the six (6) procedures that Braun & Clarke (2006) recommended.

During step one, the transcripts were read over several times for familiarisation. In the second stage, codes were formed by reading and rereading the entire transcribed data set. Next, the codes were expanded and connected to provide ideas for the next step. The codes, themes, and subthemes were analyzed during stage four, giving a thematic map with two main themes. The essence of each theme was identified and developed in the fifth step. Although the themes and subthemes were primarily descriptive, they were also interpretative in certain aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final step of the analysis was to insert selected conclusive extracts within the analytical narrative to construct a coherent and internally consistent report.

## **RESULTS**

Six (6) participants were chosen for this study's data collection method. In addition, researchers chose participants with more than four (4) years of experience teaching or preschool teaching to ensure a broad view and adequate experience in the study focus areas. All participants work as early year's teachers at three (3) different preschools, and three (3) are also preschool operators. All the participants attended *Kursus Asas PERMATA* (KAP).



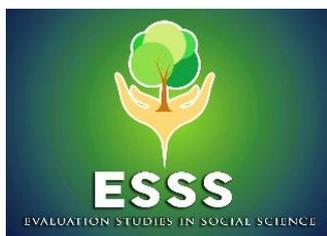
### *Teacher's view on exploring outdoor classroom learning*

The findings showed that all early-year teachers thought of good perspectives about outdoor classroom learning and supported that outdoor classroom learning is essential in the early years. In addition, teachers expressed a positive view of the advantages of learning outside the classroom as an extension of learning in the classroom by explaining the benefits of practicing it in preschool learning. Table 3.1 illustrates participant responses on their view, the factor contributing to their understanding, and the perceived benefit of outdoor classroom learning.

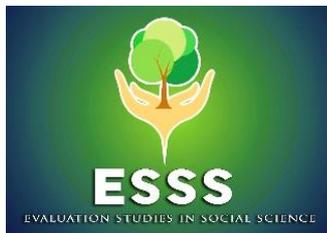
Teachers' understanding of outdoor classroom learning' is essential because the thin line separating the understanding of the concept often results in different objectives and approaches in outdoor classroom learning. A few participants tied to the classic understanding of outdoor classroom learning, involving learning about nature in a natural setting. Most teachers appeared to know some of the approach's key characteristics. Their comments revealed a basic comprehension of the subject, providing a clear picture of this instructional approach. This first finding also sheds light on teachers' core ideas about what constitutes outdoor learning. It is likely to have an impact on the rest of the outcomes.

Table 3.1  
*Theme from participant's responses*

Theme 1	Sub Theme	Teachers' Answer.
	All teachers believe that outdoor classroom learning is beneficial for preschool-age children. Their response is positive and encouraging.	<i>"Learning outdoor is suitable and important to enhance the indoor learning session." (P1)</i>
	Teaching in the outdoors / about the outdoors	<i>"Program activities in the form of learning ... called play while learning.... that happened outside the classroom, learning that occurs spontaneously and indirectly." (P1)</i>
	A holistic education views children as entities hungry for knowledge and experience.	<i>"It is like a program or activities outside the classroom that is planned or structured... activities take place outside the room ... outside the classroom...." (P2)</i>
	Learning that enhances the child's physical development.	<i>"Actually, for children, it is actually more moving. So, outdoor learning is more to physical development..."(P3)</i>



<p>Teacher's view on exploring outdoor classroom learning and factors contribute to teacher's understanding of the concept</p>	<p>The nature and learning style. (2)</p>	<p><i>"There are three types of kids, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. So the best way for children to learn is to cover these three methods. So, when you play outdoor, the kid that visual learner can see better, those yang through auditory, they can learn instruction more, they can communicate with their friend more and those who are kinesthetic, that the best for them..."(P4)</i></p>
	<p>Nowadays, children's trends are disconnected from nature and impact their physical and emotional development. (2)</p>	<p><i>"As we know the children nowadays, they more to electronic and gadget, so we see that the children are less to see the outside of the world. Like less exposure to outdoor activities or what happens to outdoor activities, so, for me, is it like this time for school and teachers bring out the children outside to explore more and do the outdoor things. To feel the sun, running, climbing..."(P5)</i></p>
	<p>Past experiences (2)</p>	<p><i>"My childhood was my main factor, which is a great memory to me. But nevertheless, I think the exposure and the experiences playing in nature also help me in a way. Because of many experiences before I go into academic learning..."(P6)</i></p>
	<p>Connecting theory to practice through experiential learning</p>	<p><i>"inside the class, it limited for them.. yes because, inside the class, they only like aaa... only see the picture, watch the video, so that, they have a limit to understanding what they learned. So, if the children go outdoors, they will more understand ... see some real thing..aaa... objects..."(P5)</i></p>
	<p>Promoting physical development, social and health, and stimulating senses</p>	<p><i>"It is very important for the preschool children, and I always let the children explore outside, outdoor as much as possible. Because I think that is the best, they learn through their senses..." (P6)</i></p>
	<p>Connection to nature</p>	<p><i>".. I love the kids playing outside.. due to nature..because kids need to be grounded.. sometimes, with that energy, they need to be grounded to nature..."(P4)</i></p>



### *Experiences in exploring outdoor classroom learning*

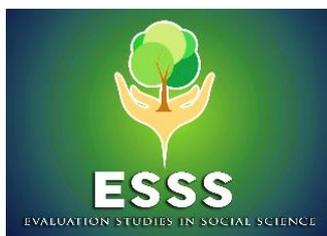
The current study's second theme revealed the teachers' basic teaching profiles and prior experiences with outdoor lessons. The teachers then recounted their previous experiences in outdoor lessons on how to facilitate, roles of experiences, and their ideal outdoor classroom learning in response to a follow-up question. Table 3.2 summarize teachers' responses regarding their experiences and practices in outdoor classroom learning.

Observations conduct with three preschool teachers during their outdoor classroom learning. The interview questions were carefully constructed to uncover teachers' current teaching approaches and practices and the most frequently taught classes. From the interview analysis of the teachers' experiences in outdoor classroom learning, most of the participants' views on outdoor classroom learning leaned toward the progressive concept of outdoor classroom learning. However, through interviews during the observation and reviewing the teachers' lesson plans, their planned activities leaned toward the classic concept of outdoor classroom learning and more toward physical development activities.

Most preschool teachers mix outdoor education in the traditional sense with multidisciplinary approaches for their teaching practices. Furthermore, all teachers agreed that at least one outdoor lesson for each theme should be implemented with the children. Also, from the observation, the activities performed by preschool teachers primarily included gardening and physical development exercises. Finally, teachers must consider selecting suitable places, facilities, and materials for outdoor classroom learning.

Table 3.2  
*Summarization of teacher responses to their experiences.*

Theme 2	Sub Theme	Teacher's Answer
	Three teachers mentioned that they do outdoor activities every day.	<i>So teacher ..that experience .. because one of the routine activities needs to be in the slot... aaa .. program... PERMATA for taska, is a nature walk. So, for us, teachers, it is done every day.”(P1)</i>
	Two teachers do the outdoor activities once or twice a week.	
	One teacher did it occasionally due to limited space and sharing with other children's groups.	<i>“Usually, every class will take turn to teach outdoor. For my class on Monday, we will have afternoon outdoor, and on Thursday, we will have morning outdoor” (P5)</i>



Experiences  
in exploring  
outdoor  
classroom  
learning

Two teachers did nature  
walks and gardening  
activities.

One teacher did outdoor  
games.

*nature walk is a routine activity for kindergarten. Although it is usually unplanned, emmm ... It is indeed an unplanned activity, where I bring the children to experience the nature.”(P2)*

*“I did the activity ‘Tarik Upih.’ However, I try to make it more suitable for a kid where I am using the blue mat, and I use a three-kilo packet of soil instead of asking the child to sit on the mat and be pulled by a friend. Activities using the hands give an advantage to fine motor development, especially hand grip.”(P3)*

All teachers agreed that  
planning is essential to ensure  
outdoor classroom learning  
goes smoothly.

*“In order for kids to have fun and the teacher also having fun .. you need to prepare earlier .. when you do not prepare earlier, it will cause the situation to become chaotic .. but once you prepare everything .. everyone is ready. Then, teachers, they know what to do, they can control the kids better.”(P4)*

Five teachers agreed on  
setting up clear rules to  
manage the children.

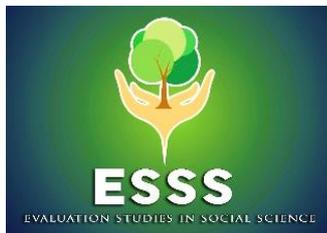
One teacher said there should  
not be any rules for outdoor  
activities.

*“tell the children, what they need to do, what they cannot do outside the classroom. The rules are number one because they need to know the rules. If the children understand the rules, so what is your planning for the outdoor, easy for you to complete.”(P5)*

*“When we talked about outdoor... There, especially in Europe and Australia. They would have like a big outdoor place, a muddy area. Furthermore, their children like freely playing outside and getting dirty and getting messy play. They'll bring them in and shower them at the end of the session. bring them in and shower... That is truly called freely exploring the outdoor learning .. they really truly explore play in the mud .. or play using the sand and so on .. Ya .. Rather than Asia's teachers, we have a lot of control over how they want the children to experience play and learning.”(P6)*

Four teachers mentioned that  
their ideal outdoor classroom

*“Different kind of thing for them explore also .. and different kind of texture. I want to set up a sensory garden .. where the children can go out, and they can touch the leaves, smell the flower ..*



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learning is in an ample open space surrounded by nature.

*and the play with the stone .. do role play .. you know all this thing .. ya. .can happen in the natural setting ..”(P6)*

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Two teachers preferred to have equipment that could aid with physical development for the children.

*“area for this place, for this activity, example, jumping .. a place for children to do sensory activities. Because my kindergarten .. we have a gardening place..then we have big compound like yes, but what I want .... a field that has golf course grass .. and then .. things are like wall climbing activities. .aaa that's what it is.”(P3)*

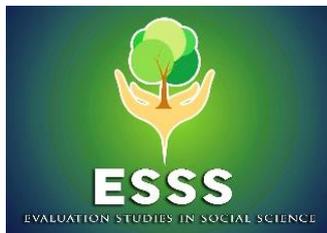
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## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### *Teacher's view on exploring outdoor classroom learning*

The first theme is preschool teachers' perspectives on outdoor learning. Three participants define outdoor learning as a teaching approach outside the classroom, an education in, about, and for the outdoors, which corresponds with Donaldson and Donaldson's (1958) classical views. Nonetheless, two individuals disagreed with Donaldson and Donaldson's classical viewpoints. Instead, they characterized outdoor classroom learning as enriching classroom experiences in the outdoors and outdoor education with various aims to consider (Fägerstam, 2012). Furthermore, one person did not hold both traditional and progressive perspectives of outdoor learning. Instead, she highlighted the importance of outdoor learning for children's physical development. Surprisingly, even though teachers lean toward outdoor education with environmental orientation, the results show that most of them regard it as an experiential approach and tend to Dewey's opinion (1997). He states the authentic place as a source of stimuli for discovery, interaction, and learning in the actual situation.

The factors that contribute to teachers' views vary. Two teachers mentioned that children love to play, and being outdoors contributed to their factor. Other teachers explained that children's trends nowadays which disconnect from the natural environment and the advantage of being outside to their physical and emotional development, become the factors to them. It is consistent with Magraw (2011), that said the freedom of the outdoors encourages children to express their feelings (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Another two teachers mentioned that past and childhood experiences in the natural environment contribute to their view of outdoor classroom learning. These correlate to research that said the teachers' own experiences with the outdoors and physical activities as children and adults all contribute to their views on the contexts of outdoor play areas.' (Elliot, 2011; McClintic & Petty, 2015). One of them explained that a contributing factor to his view was the nature of children cultivating a spirit of determination outdoors. The view is closely related to research on the benefits of this type of



formal extracurricular learning, which increases morale and enhances vitality (Janke E. et al., 2020) and motivation for learning (Rickinson et al., 2004; Peter Bentsen et al., 2017).

Another factor that plays a vital role in contributing to teachers' understanding of learning outside the classroom is all teachers' solid support for outdoor learning as a teaching technique that brings various benefits to their children. They reported at least one benefit from doing outdoor lessons. This can be attributed to studies where outdoor learning experiences improve academic performance and levels of physical activity, social interaction, and emotional well-being (Masnan et al., 2018; Ernst, 2014; Fjortoft, 2000; Yıldırım & Akamca, 2017; Merewether, 2015)

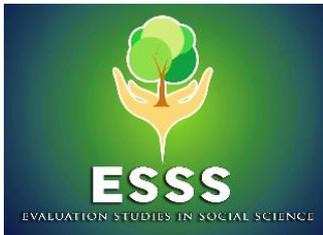
### *Experiences in exploring outdoor classroom learning*

Most teachers related their experiences in outdoor classroom activities with the students in response to an interview question and substantiated the offered information with examples. Observation reveals that most of the selected activities focus on outdoor education, nature, and outdoor games. It should be noted that several of the lessons were not properly arranged or consistently practiced. Furthermore, most included excursions, observations in nature, and physical exercises with the children.

As a result, the findings supported developing an intriguing theory regarding teachers' perspectives on what it means to "teach a lesson outside," particularly when there appears to be disagreement, if not outright contradiction, between their responses and practices at many points. While preschool teachers appeared to appreciate the developmental value of these experiences, they only reported employing natural outdoor settings occasionally, which is consistent with research that suggests teachers' attitudes are more developmentally appropriate than their behaviors (Ernst, 2014). Each person constructs reality due to their experiences and perception of those events (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Similarly, teachers' attitudes toward the outdoors influence their actions and behaviors in the outdoor classroom. Based on their various teaching experiences in and out of the classroom, preschool teachers described scenarios and variations about learning outside the classroom that differed from those stated in the literature.

### *Implications*

The findings and those from other countries (Tuuling et al., 2015; McClintic & Petty, 2015) showed that teachers value outdoor learning. However, they use it infrequently in their daily practices due to various constraints, including weather, limited natural surroundings, limited skills, and limited infrastructure and material. At the same time, outdoor learning promotes physical activity in children and fosters the development of a healthy lifestyle. Outdoor classroom learning should emphasize teacher education to strengthen teachers' professionalism in employing it in their daily teaching practice since outdoor learning enhances teachers' professional abilities (Masnan et al., 2021; Tuuling et al., 2015). Therefore, teachers' understanding of outdoor classroom learning in the context of sustainable development and the



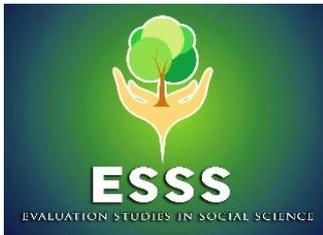
curriculum demands more attention since it will promote the daily, diverse use of outdoor learning in preschools.

### CONCLUSION

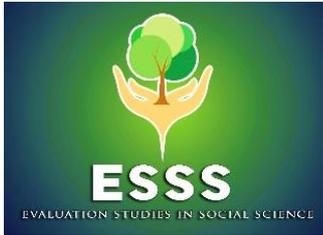
Rather than generalizing the data, the primary goal of this study was to get a detailed understanding of teachers' diverse viewpoints and experiences when implementing outdoor classroom learning. The findings can guide future research on preservice early childhood educators, a group with the potential to significantly impact young children's development and contribute to a more sustainable society. According to Moser and Martinsen (2010), while outside gives many possibilities for children to explore, it does not guarantee that all curriculum areas will be covered (Catucci & Ehrlin, 2018). Nonetheless, the attitudes, experiences, and reasons limiting early childhood educators' need to practice outdoor classroom learning are valuable findings that can help guide future research and professional development initiatives. While many areas require thought and work to make the outdoor classroom learning experience more widespread in early childhood education, efforts to make this environment more accessible to teachers are the best place to start and a worthwhile investment.

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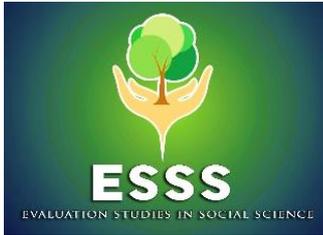
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