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**Outdoor Play as a Third Space: Micro-cultural Transitions of Multicultural
Children between Home and School**

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PhD in Education

The University of Edinburgh

2025

Declaration Page

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Jianing Fu

30/10/2025

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Abstract

Outdoor play and learning have been introduced into Scotland's national curriculum and are actively promoted in early childhood education. Meanwhile, Scotland is experiencing increasing cultural diversity, particularly within early years and school-age populations. Although extensive research has documented the developmental benefits of outdoor play, its role in supporting cultural transition and cultural formation remains underexplored, especially for multicultural children.

This ethnographic doctoral research explores how outdoor play supports the cultural formation and transition of multicultural children. It investigates the issue from both institutional (home and school) and individual (children) perspectives to explore how children's cultural knowledge is constructed through interactions and negotiations with peers and adults, and how outdoor play helps them navigate cultural dissonance across institutions and facilitates micro-transitions.

This research was carried out in two phases. First, I conducted participant observation with two Primary 1 classes at a primary school in Edinburgh, focusing on children's interactions during both free and adult-led outdoor play. In the second phase, I conducted interviews with multicultural families from the broader Edinburgh and Glasgow communities. The interviews offer insights into parents' beliefs about outdoor play influenced by two cultures, and children's understanding and experiences of how outdoor play supports their transition into a new cultural setting. A drawing activity was provided to children before the interview to help them express views that might not be easily verbalised.

The study uncovered the misalignments between individual (children's) motives and institutional (school and home) demands, showing that while the societal and institutional beliefs influence children, they are also actively reshaping their activity settings and social relationships during outdoor play, thereby contributing meaningfully to their own cultural formation. This research emphasised that language is not necessarily a barrier to multicultural children's outdoor play. Outdoor play provided children with a mediating space that encouraged them to navigate conflicts, exercise their agency, negotiate power, and develop new cultural understandings through interactions with peers, adults and the natural world.

This study argues that children's cultural formation is a dynamic and complex process that should be viewed holistically. The transition is not simply a macro-level shift between institutions; it is also shaped by multiple micro-level interactions and moments in children's daily experiences. Outdoor play functions as a third space, affording multicultural children the opportunity for transition and identity exploration, and can help parents and educators bridge the cultural gap between home and school.

Chapter One. Introduction

1.1 My Personal Story

As a Chinese international student who had been studying in Scotland for over 4 years, I fell deeply in love with this land and became fascinated by outdoor education during my Master's programme in 2020. When I entered the course, I felt like an outsider because no one shared a similar cultural background to mine. Although my spoken English was adequate, I still lacked cultural knowledge, such as familiarity with Western childhood television programmes and traditional foods, which prevented me from fully engaging in their conversations. I could always feel the wall between my classmates and me. This situation continued until my first outdoor canoe trip, when all our classmates needed to camp, cook, communicate, and canoe together for a week. The outdoor environment seemed to make us more open and lower our defences, both mine and others'. Interactions occurred naturally between my classmates and me outdoors; we discussed the shapes of leaves and the types of trees in the field. I believed my mind had somehow become more relaxed and that language was no longer the primary means of communication among us, as I made them laugh multiple times with my body language.

As I gradually developed friendships and became familiar with the cultural environment in Scotland, I found that my original cultural identity, rooted in Chinese culture, was no longer defined by a single framework. I occasionally felt confused when discussing cultural beliefs and norms, because I realised that I lived between

two cultures and was unsure which perspective to take. However, continuous interactions with my peers enabled me to learn new cultural knowledge and to make sense of both conflicts and alignments across cultures. I was surprised to observe myself in this process of negotiating between two or more cultures, which, although quite distinctive in many ways, were also connected. For example, I remembered that in one of my philosophy courses, my classmates and I discussed the Western understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. I found it deeply interconnected with the Chinese concept of “Tianrenheyi”, which views humans as part of the world and emphasises the oneness of humanity, nature, space, and the myriad (Weber, 2005). The boundaries between cultures were gradually dissolving through my daily interactions with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as through my own interpretations. This did not mean I had entirely abandoned one for another; it was more like the hybrid identity Bhabha (1994) described as a third space where different cultures meet, negotiate, and generate a new, fluid form of identity.

At the end of our programme, I completed a placement as a teaching assistant at a science museum, which included sessions that integrated outdoor play into learning for children from diverse backgrounds and age groups. Although I had benefited from outdoor education in my own learning journey, seeing how it operated among children was particularly exciting, especially when children of different ethnicities played together outdoors, even when some could not speak English. I remembered asking my colleague, “How can they communicate and learn when they do not know English?” My colleague answered, “That is the magic of outdoor play.”

The idea for this research arose during the lockdown, when people experienced prolonged disconnection from nature and outdoor spaces. The public and researchers acknowledged and emphasised the importance of being outdoors, and I kept wondering about the children, particularly those children like me who used outdoor play as a space to connect with the world and navigate new cultural environments. This reflection led me to conduct the current research on how outdoor play acts as a third space for multicultural children's micro-transitions and cultural formation.

1.2 Research Context and Rationale

Growing evidence indicates that outdoor play has many positive effects on children's physical, mental, academic, and social development (Koepp et al., 2022; Ulset et al., 2017; Waite et al., 2013; Whitebread, 2017; Zamani, 2016). However, children's outdoor playtime has significantly declined over the past few decades (Yoon & Lee, 2019). In response to these proven benefits and the decreasing access to outdoor play, researchers have increasingly advocated for integrating outdoor play into the formal education system, from playground design and natural space provision (Craig et al., 2024; Herrington & Brussoni, 2015) to stakeholder views on outdoor play and play-based pedagogy (Chakravarthi, 2009; LeMasters & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2023; McClintic & Perry, 2015). While these studies offer valuable insights into the external factors affecting children's outdoor play and learning, they also represent gaps in the existing literature.

Critically, existing research is predominantly constructed from Western

perspectives, with limited investigation of the cultural dimensions of outdoor play and the experiences and opinions of children from diverse cultural backgrounds (Göncü et al., 2000; Waite et al., 2013). Although some studies have examined cultural differences in play and the relationship between play and learning, these primarily adopt adult perspectives to explain diverse cultural beliefs, without a specific focus on outdoor play (Gaskin, 2015; Samuelsson & Fler, 2008; White et al., 2009). While Yahya and Wood (2016) focus on the play experiences of migrant children and examine the perspectives of both mothers and children, arguing that play could bridge the cultural gap between home and school, their study does not involve direct observation of children's lived interactions during play. Research that explores the dynamic interactions of multicultural children during outdoor play, incorporating the perspectives of children themselves alongside those of parents and teachers, remains remarkably scarce.

This gap is particularly significant when considering the concept of micro-transitions, the moment-to-moment negotiations of cultural identity and understandings that occur during daily interactions. While research has examined macro-transitions, such as starting school or moving to another country (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dockett & Perry, 2007a), these subtle, everyday cultural negotiations remain largely invisible in the existing literature (Birkeland et al., 2021). However, it is through these micro-moments that multicultural children actively construct hybrid cultural identities and navigate between different cultural expectations. Micro-transitions in this study refer to the ongoing, fluid processes

through which children make sense of cultural differences, test cultural boundaries, and negotiate their identities within multicultural contexts. For children navigating between diverse cultures and institutional expectations, these micro-transitions occur continuously throughout their daily lives; however, they have received less scholarly attention (Birkeland et al., 2021). Understanding how outdoor play facilitates these micro-transitions is crucial because outdoor environments may offer unique affordances for cultural negotiation that are less available in more structured indoor settings.

The Scottish context offers a compelling setting to examine these issues. Scotland has rich outdoor resources to support outdoor play development. The Scottish government has made significant efforts to integrate outdoor play and play-based learning into its national policy framework (Christie & Higgins, 2012; Christie et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2016), demonstrating a commitment to outdoor learning. However, this policy development has occurred alongside increasing cultural diversity in Scottish schools, while comparatively little attention has been paid to understanding how children navigate cultural transitions through outdoor play experiences. This study addresses this gap by exploring how outdoor play acts as a third space where children negotiate cultural knowledges and develop new cultural understandings through their everyday micro-transitions.

1.3 Research Aims and Questions

The purpose of this study is to provide a platform for multicultural families in

Scotland to share their motivations, needs, and cultural experiences of outdoor play. Specifically, the study aims to investigate how outdoor play mediates the diverse cultural understandings that children bring from home and school, and how they negotiate and form new knowledge in their everyday outdoor interactions. To situate these experiences within broader institutional and societal contexts, the study also explores the perspectives of mothers from non-UK backgrounds, focusing on the alignments and tensions between their traditional cultural beliefs and expectations and those embedded in Scottish culture. The views of class teachers are also considered to provide institutional context for understanding children's daily experiences and to illustrate the school's general orientation towards outdoor play.

Guided by these objectives, the overarching research question is:

How does outdoor play mediate and facilitate children's cultural formation through micro-transitions?

Specifically, three supplementary questions are proposed:

1. How do multicultural children engage with outdoor play to negotiate cultural meanings and identities?
2. How do parental cultural beliefs about play shape children's outdoor play experiences and practices?
3. How does outdoor play facilitate children's micro-transitions across home and school settings?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

A conceptual framework is developed that conceptualises outdoor play as a third space for children's cultural formation through micro-transitions. This framework links Bhabha's (1994) third space theory with Hedegaard's (2019) wholeness approach and examines children's cultural formation from societal, institutional, and individual levels, while situating outdoor play between two institutional settings (home and school) as the third space. The third space concept is particularly relevant for understanding how multicultural children navigate cultural hybridity, as it provides a theoretical lens for examining spaces where different cultural practices, beliefs, and identities meet, interact, and produce new forms of cultural understanding. Adopting this framework enables a holistic understanding of children's lived experiences and the processes through which they navigate different cultural demands, while also capturing children's potential micro-transitions in these processes. The theoretical framework is developed in detail in Chapter Two.

1.5 Methodological Approach

These research questions are investigated through an ethnographic study with narrative analysis (Elliott, 2005), situated within the interpretive paradigm. Ethnography enables an understanding of how individuals make sense of and create their world through experiences, allowing research to acknowledge the fluidity and capture the changes in processes (Mills & Morton, 2013; Watson & Till, 2010). This

approach aligns with the study's need to interpret children's daily interactions and micro-transitions across home and school, as well as the experiences and perspectives of children, mothers, and teachers.

This ethnographic study is informed by a multimodal perspective, which recognises that meaning is produced through a variety of social semiotics, including but not limited to verbal dialogues, body movement, spatial arrangements, and images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Two groups of participants were chosen for the study. The first group consisted of two classes of children from a primary school in Edinburgh, along with their respective class teachers. The second group included multicultural families recruited from the wider communities in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In total, twelve mothers from non-UK cultural backgrounds participated in semi-structured interviews, alongside ten of their children. Two children withdrew from the interview.

The study presented findings through narratives to recount the content, structure, and performance of participants' experiences. Informed consent was obtained from both children and their parents. Child-friendly informed consent was obtained from the children themselves prior to the interviews and observations. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. The detailed methodology, including data collection methods, ethical considerations, and the researcher's positionality throughout the research process, is discussed comprehensively in Chapter Three.

1.6 Thesis Structure

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the current study. It establishes the researcher's positionality and motivation, outlines the research context and rationale, presents the research aims and questions, introduces the theoretical framework, and describes the methodological approach.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature that informed and constructed the current study. It begins with the complexities of defining play, then introduces the sociocultural perspective in exploring outdoor play. After reviewing existing literature on cultural variation in outdoor play, outdoor play development in the Scottish context, and cultural identity and micro-transitions, it highlights the gap regarding the role of outdoor play in multicultural children's micro-transitions. The chapter concludes with a detailed construction of the theoretical framework.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the methodology and research methods employed. It discusses the researcher's positionality throughout the data collection process and the challenges encountered. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive discussion of ethical considerations.

Chapter Four: Findings: Observation at School Settings

This chapter presents maps and narratives of interactions that occurred with the observed groups. Teachers' contextual explanations are interwoven within the children's stories. Semi-structured interviews with teachers are presented following

the children's narratives.

Chapter Five: Findings: Experiences and Perspectives of Mothers from Non-UK Cultural Backgrounds

This chapter examines the outdoor play experiences and traditional cultural beliefs of mothers in their home countries, exploring how these experiences and beliefs influence their current cultural perspectives. It also uncovers the struggles of these multicultural mothers in balancing the conflicts between their traditional cultural beliefs and those in the new cultural context of Scotland regarding children's outdoor play.

Chapter Six: Findings: Perspectives and Drawings of Multicultural Children

This chapter presents narratives of how children explained their outdoor play experiences across home and school settings. Their drawings are provided at the beginning of each narrative, accompanied by the researcher's commentary and interpretation.

Chapter Seven: Discussion: Outdoor Play as the Third Space for Children's Micro-Transitions

This chapter consolidates the main findings and discusses them in relation to relevant literature, examining how outdoor play serves as a third space that facilitates children's micro-transitions and cultural formation.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

In the final chapter, reflections on the ethnographic research process are shared, along with the study's limitations. Contributions to knowledge and suggestions for

future research are also included.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The objective of the current study is to explore how outdoor play spaces act as a “third space” that mediates the micro-transitions of multicultural children between home and school contexts, and how this process contributes to their cultural identity formation. This chapter is purposefully designed to situate outdoor play within a theoretical frame, but it is not meant to be exhaustive. The selection of literature was based on its theoretical relevance to the study’s framework, prioritising foundational works that provide the theoretical scaffolding for this study’s exploration, such as Vygotsky’s classic work on sociocultural theory.

The chapter is organised into four sections. The first section reviews key debates surrounding the concept of play and introduces the sociocultural frames of this study. The second section explores research on outdoor play, its developmental benefits, and policy developments in Scotland. The third section considers multicultural perspectives on outdoor play, focusing on parental beliefs, children’s experiences, and the challenges of cultural transition. The final section introduces the theoretical frameworks of third space theory and Hedegaard’s wholeness approach, which together inform the study’s analysis of children’s outdoor play as a mediating space that facilitates micro-transitions and cultural formation.

2.2 Understanding Play

2.2.1 Defining play

Play remains a complex concept to define, as it encompasses a range of behaviours and activities, and its meaning for participants is strongly influenced by the context in which it occurs (Wood, 2010). For example, child-initiated free play, such as creating artefacts or engaging in peer interactions, may be clearly recognised by children as play. However, if situated this action within a classroom context, teachers may perceive these activities as a disruption to academic work. When children encounter restrictions and disapproval of these activities, they learn that this kind of behaviour is inappropriate in the classroom setting. Then they may begin to accept the teacher's interpretation and then reframe it as 'naughtiness' rather than play. In contrast, adult-led, highly structured play is often encouraged by teachers because it is seen to achieve specific learning outcomes through a clearly planned framework (Elkind, 2007). However, because these activities are directed by adults and constrained by the school timetable, children may not interpret them as play; instead, they may come to see them as work.

To capture the multidimensional nature of play, some researchers suggest clarifying specific characteristics of different forms of play (Turnbull & Jenvey, 2006). Garvey (1990) outlines five key characteristics of children's behaviour in play: pleasurable, spontaneous and freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, actively engaged, and a systematic relation to non-play.

Rubin et al. (1983) provide a comprehensive framework for defining play through dispositional, contextual, and developmental characteristics. The dispositional

and behavioural approach catalogues the motivational and behavioural features. The dispositional perspective emphasises play's internal characteristics, identifying six key factors: intrinsic motivation, children's freedom to choose, create, and initiate play, and active engagement with a focus on process rather than outcome. From this perspective, whether an activity qualifies as play depends on the child's motivation, perception, and experience, rather than the specific behaviours involved. A child's playful mindset determines the nature of the activity. The behaviour approach concentrates on observable features of play. For example, Piaget (1962) categorises play from a cognitive developmental perspective, asserting that the development of children's cognition underpins changes in play, categorising play into stages that correspond to cognitive development, including practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules. Meanwhile, the contextual approach considers environmental settings that support play behaviours.

Although this framework offers a valuable starting point for defining play and recognising its role in children's development, it does not fully consider the complex sociocultural dimensions of play (Brooker, 2010). Traditional frameworks for understanding play are mainly rooted in a European heritage context, risking overlooking the fact that, while play may be a universal phenomenon, how children play can vary significantly across cultures (Wood & Attfield, 2005; Göncü & Gaskins, 2006).

In an ethnographic study by Göncü et al. (2000) across four communities in Guatemala, Turkey, India, and the United States, the researchers challenge the idea

that Western notions of play are universal. They observe that each community's values, beliefs, and social structures greatly shape children's play choices and opportunities. These cultural frameworks influence not just the types of play but also how often children play, who they play with, and what behaviours are considered acceptable. The authors especially highlight that Western views of play can often misinterpret or undervalue play in non-Western settings, particularly when such play lacks the make-believe elements that are often seen as central in Western definitions. In these situations, children's play in non-Western contexts is sometimes wrongly seen as inadequate because it does not meet Western standards.

Another example of this cultural variation involves the relationship between play and work. In many Western contexts, play is often defined as "free" activity, implicitly positioned as the opposite of work. However, in Maya communities, children are expected to contribute to work, and play often occurs within or alongside work activities (Gaskin, 2015). Similar patterns have been documented in Indian contexts, where children's play naturally integrates with daily responsibilities and family activities (Gosso, 2009). These examples highlight how cultural beliefs, values, and daily practices shape distinct understandings of what constitutes play across communities.

This cultural variation leads to a fundamental challenge in play research: the paradoxical nature of play itself. Play is not a fixed or easily defined set of behaviours but is deeply connected to individuals' lived experiences, influenced by their personal motives, interests, emotional states, and cognitive capacities, and further shaped by

the contextual settings in which it emerges. Howard and McInnes (2012) argue that play should be understood as a subjective attitude rather than solely through observed behaviours. Even when the activity remains the same, different sociocultural contexts and peer groups can lead children to define the activity differently, as either play or not play, depending on how they perceive and experience it (Sturges, 2003).

Despite these important insights into cultural and individual variation, research that systematically investigates diverse cultural perspectives on play, particularly incorporating children's own views, remains limited. This gap will be discussed further in section 2.4.

Given these cultural complexities, Wood (2010) warns that overemphasising the definition and categorisation of play risks overlooking children's own interpretations of it. If researchers aim to study play meaningfully, children's perspectives must be central to the inquiry. Studies show that children tend to associate play with activities that are free from adult control, where they have greater autonomy (McInnes et al., 2010). Howard and McInnes (2012) find that activities children view as 'like play' are linked to higher emotional well-being and greater engagement, mainly because the children have more choice and control. However, researchers also caution that teachers' pedagogical approaches and the frequency of adult involvement can strongly influence how children distinguish between play and work (Howard, 2002; McInnes et al., 2011). This emphasises that children's definition of play is closely connected to their social context and the level of autonomy they experience.

Definitions of play vary significantly across researchers and contexts, and much

of the existing literature adopts an adult-centric perspective that can lead to interpretations that differ from children's own understandings (Fleer, 2009). It is reasonable to suggest that trying to define play may cause confusion rather than clarity. Building on this understanding of play's complex and dynamic nature, this study adopts a socio-cultural lens to explore children's outdoor play experiences, drawing on Vygotsky's influential theoretical framework.

2.2.2 Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective on play

A substantial body of research has examined the role of space and place in children's learning and development. Moss and Petrie (2005) criticised the failure to fully acknowledge children's rights and agency in children's policy, arguing that existing frameworks tended to view "the child in children's service as incomplete and immature" (Moss, 2006, p. 183). They proposed adopting the concept of "children's space" instead of "children's service" to view children as competent, active agents in society. Crucially, the "space" they envisioned is not limited to physical settings such as playgrounds, but encompasses the "social, cultural and discursive" in which young children build their social relationships (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p. 107). Their argument is significant because they identify a gap in policy regarding children's agency and rights. More importantly, they situate children within historical and sociocultural contexts and view them as individuals who actively work with other social relations to seek meaningful developmental potential in the "space".

A more contemporary theoretical lens that addresses the relationship between

place and children's development is place-based theory. Place-based education focuses on fostering individuals' experience of, and connections with, their community, cultures and environments, motivating them to learn about the social, cultural, economic, and biological contexts in which they live (Nichols et al., 2016; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004). Although it also attends to the cultural dimension of learning, for example, through community-based intergenerational knowledge, its primary aim is to cultivate an individual's relationship with a particular place (Bowers, 2008; Yemini et al., 2025). Furthermore, the emphasis on "sense of place" in place-based theory inevitably poses challenges in recognising cultural differences in individuals' perception of various environmental contexts (Semken & Freeman, 2008; Yemini et al., 2025).

Given that the current study aims to investigate children's sociocultural experiences and observe their microtransitions in outdoor play, rather than their connection to the place, place-based theory does not provide an appropriate framework. Drawing instead on Moss and Petrie's (2002) call to construct children's cultural, discursive, and social spaces, the current study adopts Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to examine children's interactions in outdoor play.

Vygotsky offers one of the most influential perspectives for situating individuals within a socio-cultural-historical context. Although he did not write extensively on play, in his essay "Play and its role in the mental development of the child" (1967), Vygotsky challenges the idea of treating play merely as symbolic or as a cognitive process. He warns that this narrow view risks "generalising actual reality" and

neglects the fact that play is an action initiated by children themselves (p. 9). In the following section, I will present snapshots of play from Vygotsky's perspectives on play and explain how they lay the foundation for interpreting play through a socio-cultural lens.

Play as concept development. An important contribution from Vygotsky's (1967) work on play is his view that play creates a space for children to evoke and engage with concepts they have already encountered in real life. He illustrates this with an example of two sisters who are real-life siblings but take on the roles of 'sisters' in their imaginary play. Although they already live as siblings, they may not consciously grasp the underlying concept of the sibling relationship or the associated behavioural expectations in specific situations. As Vygotsky claims, "what passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behaviour in play" (p.10). Through role-play, the children can focus on the meaning of 'sisters' and thereby contribute to the development of their concepts (Samuelsson & Fleer, 2008).

Symbolic function of play. However, this does not mean that children simply copy their lived experiences or replicate real-world rules during play. Instead, Vygotsky contends that play acts as the leading activity in early childhood development, serving as a transitional stage that mainly focuses on developing children's symbolic functions. In play, children can create self-defined meanings that are separate from the physical function of objects. For example, a stick can symbolise a horse in children's play. Through such transformations, play allows children to enter an imaginary situation that "liberates them from situational constraints" (p. 11). In this

way, play offers a space where children can satisfy desires or motives that cannot be fulfilled immediately in reality, such as pretending to drive a car, an activity they are not yet permitted to do in real life.

The zone of proximal development. Another important concept introduced by Vygotsky is the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), which is defined as the conceptual distance between a child’s current developmental level when acting independently and their potential level of development with support from more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). He explains that “in play, a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour” (p. 18). When children face difficulties they cannot handle alone, engaging with and receiving support from more competent adults or peers helps them learn and perform more independently in future situations.

Children’s social situations in development. The significance of social interactions during play relates to Vygotsky’s broader theory of the social situation of development (1998). Vygotsky emphasises that children’s development is influenced by the sociocultural context of their lives at a certain age. As he explains, the social situation of development “represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period” and “determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development” (p. 198).

Vygotsky argues that children’s social situation is determined by the interactions

of their current social relationships with their surroundings, as well as the societal and cultural context they are embedded in. On one hand, the mediating tools children utilise during interaction, such as language, symbols, and cultural traditions, differ across cultures. Children gradually gain new knowledge through engaging with various cultural tools. On the other side, children at different developmental stages are affected by separate social, historical, and cultural contexts, which influence their motives and interests. These differences significantly vary across cultures and directly affect the character and course of their developmental processes. Therefore, Vygotsky emphasises recognising a dialectical process in children's development with their social relations.

If play indeed acts as the main vehicle for young children's development, representing action within an "imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16), then the cultural context of play becomes critically important. Different cultural contexts will influence not only what children play, how they play, and with whom they play, but also the developmental outcomes that result from these play experiences. This understanding highlights the importance of examining play through a socio-cultural lens.

2.3 Understanding Outdoor Play

Having outlined the complexities of defining play and the importance of placing it within a sociocultural framework, I now turn to outdoor play as a specific aspect of

this broader phenomenon of play. Outdoor play is often emphasised in policy and practice as vital for children's development, but its meanings and customs are influenced by cultural traditions, institutional structures, and children's lived experiences.

2.3.1 The diminishing of outdoor play in contemporary childhood

Outdoor play provides children with powerful and meaningful experiences, supporting numerous fundamental aspects of their development (Oh, 2024). It is generally conceptualised as spontaneous, unstructured physical activity that takes place in outdoor environments (Maddren, 2025; Oh, 2024). Researchers highlight that the openness, dynamism, and natural variability of outdoor settings offer unique play opportunities, which cannot be easily replicated indoors (Bento et al., 2017; Hordyk et al., 2015).

A substantial body of research has documented the benefits of outdoor play across multiple developmental domains. Physically, regular outdoor play is associated with reduced childhood obesity, adequate Vitamin D levels, and enhanced motor skill development (Oh, 2024). Cognitively, free outdoor play supports problem-solving abilities and creativity (Zamani, 2016), while evidence suggests that outdoor sessions enhance subsequent classroom concentration (Koepp et al., 2022) and may protect against attention difficulties and hyperactivity symptoms (Ulset et al., 2017). Beyond these individual benefits, outdoor play facilitates social development by supporting peer interactions, friendship formation, and prosocial behaviours, while contributing

to improved mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety and depression symptoms (Waite et al., 2013; Whitebread, 2017).

However, there is increasing evidence that children's outdoor playtime is decreasing rapidly and raising concerns about their waning connection to nature. (Beames & Brown, 2014; Lee et al., 2021; Tremblay et al., 2015). Children's play is increasingly shifting indoors and becoming more screen-based, which has been associated with higher levels of sedentary behaviour and reduced well-being (Katzmarzyk et al., 2015; Ussher et al., 2007). This trend seems to have intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic, during which children spent most of their time indoors and grew accustomed to screen-based forms of study and play. A recent study from India, for example, shows a significant increase in children's virtual play since 2020, alongside a decline in outdoor play, especially in natural environments (James & Anoop, 2025).

This shift towards indoor play cannot be seen solely as a result of children's personal choices, as many external factors also play a role in the change. While children are increasingly recognised as active agents in their own lives, they are still influenced by various social, cultural, and institutional forces. Parents often serve as the first models of behaviour, values, and beliefs that children observe, and their control over children's access to play is also significant. Therefore, parental anxiety becomes a strong factor that restricts children's outdoor play.

Parental anxiety is often linked to concerns about both safety and development (Beames & Brown, 2014; Furedi, 2002). Many parents are worried about allowing

their children to play unsupervised due to safety concerns. For instance, researchers identify traffic dangers and fear of strangers as among the most common parental concerns (Palmer, 2007; Jago et al, 2009). A study conducted by Jago et al. (2009) found that over half of the parent participants reported that the high volume of local traffic adversely affects their children's opportunities for physical activity. Similarly, stranger danger is frequently reported by parent participants across UK research as a factor that limits children's outdoor play (Allin et al., 2014; O'Brien & Smith, 2002)

In addition, the community's reduced social cohesion makes parents feel insecure about allowing their children to play independently after school in the neighbourhood. Loebach et al (2021) surveyed 12 schools with over 800 children in Canada to examine what hinders their access to outdoor play. The result shows that parental perception of social cohesion in the neighbourhood significantly affects children's preference for outdoor play (Loebach et al., 2021). The lack of community belonging and decline in neighbourhood relationships lead to feelings of distrust, as the neighbours become strangers. In this way, parents and children do not have "eyes on the street," which restricts children's outdoor play (Witten et al., 2013, p. 220).

Growing academic demands also negatively influence children's access to outdoor play. This is reflected both within school and after school. Charan et al. (2014) report that schools and parents are under increasing pressure to improve children's academic achievement, leaving children with limited space for outdoor play. Bae (2010) notes that the practitioners and professionals in the education field may overlook children's voices and be governed by "neo-liberal or new management

discourses” (p. 215). The growing emphasis on learning outcomes poses a threat to children’s free expression, while play, as a space that affords such freedom, has also been underestimated in its role in children’s development (Bae, 2010). In some cultures, parents tend to link children’s success to academic achievement, so their outdoor playtime is replaced by reading and completing academic tasks. This cultural dimension will be explored further in section 2.5.2.

This decline in outdoor play affects children in several ways. Firstly, less outdoor play is associated with social development issues in children (Palmer, 2007; Elkind, 2007). Outdoor play gives children larger spaces to participate in group activities. Through outdoor play, children learn to interact and form friendships, and they also develop the skills to handle and resolve conflicts on their own. These social skills are difficult to foster in daily classroom settings, as they often occur under adult supervision. Additionally, parental anxiety may lead children to believe that outdoor play is unsafe, as well as create fears of the natural creatures found outside. Such perceptions can lead to children’s biophobia, which refers to a negative emotional response to creatures in the natural world, and a disconnection from nature (Ulrich, 1993; Zhang et al., 2014).

Second, parents’ negative perceptions of free outdoor play limit children’s contact with and play in nature. This results in children’s lower actualised affordance of outdoor settings. Kyttä (2003) distinguishes between potential affordance (what the environment allows) and actualised affordance (children’s actual lived opportunities in outdoor contexts). Kyttä argues that when children experience greater social and

cultural constraints on outdoor play, it is difficult for them to discover the potential affordances of spaces as much as for other children who have had rich outdoor play experiences. For example, a tree can afford children's climbing but may not become an actualised affordance for a child if adults never allow them to climb. This influences children's ability to create meaningful play activities actively and further restricts their access to outdoor play.

Furthermore, the deprivation of outdoor play negatively impacts children's physical health and well-being. Reduced frequency of outdoor play can contribute to children's obesity and higher risks of ADHD symptoms (Stone et al., 2014; Taylor & Kuo, 2011). In addition, many studies have shown that lack of play among children, particularly outdoor play time, is highly associated with children's mental distress, such as anxiety and depression symptoms (Cooley et al., 2020; Elkind, 2007; Piccininni et al., 2018). Dodd et al (2023) conducted surveys across the UK and Northern Ireland with parents to investigate the relationship between children's outdoor playtime and their mental health during the first UK-wide Covid-19 lockdown period. The findings show that children who spend more time outdoors demonstrate lower depression over time and appear more resilient. These children also show greater ability in managing internalising problems.

Despite the well-documented benefits of outdoor play, children's engagement in it has been declining in recent decades. This trend is associated with a range of factors; this section specifically examines how societal and parental anxiety influence children's access to outdoor play and the potential consequences. As the current study

is situated in the Scottish context, in the following section, I will introduce and explain the policy development of outdoor play in the Scottish education context.

2.3.2 Outdoor play in the Scottish context

Early childhood pioneers such as Froebel, Montessori, and McMillan have emphasised the importance of providing outdoor play and learning environments for children. Froebel introduced the concept of kindergarten and regarded outdoor play as central to children's holistic development. His idea of the garden offers a space where children can learn the philosophy of unity, connect with nature as individuals, and develop responsibility through freedom (Tovey, 2014). Children can acquire knowledge from their lived experiences and nurture creativity by engaging with nature during outdoor play. Montessori underlines the importance of the outdoor environment for children; however, she sees outdoor space as an extension of a structured learning area rather than a place for imagination and play. She remains unconvinced that children can learn effectively from unstructured, natural materials (Tovey, 2014). Similarly, Tovey (2014) notes that McMillan stresses how outdoor spaces provide children with richer, more meaningful experiences from which they can learn about nature. In her work, she highlights the significance of nature for children's health and wellbeing, especially recognising its developmental benefits for disadvantaged families.

Building on this legacy, Scotland has recently experienced a notable shift towards integrating outdoor play and learning into early childhood and primary

education. Key initiatives have promoted the inclusion of outdoor experiences within the national curriculum, highlighted by the Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning (CfEOL). This policy framework emphasises the holistic development of children, asserting that ‘the journey through education for any child in Scotland must include opportunities for a series of planned, quality outdoor learning experiences’ (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, p. 5). Such a directive underlines the government’s commitment to embedding outdoor play and learning into formal schooling.

In line with this, Education Scotland (2013) acknowledges the benefits of introducing outdoor context to the education framework as it ‘provides a diversity of resources and spaces that are difficult to replicate in an indoor environment’ (p. 6). Moreover, the Scottish government is also determined to expand the number of outdoor play programs for early learning and care services in both rural and urban areas (A Blueprint for 2020, 2017). Subsequent guidelines, such as My World to Play (2016), Space to Grow (2017) and Out to Play (2020), have provided more detailed and comprehensive guidance for educators on how to leverage school and local outdoor spaces to improve children’s play and learning experience. Although these guidelines seem to lean toward early childhood education, they remain indicative of increasing awareness in society and the education field of the manifold benefits of outdoor play and learning.

The post-pandemic landscape has further underscored the urgency of promoting outdoor play. A wealth of research suggests that, in the aftermath of the pandemic,

outdoor play could act as an important role in reducing sedentary behaviour, alleviating mental stress caused by social isolation, and promoting physical development (Bruijn et al., 2023; Mitra et al., 2020). In parallel with these research findings, the Scottish Government's "Summer of Play" initiative, which allocates funding to local councils to expand outdoor play opportunities during the summer of 2020, was a direct response to the social and physical isolation experienced by children during the COVID-19 lockdowns. By providing increased funding and resources, these initiatives aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on children's well-being through outdoor play and to cope with the barriers for disadvantaged children to access outdoor play.

2.3.3 Lack of attention to multicultural children's outdoor play

A particularly progressive but underexplored aspect of outdoor play and learning in Scotland is the understanding of the multicultural groups within the Scottish educational context. The Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010) explicitly acknowledges the role of outdoor play in facilitating smooth transitions between educational stages. It emphasises the importance of incorporating cultural and social diversity into outdoor learning experiences. Subsequent policy documents, such as Learning for Sustainability (Education Scotland, 2013), have also recognised the potential of outdoor learning to promote intercultural understanding by encouraging exploration of diverse perspectives and cultural practices.

Nevertheless, how to use outdoor play to support multicultural children's transition into new cultural contexts, especially in their daily interactions within and after school, remains implicit and understudied in educational discourse. This is surprising based on the cultural diversity in Scotland. According to the National Records of Scotland census data, 12.9% of the population identified as being from a minority ethnic background in 2011, a significant increase from 8.2% in 2010. Bilingual and migrant children are the fastest growing group of the Scottish school-age population (Pupils in Scotland Census 2006-2009; Pupil Census - Supplementary Data 2010-2014). The Scottish Government Pupil Census (2012) also reported that pupils speaking Polish as their primary home language constituted the largest group after English-speaking students. More recent data, outlined in Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland (2024), show that 78.5% of students were recorded as White Scottish or White Other British, suggesting that approximately 21.5% of pupils come from other cultural backgrounds.

The investigation of outdoor play in multicultural contexts, from both school and home settings, appears to be a relatively underexplored area. The current educational focus on supporting bilingual children in Scotland has mainly concentrated on language education (Hancock, 2014; Moskal, 2015; Stella & Kay, 2023), academic attainment and social participation (Forbes & Sime, 2016), social capital formation (Smyth et al., 2010) and inclusion policy development (Moskal, 2016; Hancock, 2014; Howe et al., 2021). Most of the studies of outdoor play in Scotland focus on the policy and provision development (Christie & Higgins, 2012, Christie, et al., 2014;

Thomson & Philo, 2004; Wright et al., 2019), educators' capacity to promote children's engagement and professional learning (Christie et al., 2015; Barrable, 2020), as well as the outdoor play outcomes.

The research participants in these studies are generally spread across all groups of children, without specifically identifying children who are living between two cultures. For example, Christie et al. (2016) examine the perceptions of Scottish secondary school teachers and students regarding a local, curriculum-based outdoor learning programme, highlighting the importance of considering "culture, context and relational influences" of the pedagogy located settings (p. 430). They indicate that the 'culture' is constructed at a micro-level within the school, such as different students' expectations for a subject, and at a broader level outside the school, where the values and beliefs of students and teachers are developed through their daily interactions. Thompson and Philo (2004) aim to explore children's experiences of play and space in Livingston, Scotland. They note that children from working-class families may need outdoor space more, but the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of these children are not discussed.

Regarding documents in Scotland, for instance, while resources such as *Out to Play* (2018) and the *Play Strategy for Scotland* (2013) emphasise the importance of ensuring equal access to outdoor spaces for all children, they provide limited guidance on how schools can actively encourage intercultural dialogue and inclusive outdoor play practices. As Powney et al. (1998) and McMillan (2008) contend, there is an urgent need for more research and policy focus on education for ethnic minority

groups, especially given Scotland's increasing cultural diversity. Therefore, while Scotland has made significant progress in promoting outdoor play, the intersection of cultural diversity and outdoor play remains an underdeveloped area in educational practice.

Wood (2010) suggests that educators are influenced by two powerful external pressures when providing children with meaningful play-based learning experiences. The first stems from policy and curriculum demands, particularly the pressure to demonstrate measurable educational outcomes. The second one is rooted in the traditional beliefs of both some practitioners and parents, who view "learning is acquisition", rather than recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between individuals and shaped by their sociocultural worlds.

These influences contribute to a lack of parental confidence in outdoor play and play-based learning, particularly among migrant and multicultural families who may have limited experience with the UK education system (Brooker, 2010). This disconnect also reveals a critical gap in understanding the role of outdoor play from the perspectives of multicultural families, as Gershon (2005) noted that "What is culturally appropriate for students in one culture is not necessarily so for students in another" (p.66). As educators, we need to understand both the universal and the sociocultural dimensions of children's play. It therefore becomes essential to explore how outdoor play is conceptualised across different cultural contexts. In the following section, I will examine diverse cultural understandings of outdoor play.

2.4 Situated Outdoor Play in Sociocultural Context

2.4.1 Different cultural beliefs on outdoor play

Although all children play and play is widely recognised as a universal feature of childhood, there are still existing differences. It is these differences that shape children's behaviours, ways of interacting, thinking, and their developing identities, with culture being a key factor (Brooker, 2010). To understand such variation, researchers need to explore social encounters and cultural contexts within children's communities. The values and beliefs of a community influence caregivers' attitudes and educational practices, which, in turn, shape children's play experiences. As Göncü et al (2000) explain, "children's play reflects adults' beliefs about children's development and the social structure of the community in which children develop" (p.328). In their cross-cultural research on the cultural variation of toddlers' social play in four communities in Guatemala, Turkey, India and the United States, they find that, although social play occurs in all settings, the frequency of play and children's engagement in play, as well as the role of adults in play, differ across communities. Their findings challenge the traditional Western interpretation of play by arguing that the absence of certain play types does not imply a developmental disadvantage. Instead, children may derive similar benefits from other forms of play or non-play activities, depending on the cultural context in which they are embedded.

Another aspect of cultural variation is adults' perception of the function of play in diverse cultures, which is often associated with parental goals and broader community values. For instance, in urban middle-class families in Europe and the

United States, play is generally seen as an essential activity for children's social skills and cognitive growth (Farver et al., 2000; Gosso, 2009). In the Australian context, educators and parents tend to view play as a way to promote autonomy and personal development (Fleer et al., 2009). Conversely, among Yucatec Maya, play is valued for its practical role in keeping children occupied and giving adults a break from supervision. Parents see play as a natural activity and do not consider its developmental potential; therefore, they do not interfere with or facilitate children's play (Gaskin, 2015). In Māori communities in New Zealand, play is regarded as a means for children to connect with the local land, culture, and community (White et al., 2009). The purpose and function of play are closely tied to cultural transmission and the shaping of identity.

Evidence shows gender differences in children's outdoor play, partly due to cultural beliefs about gender-appropriate behaviours (Erden & Alpaslan, 2017). For instance, a UK-based study reveals some Pakistani parents are hesitant to let their daughters play outside (Hornby-Turner et al., 2014). This reluctance is linked to cultural disapproval of mixed-gender play, which they consider inappropriate based on their values and beliefs. Conversely, White British girls in the same study are reported to be more active outdoors, with parents more supportive of their outdoor activities. Similarly, in India, girls tend to spend considerably less time engaging in outdoor physical activities compared to boys, due to longstanding cultural expectations that portray girls as home-centred and responsible for domestic roles. These expectations are ingrained from an early age, as girls are traditionally raised to

prepare for future roles as ‘homemakers’ (Singh & Misra, 2015; Raskind et al., 2020). Such gender disparities in access to outdoor play are deeply rooted in cultural norms and parental values.

Cultural perceptions of risk in outdoor play also vary widely and significantly influence parenting practices and children’s autonomy in outdoor environments. These perceptions are closely linked to cultural definitions of ‘good parenting’, which affect how much freedom children are allowed during play. For example, in Norwegian culture, caregivers tend to adopt a more relaxed approach toward children’s independent exploration and outdoor activities. Obee et al. (2021) describe this phenomenon using the concept of *friluftsliv*, which reflects a cultural attitude that values outdoor life and views it as low risk. Under this culture, outdoor play is encouraged as an essential part of everyday life and child development. In contrast, the risks associated with outdoor play are more frequently emphasised in some Western contexts. Allin et al. (2014) found that mothers in the UK were often more protective and hesitant to allow their children to play outside unsupervised. This caution was partly driven by cultural expectations around parenting, particularly the fear of being judged as irresponsible. In this case, being perceived as a ‘good mother’ is tied to visible supervision and control, which may restrict children’s autonomy in outdoor play.

2.4.2 Different cultural beliefs on outdoor play and learning

Although learning through play is widely accepted in European, American, and

Australian educational settings, its interpretation and perceived value can differ markedly across cultures. From a sociocultural viewpoint, Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the importance of children's social and cultural context in shaping their learning. Piaget similarly stresses that children build knowledge through interaction with their environment, though he placed less emphasis on the role of adults in this process. Recent research indicates that parental attitudes and perceptions of play are closely linked to both the frequency of children's play and how play activities are organised and facilitated (LaForett & Mendez, 2016a; Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2016). These findings, when considered alongside constructivist theories, imply that cultural beliefs and values about the relationship between play and learning significantly influence daily play practices and the provision of play-centred educational experiences (Fleer, 2014).

In some cultures, play is viewed as the opposite of learning, and parents may not believe that play contributes meaningfully to children's academic achievement. In the Chinese context, educational values are strongly influenced by Confucian heritage culture, which traditionally maintains an apparent dichotomy between play and formal learning (Lin et al., 2019). Within this cultural framework, diligence, discipline, and academic success are highly valued, while free play is often marginalised or positioned as a reward for completing academic tasks (Liu & Elicker, 2005). A similar perspective is observed in other cultural contexts. Brooker (2010) reports that, in her observation of a Bangladeshi family in the UK, a child's play is permitted only after completing all homework and meeting parental expectations for the child's learning

tasks. When the researcher suggested that play might also support learning, the parents dismissed this idea as “foolish”, which indicates that their cultural belief is that learning and play are mutually exclusive.

The misalignment between parents’ and the school’s demands creates tensions in supporting play and play-based learning. For example, in Hong Kong, early childhood education is regarded as preparation for children’s academic-oriented curriculum of primary school. Consequently, the “play as learning” framework contrasts with parental expectations and poses a range of dilemmas for educators during implementation (Fung & Cheng, 2012). Except for the traditional cultural emphasis on academic success, practitioners in Kindergarten perceive themselves as powerless, as they are expected to meet parents’ demands, which are heavily driven by market forces and financial pressures.

This tension becomes even more pronounced in some African contexts, where a significant disconnect exists between school culture and local cultural values. The formal schooling system in many parts of Africa is primarily based on a Western educational model, which is viewed by local communities as dysfunctional, as it fails to adapt to indigenous cultural norms and traditions (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011). The parents believe that children are deprived of a meaningful education that contributes to the construction of their cultural identities. Due to this disconnection and the traditional values on academic learning, both teachers and parents present a lack of clear understanding and acceptance of the developmental values of play. Marfo and Biersteker (2011) find that South African children tend to play in mixed-age groups,

where learning naturally emerges through interactions with more experienced peers. This type of informal, community-based learning contrasts sharply with school-based play, which is often highly structured, driven by the teacher's curriculum schedule, and constrained by limited space and resources. In this context, Margetts and Phatudi (2013) report that children are excited about transitioning to primary school because they do not find structured play in early education settings meaningful or associated with learning.

However, research suggests that cultural beliefs around play can be shifted when educators consider the local cultural context and provide clear communication with parents. In a case study of Rao and Li (2009) in mainland China, teachers are active participants in children's structured play activities and explain the concept of "play to learning" for parents. Educators introduce the idea of eduplay, which aims to use play to achieve learning outcomes while balancing between a progressive, play-oriented pedagogy and traditional academic expectations. Although opportunities for free play remain limited in many Chinese kindergartens due to entrenched cultural beliefs, the concept of 'eduplay' has gained acceptance among parents in some urban and coastal areas (Lin, 2013; Rao & Li, 2009).

Additionally, cultural beliefs around play are likely to evolve through prolonged contact with other dominant cultural practices. This process of navigating and reconciling different cultural beliefs and values surrounding play and learning is particularly evident among migrant and multicultural families, who often must balance home traditional educational beliefs with the educational approaches in their

dominant cultural environment. Hyun et al. (2021) investigated Chinese migrant parents' beliefs about their children's play in the United States. Most parents in the study expressed a positive attitude toward U.S. play-based pedagogy, believing that it was beneficial for their children's development. Some parents reflected on their own childhood experiences of strict academic schedules and stated that they now wish to provide their children with a freer and more playful upbringing. Importantly, many parents viewed play as a medium through which their children could adapt to the new cultural environment, particularly by improving language skills and developing a sense of belonging within peer groups.

However, Hyun et al. (2021) also noted that not all parents fully trusted that play could support academic performance; they are attempting to find the balance between their traditional cultural beliefs and the cultural beliefs in the current cultural context. Some expressed concerns that play-based approaches might overindulge children. As a result, they take their children to some courses outside the school to prepare them adequately for future academic demands.

Jiang and Han (2016) reported different findings in their comparative study of parental play beliefs among mainland Chinese parents, Chinese immigrant parents in the U.S., and European American parents. Interestingly, they found that Chinese immigrant parents held the most negative views towards play-based learning and maintaining traditional Chinese child-rearing beliefs. Meanwhile, both mainland Chinese and European American parents expressed more positive attitudes towards play. Parmar et al. (2004) report similar findings in their ethnographic research

comparing Asian and Euro-American parental beliefs about preschool children's play at home and in school. They find that Asian parents in the U.S. were less likely to recognise the educational value of play compared to Euro-American parents. As a result, children from Asian immigrant families had fewer opportunities for play than their Euro-American peers at home.

The researchers suggest that the educational backgrounds and social contexts of the observed parent groups may explain the different results. When Chinese immigrant parents in the U.S. are first-generation immigrants who were educated within a highly traditional and academically rigorous system, they tend to hold more strongly to traditional Chinese values (Chao & Tseng, 2002). In contrast, parents in mainland China have been increasingly influenced by Western educational discourse and have begun to push back against excessive academic pressure (Johnson & Chang, 2007).

Although cultural beliefs about play vary, the challenges faced by migrant parents in balancing home and host country expectations are visible. For children who encounter multiple, and sometimes conflicting, cultural beliefs, these misalignments between home and school values can confuse, potentially affecting their adaptation and sense of belonging in the new cultural context (Chen et al., 2014). For instance, Farver et al. (2000) found that Korean-American mothers whose beliefs aligned more closely with school-based values were more supportive of their children's free play, and their children adapted more successfully to the school environment. In contrast, children of migrant mothers who had less interaction with the host culture and

struggled to reconcile home and school expectations were more likely to experience negative peer interactions and social marginalisation within the classroom.

However, it is important to recognise that children are not passive recipients of cultural norms. As active agents, they can construct their own meanings and understandings through interactions with others. Play, particularly outdoor play, as a regular, often less-structured part of children's everyday lives, can offer an open and inclusive space for intercultural interaction. Through engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds, children may gradually negotiate their identities and make sense of cultural differences, contributing to their own cultural formation and micro-transitions.

2.5 Play, Cultural Formation and Agency

2.5.1 Multicultural children's identity construction in play

Children's cultural formation is described as an ongoing process (Grindheim et al., 2021). In this process, individuals are shaped by cultural norms and values but also act as active agents in constructing their own identities and cultural understandings through interactions and negotiations with others (Grindheim et al., 2020). Agency, as defined by Côté and Levine (2002), refers to the capacity of individuals to make decisions, act independently and intentionally and influence self-identity trajectories within the power of social structures and cultures. Identity is conceptualised as a 'frame' within which agency operates, but it is not fixed. Lewis et al. (2020) argue that the construction of self-identity is "fluid, socially and

linguistically mediated construct” (p.4). One reason for this fluidity is that although individual agency is embedded within sociocultural contexts, it also enables individuals to challenge, reinterpret, and transform their existing identities as they explore alternative trajectories and reflect on their past and present selves.

For children from multicultural families, living between or among multiple cultures presents both challenges and opportunities for identity construction. This process of identity negotiation has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its significant implications for children’s adjustment to new cultural contexts.

Researchers suggest that when individuals encounter cultural environments that are markedly different from, or even in conflict with, their home culture, they are more likely to face difficulties in integrating into the new setting (Amiot et al., 2007; Huynh et al, 2011). In contrast, individuals who perceive compatibility between their home and host cultures are often able to integrate knowledge from both. As a result, they tend to demonstrate greater creativity in problem-solving, experience less identity conflict, and benefit from smoother intercultural interactions and social adjustment (Mok & Morris, 2010).

Additionally, as noted earlier, identity is fluid and shaped as both individuals and societies develop, especially during processes of migration and acculturation (Obsiye & Cook, 2016). According to Berry (2005), acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change that occurs after interacting with different cultural groups or individuals. Activities that facilitate intercultural interactions, such as learning peers’ languages, sharing traditional food with friends from other cultures, and engaging in

outdoor play, can contribute to children's acculturation. Through exchanging cultural knowledge in conversations with others, children may gain new interpretations or recognition of their past beliefs about themselves and reality, which contribute to the formation of a new cultural identity.

Studies have shown that multicultural children can use play to practice and shape their identities through play. Levinson (2005), for example, investigated how Gypsy children in England use play as a means to shape and maintain their cultural identity across home and school contexts. In this long-term ethnographic study, the researcher found that children viewed home-based play as preparation for adult life. A large part of their play involved imitating adult behaviours, which reflecting community expectations that children contribute to family. In contrast, the same children's play behaviours at school often signalled resistance to mainstream cultural norms and expressed loyalty to their own cultural traditions. In this context, play functioned as a tool for asserting cultural boundaries and maintaining their Gypsy identity.

Similarly, Yahya and Wood (2016) also examine the experiences of Canadian immigrant families from the perspectives of mothers and children. Their study discovers that children whose family culture is disconnected from school culture (manifested as language barriers and unfamiliar social customs) experience feelings of marginalisation when they try to bring family cultural discourse into the school environment. However, through play, migrant children actively engage with peers to move across cultural boundaries, forming new cultural understandings and constructing a hybrid identity in the process.

Hybrid identity is formed through navigating and negotiating multiple cultural influences, existing within a third space that is a conceptual zone where social, cultural, and symbolic boundaries intersect and become blurred (Smith, 2009; Yahya & Wood, 2016). This concept emphasises children's agency in shaping and developing their identities across diverse cultural contexts. Outdoor play appears to provide ideal conditions for fostering intercultural dialogue, enacting agency, and supporting the development of hybrid identities. According to Edmiston (2008), play creates an 'authoring space' where children feel safe to express emotions and gain a sense of power. For example, children can make their choice in play, including managing task difficulty, negotiating social power dynamics, and arranging individual and group activities (Wood, 2014). However, Wood also cautions that the freedom to make choices does not always lead to empowerment, particularly for children who lack the social skills or cultural knowledge to navigate power dynamics without adult guidance.

Therefore, play can be conceptualised as a space where children continually shape and reshape their cultural understanding and develop their cultural forms. However, this process does not unfold through major, dramatic shifts; it unfolds through numerous micro-transitions, often unnoticed, that emerge as play progresses. Focusing on these micro-transitions enables researchers to examine more precisely how children interact with peers, resolve conflicts, and exchange knowledge during play. Consequently, studying micro-transitions offers a valuable perspective for understanding the everyday dynamics of cultural formation.

2.5.2 Micro-transition

A transition in childhood education often refers to a significant change in children's educational settings, such as entering structured early childhood education for the first time or transitioning from kindergarten to formal schooling. This transition between institutions has attracted significant interest from researchers and educators, as it represents an important change in children's lives, in which they begin to encounter different cultures, norms, beliefs, and demands from their home settings (Hedegaard & Fler, 2013). Extensive research exists on children's transition between different learning stages (Chan, 2012; Kienig, 2013), as well as on the daily transition between different institutional settings (Hughes et al., 2009; Lam & Pollard, 2006).

Compared to macro-transitions, micro-transitions occur more frequently in children's daily interactions and experiences. By focusing on these transitions, researchers can use a more nuanced lens to capture and understand how children actively navigate cultural differences and expectations through their dialogues and behaviours in everyday outdoor play, which contribute meaningfully to children's ongoing cultural formation (Birkeland et al., 2021). This is particularly important for children from multicultural backgrounds, as they are more likely to experience cultural dissonance when bringing knowledge from home into school settings and engaging with diverse norms, beliefs, and institutional structures (Yahya & Wood, 2016). Investigating micro-transitions in outdoor play, therefore, allows researchers to closely examine how children adapt and negotiate their identities through evolving

behaviours and interactions.

However, relatively little research has focused on children's micro-level transitions within specific activity settings such as outdoor play (Birkeland et al., 2021; Cavada-Hrepich, 2019; Devi et al., 2019). A recent study from Birkeland et al. (2021) conducted a comparative study of children's outdoor playtime micro-transitions in kindergartens in China and Norway. In their research, micro-transition refers to small, routine shifts that are culturally embedded and shape children's daily experiences by organising time, space, and social interaction. In their findings, these transitions affect how children respond to various institutional demands and cultural expectations. For instance, the shift from indoor to outdoor time in Chinese kindergartens is structured around collective efficiency and discipline. In contrast, in Norwegian kindergartens, the same transition encourages independence, autonomy, and outdoor competence, such as letting children choose their own activities.

In the current study, micro-transitions underscore the interactions in children's outdoor play. They are considered to refer to moments or events in which children encounter new cultural knowledge and adjust their prior understanding as they negotiate and adapt to the expectations of their institutional environment. These transitions can take place many times in children's everyday lives, from learning a cultural tradition through peer interaction to negotiating the rules of a game within a diverse playgroup.

2.6 Theoretical framework: Outdoor play as a Mediating Space for Multicultural

Children's Micro-transition

2.6.1 Introducing the Third Space theory

We have discussed “culture” extensively. What does the concept of “culture” mean in this research context? Considering that we are situated within multicultural children’s dimensions and applying a sociocultural lens, culture includes the cultural knowledge, such as beliefs and norms, that children perceive from two main daily institutional settings, home and school, as well as new understandings that arise from their interactions with other individuals beyond these settings.

The concept of Third Space theory originates from Bhabha’s (1994) argument that cultural identity is produced in an ‘in-between’ and hybrid space, which he refers to as the “third space” in educational contexts. Gutierrez et al. (1999) adapted this concept to classroom learning. They argue that a third space emerges when official classroom scripts intersect with children’s counter-scripts, such as their home-based knowledge. In their view, this space is closely linked to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), creating a hybrid learning environment where diverse voices and cultural knowledge interact.

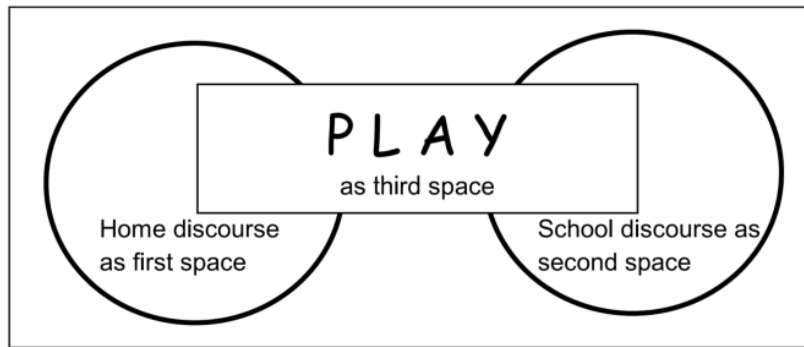
Moje and colleagues (2004) further summarise and discuss multiple perspectives on the third space within the educational context. In addition to using third space as a scaffolding learning space, researchers also view it as “a navigational space, a way of crossing and succeeding in different discourse communities” (p. 44). It supports children in challenging and questioning the dominant knowledge by participating in community and school practices. Another view focuses on how students’ funds of

knowledge from their homes and communities could scaffold children's academic learning. These funds of knowledge are the culturally and historically accumulated understandings derived from families' daily practices (González et al., 2006; Moll et al., 2006). This interpretation positions the third space as a bridge that connects everyday community discourse with school-based practices, supporting the development of new literacies and knowledge.

The interpretation by Yahya and Wood (2017) of play as a third space which draws on the conceptual framework of Levy (2008) aligns closely with the focus of the current study. In their interviews with migrant mothers and their children about play experiences at home and in school, they found that both children and educators used play to bridge the discourses between home and school. Through play, migrant children exchange cultural knowledge with peers in a Third Space, which helps them navigate cultural discontinuities and freely explore opportunities to develop a hybrid identity. Yahya and Wood also suggested several strategies that educators could use to facilitate more effective communication and reduce the gap between parents and practitioners.

Figure 1

Yahya's play as a third space framework



However, their research does not observe children's dynamic interactions in play at home and school settings and excludes teachers' perspectives. First-hand observation of children's outdoor play behaviours can help the researcher better capture their body language and facial expressions, which could provide additional information that has not been verbally spoken (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). It is also an important element in children's dialogical engagement in exploration (Ødegaard, 2020).

Additionally, as I will argue in the following section, children and their social environments are shaped in a dialectical relationship. To understand how multicultural children experience micro-transitions in outdoor play, and how outdoor play serves as a mediating space for their cultural formation, it is necessary to examine their societal, cultural, and institutional contexts from a holistic perspective. Including teachers' insights into children's daily behaviours can further enrich this understanding by offering a classroom-based perspective and helping to connect children's present actions with their past behaviours.

2.6.2 Outdoor play and the Third Space theory

Outdoor play, which takes place outside the traditional classroom or home environment, is perceived by children as a spatially distinct space, separate from home or school. Beyond the benefits of outdoor environments discussed in section 2.3.1, outdoor play itself offers unique opportunities for children to interact with peers, adults, and the natural environment. Consequently, in terms of both space and social interaction, outdoor play has considerable potential to serve as a transitional space that extends beyond the home and school in children's cultural formation.

Existing research has emphasised the mediating and educational functions of the outdoor environment. Drawing on the Reggio Emilia approach, scholars have argued that the outdoor environment can be children's "third teacher" alongside the classroom and home, and that educators should consider how to cultivate outdoor space as a meaningful learning place for children (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2018; Rosalinda & Garzia, 2022; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Aligning with this perspective, this study suggests that the outdoor environment provides children with a space to create their own play artefacts from natural materials, drawing on their understanding of the world.

However, it is crucial to recognise that, although space provides fertile ground, the **action** of playing in the outdoor space affords the most micro-transition opportunities. In other words, children's active engagement in outdoor play, rather than mere physical presence in an outdoor setting, stimulates the most meaningful cultural interactions, which facilitate the micro-transition process. Focusing solely on the geographic dimension of the space risks overlooking two key concerns: first, the

inequality in children's access to green space, which includes barriers such as socio-economic factors, race, gender and cultural backgrounds (Franzini et al., 2010; Rivera et al., 2021); and second, that occupying an outdoor environment does not necessarily lead to playful or culturally meaningful interaction.

When children are actively engaged with the natural environment, however, they interact spontaneously with peers. For example, in the group, discuss which play artefacts they need for play, and creatively select natural elements to incorporate into the group play. The significance of outdoor play, therefore, lies not only in the spatial affordances of the environment but also in its capacity to create a distinct yet connected space where children can exchange knowledge and cultural understandings drawn from their experiences at home and at school.

In the next section, I will introduce the 'wholeness approach', which conceptualises children's cultural formation through a holistic lens. This approach will be integrated with Third Space theory to construct the conceptual framework for the current study.

2.6.3 The wholeness approach: a holistic perspective of children's cultural formation

From Bakhtin's (1981) perspective, the voice or dialogue of the individual is shaped by historical and social discourses. Meaning is constructed through the fusion of immediate lived experiences and personal life histories, which are deeply embedded in sociocultural and historical contexts. Therefore, to understand children's

cultural formation during micro-transitions, we must adopt a holistic perspective that accounts for these layered and intersecting influences.

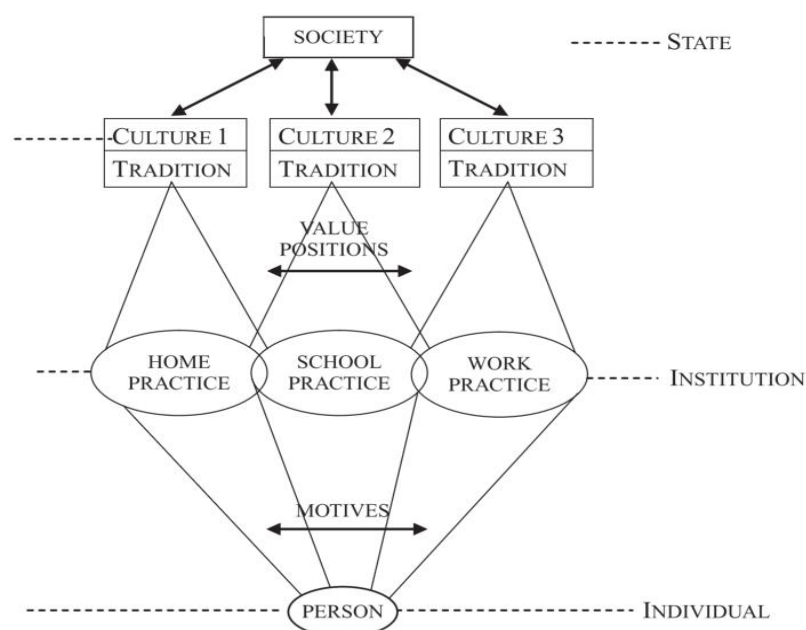
Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory identifies personal development as the interaction among micro, meso, and macro systems, from relationships with the immediate environment to institutional patterns of culture. Although Bronfenbrenner's theory characterises the multidimensional aspect of personal development, it lacks recognition of the individual's agency in the dynamic transformation process, and the dialectic relationship between the individual and the surrounding social conditions (Hedegaard, 2009). Children's play should not be interpreted as a set of systems, but a dynamic and reciprocal process. While institutional and societal structures indeed influence children's behaviours, they also actively contribute to shaping institutional practices, even to transforming societal norms.

Hedegaard (2009, 2012) proposes a cultural-historical wholeness approach and depicts a fluid interconnection between children, social environment and institutional practices. The framework (Figure 2) illustrates children's development through three interconnected dimensions: the societal, the institutional, and the personal. A key argument of this wholeness approach is that children are active agents who engage in constant interaction with their social environments. Therefore, their social situation should be regarded as central to their development and learning. In this context, a child's social situation refers to their "relation via motives and competencies to the different activity settings" (Hedegaard, 2012, p. 130). In other words, it encompasses

how a child perceives and responds to their everyday experiences within culturally embedded institutional practices.

Figure 2.

Hedegaard's (2009) model of children's learning and development through participation in institutionalised practice (p. 73)



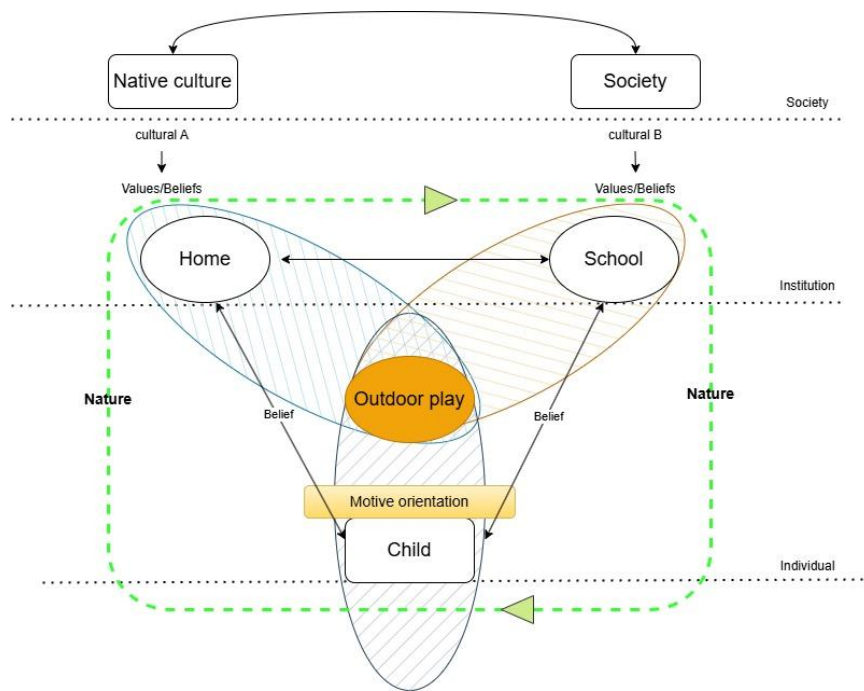
The first plane of state reflects the cultural traditions of a society, which are further transformed into laws and regulations that provide a framework for practices. The institutional perspective is about the daily practices in institutions (depicted in the model as home and school), which intertwine cultural traditions and values with individuals' motives and competence. The individual plane concerns the individual's demands, perspectives, and motives, both in everyday life and during their participation in various institutional practices.

Hedegaard's framework presents a dialectical relationship between social conditions, values and demands of the institutions and children themselves. The society's cultural traditions and values create and shape different institutions, and the activity settings reflect the cultural traditions and values of an institution. Children orient themselves to the demands and traditions of collective institutional practices in which they are involved, and their responses to the demands and cultural traditions further shape their motives and values and develop their competencies, which again influence their behaviours in future institutional activities.

To illustrate how outdoor play can facilitate and mediate multicultural children's micro-transition, this study develops a framework which is based on Hedegaard's (2009, 2012) wholeness approach of children's development and the third space theory, as shown in Figure 3

Figure 3

Outdoor play as the mediating space for multicultural children's micro-transition



This aligns with Hedegaard's (2009) wholeness approach, which characterises development across three interconnected planes: society, institution, and individual. As this study explicitly examines a multicultural context, the societal plane is further divided into two dimensions. One dimension refers to the home or native cultures of the children's parents, which may involve one or more cultural backgrounds depending on the family. The second dimension refers to the dominant culture in which the family is currently situated.

The institutional plane encompasses the two primary settings in children's lives: home and school. Within the home, parents' beliefs and practices are shaped by traditional cultural values. However, these beliefs may undergo transformation as children engage with the school environment, which reflects the values and expectations of the dominant societal culture.

This framework positions children as active agents and conceptualises outdoor

play as a third, mediating space situated between home, school, and the child. At the individual level, children are influenced by the potentially contrasting cultural beliefs and expectations of the home and school environments. At the same time, they develop their own motive orientations through outdoor play, and in doing so, actively contribute to shaping the cultures of both home and school.

Children bring cultural knowledge constructed in the home and shaped by school experience into the space of outdoor play. Through interaction with peers, adults, and the natural environment, outdoor play is hypothesised to support children's cultural formation through a series of micro-transitions.

2.7 Conclusion

Although researchers have attempted to define play, it continues to be recognised as a complex and elusive concept. Instead of limiting play to a fixed set of characteristics, this study adopts a sociocultural lens that is built on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of play and views play as a culturally constructed phenomenon.

Outdoor play as a dimension of play has received growing attention from childhood educators in recent decades, due to its significant contributions to children's mental health, physical well-being, and social development. In Scotland, there has been increasing recognition of both the benefits of outdoor play and the worrying decline in children's access to outdoor environments. In response, policy and educational practices have increasingly focused on promoting outdoor play and learning. However, in light of Scotland's growing multicultural population, a notable

lack of research remains regarding the outdoor play experiences of multicultural families.

By applying a sociocultural lens to outdoor play, this study seeks to explore how play is understood and practised across different cultural contexts. It particularly examines parental cultural beliefs around the purpose of play, perceptions of risk, gender expectations, and the relationship between play and learning. While a relatively rich body of research exists on play and learning across cultures, far less attention has been paid to the role of outdoor play in the cultural formation of multicultural children.

For children from multicultural backgrounds, entering a new cultural environment can present multiple challenges, such as increased emotional stress and difficulty forming peer relationships. Previous studies suggest that play can support these children in negotiating their identities and may contribute to the development of a hybrid cultural identity.

This cultural formation process unfolds through multiple micro-transitions in everyday discourses and interactions. However, only a few studies have investigated these micro-transitions within the context of multicultural children's outdoor play, and even fewer have incorporated observational data that captures their dynamic interactions across both home and school settings.

To address this gap, this study draws on third space theory to conceptualise outdoor play as a mediating space between home and school cultures. It argues that outdoor play can serve as a third space that helps children manage cultural dissonance

and supports their identity work. To better capture the dynamics of children's micro-transitions in outdoor play, this study integrates third space theory with Hedegaard's (2009) wholeness approach, providing a holistic framework to examine children's cultural formation across societal, institutional, and individual planes. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do multicultural children engage with outdoor play to negotiate cultural meanings and identities?
2. How do parental cultural beliefs about play influence children's outdoor play practices?
3. How does outdoor play facilitate children's micro-transitions across home and school settings?

Chapter Three. Methodology

3.1 Introduction and Overview

This chapter presents and justifies the methodological choices and research methods adopted to explore how outdoor play facilitates children's cultural formation through micro-transitions. This study aimed to investigate how children from multicultural backgrounds exchange knowledge and create new cultural understandings through the interactions and experiences in outdoor play. To address these inquiries, the current research employed a qualitative ethnographic approach informed by multimodal perspectives (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and situated within the interpretive paradigm. Findings are reported in a narrative style that foregrounds children's voices and experiences. Data collection methods included observations, interviews, snapshots, photographs, field notes, and children's drawings, all guided by the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two.

The chapter is organised into three main parts. First, it outlines the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study, including the interpretive paradigm, qualitative ethnographic research, multimodal approaches, and narrative analysis. Second, it describes the data collection process, covering the recruitment and sample selection, the researcher's positionality, and the methods and phases of data collection. Finally, it discusses the ethical considerations of the study

3.2 Interpretivism paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm shaped this study's ontological and epistemological foundations. From an interpretivist ontological perspective, reality is not fixed but socially constructed and situated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paradigm holds that understanding the world requires making sense of it through one's subjective position within it (Hammersley, 2012), based on the interpretations that people ascribe to their own cultural beliefs, motives, and practices. My ontological stance is that children's cultural identities and experiences in outdoor play are not fixed or defined by a single standard; rather, they are fluid and shaped by individuals' cultural beliefs and sociocultural contexts. This perspective recognises that culture is not static but constantly negotiated and reformed through everyday interactions.

In interpretivist epistemology, the relationship between the inquirer and the subject of inquiry is characterised by interdependence rather than objective separation (Capper, 2018). Researchers draw on prior knowledge while remaining open to new understandings by capturing the meanings participants construct within specific contexts (Black, 2006; Capper, 2018; Hammersley, 2012). My epistemological stance acknowledges that my own perspectives, experiences, beliefs and potential biases inevitably shaped the research process, and that knowledge is constructed through participants' perceptions, values, and beliefs. Therefore, the goal of this study was not to generalise findings or establish causal relationships, but rather to understand and interpret the meanings and understandings that children and families attach to their social interactions and behavioural patterns in outdoor play contexts. This

interpretivist foundation underpins the qualitative methodology adopted for this research.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Qualitative research approach

Given the interpretivist paradigm and the study's focus on exploring how children from diverse multicultural backgrounds exchange knowledge and form new cultural understandings through outdoor play, a qualitative research approach was essential. Qualitative research is particularly suited to investigating "how people interpret their experience, how they construct their world and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009, p.6). This interpretive study required rich, in-depth data that could only be obtained through methods that allowed the researcher to engage deeply with participants and consider their social contexts (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). This was particularly important because the study focused on investigating children's outdoor play experiences and understandings through their own perspectives, insights, and interactions. It required the researcher to delve into participants' social relations and to explore their negotiation of different cultural beliefs between home and school. The qualitative approach enabled this investigation of meaning-making processes and cultural negotiations as they unfolded naturally in outdoor play settings, something that would not have been possible with quantitative methods focused on measuring variables or establishing statistical relationships (Creswell, 2005).

3.3.2 Research methods

The overarching focus of this study was to explore how outdoor play served as a mediating space for the cultural formation of multicultural children. Ethnography, which seeks a ‘thick description’ to analyse and interpret the culture, values, beliefs, and behaviours of specific groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Desmet et al., 2015, p. 419), provided an appropriate methodological framework for this inquiry.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) define ethnography as involving the researcher “participating, overtly and covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time” to collect all available data in the field (p.3). Employing an ethnography approach enabled me to situate myself within the sociocultural context of children’s everyday experiences to interpret their stories, while also acknowledging that these encounters are shaped by local and community culture and history (Fetterman, 2010; Willis & Trondman, 2000; O’Reilly & Karen, 2011).

Ethnography is extensively utilised in childhood education research based on its recognition of childhood as a culturally constructed phenomenon (Hohti, 2015; Huf & Kluge, 2021; Mills et al, 2013). This approach enabled researchers to engage directly with children and explore their social worlds by being present with them rather than merely observing from a distance (James, 2001). The ethnographic approach required immersion in children’s outdoor play settings for an extended period (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and this prolonged engagement, combined with its flexible research framework, allowed me to adopt various methods and tools to examine children’s

cultural negotiations and the fluidity of culture over time. This flexibility was necessary to address the research questions adequately (Walford, 2009; Pole & Morrison, 2003).

However, I acknowledge that the time spent in the field was more limited than in traditional longitudinal ethnography due to practical constraints encountered during data collection, including difficulties in recruiting interview participants, school holidays, and the study's timeframe. These limitations and how I addressed them are discussed in detail in Section 3.4.2 on researcher positionality. To compensate for these constraints and enrich engagement with participants, this ethnographic study incorporated a multimodal perspective, as discussed in Section 3.3.4.

A key strength of ethnography for this study was its affirmation of children's right to participate in research and express their thoughts, thereby enabling their voices to be heard (James, 2001). While some researchers have criticised certain ethnographic studies for risking the imposition of researchers' interests on observed children (O'Kane, 2008), recent scholarship argues that ethnography can blur traditional power boundaries between adults and children. By conceptualising participant observation as "dynamic, intra-active, inter-connected," ethnographic approaches can reduce power imbalances and respect children's autonomy and agency (Dennis & Huf, 2020, p.446). This was particularly important for this child-centred research, which aimed to explore children's everyday interactions in outdoor play settings from their own perspectives. By ensuring their agency in expressing their views, I was able to immerse myself in their play environments with a flexible positionality, listening to

their stories and observing how they created new cultural meanings through their interactions.

While phenomenology is another widely applied qualitative research design in education, it was not appropriate for this study. Phenomenological research investigates subjective perceptions and interpretations of a phenomenon or experience, focusing on the meaning of lived experiences for individuals or groups (Mertens, 2015). Although this study also sought to understand experiences from participants' perspectives, the primary focus was on interactions among children from various cultural backgrounds and how cultural fluidity develops through intercultural exchanges in outdoor play. Therefore, an ethnographic design grounded in sociocultural theory was better suited to the research objectives than phenomenology.

3.3.3 Using narrative to report qualitative findings

Using narrative to report data in ethnographic studies has been widely recognised and applied over the past decades (Clandinin, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009; Saint Arnault & Sinko, 2021). Some methodological debates have questioned whether narrative analysis, as a language-focused approach, is compatible with ethnography's emphasis on interaction (Elliot, 2011; Potter & Mulkay, 1985). Elliot (2011) contends that qualitative researchers should focus on "what is said" rather than "how it is said". This study recognises that the interactions that occur within the research process, combined with the interview texts, construct the whole "story" of the participants' experiences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Meanwhile, this study examines both what children say and how they express themselves through various modes of communication, which are integral to understanding their cultural formation.

Narrative has been argued to be particularly valuable in ethnographic studies of culture, as it captures people's beliefs, interactions, and the sociocultural contexts that shape their lives (Saint Arnauld & Sinko, 2021). It acknowledges that individuals construct their identities through time, and moves beyond the individual level by situating personal experiences within broader cultural discourses, institutional practices, and physical environments (Elliot, 2005). In doing so, researchers use stories to present "lived" situations and to trace the development and transformation of participants over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through these stories, readers can gain insight into who these participants are and are invited to see the world from children's perspectives, understanding how they navigate between cultures (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). In this way, narrative enables children's voices to be heard and represented more fully, which was a primary purpose of the current study.

Narrative analysis seeks to understand individuals' "stories" by examining the social situations in which events unfold, the participants' interactions with their surroundings, and their behaviours in relation to these narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). All human beings have stories to share, and knowledge can be gained through storytelling, whether as narrator or listener (Clandinin, 2007; Creswell, 2005). For researchers, the task is to carefully select

which stories to present and determine the depth of narration needed to explore the phenomenon under investigation meaningfully.

To capture and explore children's cultural transformation moments and interactions in outdoor play, this study employs both "big stories" and "small stories" (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). "Big stories" refer to the significant lived experiences that participants recall when reflecting on events that shaped their beliefs and understandings. These stories are typically gathered through interviews when the researcher seeks to explore specific life episodes (Bamberg, 2006). In the study's context, big stories emerged when children and mothers retrospectively discussed their past outdoor play experiences across different cultural contexts, their navigation of cultural differences, or the special moments that have shaped their beliefs about outdoor play. For example, some mothers shared detailed accounts of their own childhood outdoor play experiences in their home countries and how these contrasted with their children's experiences in Scotland.

In contrast, "small stories" are the informal interactions and fleeting narratives that occur in everyday settings, which sometimes risks being overlooked (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). However, an individual's cultural formation is constructed not only through milestones and significant events but also through the "small stories" that emerge in daily life (Baynham & Georgakopoulou, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2007). In the outdoor play context, small stories were evident when children shifted their attitudes toward playing in natural environments, negotiated ways to utilise play artefacts, or decided to join or

leave a play group. Big stories provided pathways to delve into participants' lives through their language and reflections, while small stories situated me within their sociocultural contexts and enabled analysis of children's micro-transitions in play. Therefore, this study intertwined both narrative forms to represent the dynamic nature of children's transitions and negotiations in outdoor play.

3.3.4 Multimodality in ethnography

This ethnographic study was informed by a multimodal perspective, which supported the traditional ethnographic approach to capturing the full complexity of children's meaning-making in outdoor play. To more fully examine children's micro-transitions and cultural formation within a limited time frame and with separated groups, I introduced multimodality into the current study and acknowledged that children communicate and construct understanding not only through spoken language but also through gestures, movements, spatial arrangements, drawings, and interactions with materials and environments. A multimodal perspective recognises that meaning is produced through a variety of grammars (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) and non-fixed social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988) in the "communicational ensemble" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p.111).

The visual grammar refers to the conventions and patterns that guide how meaning is interpreted and created with different modes (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). For example, the participants' gestures, postures, positions, and facial expressions in an image or photo could indicate their relationships and emotions. This

was particularly important when interpreting children's drawings of outdoor play experiences; these grammars provided frameworks for reading the modes present in their images. The concept of social semiotics was first proposed by Halliday (1978), who argues that semiotic resources are shaped within social and cultural contexts. Norris (2004) explicitly shows how different modes, such as verbal language, spatial layout, body position, head and arm movements, gaze, text, and images, can be combined to analyse social interactions. These modes move beyond linguistic structures and the transcripts (text) of the conversation, incorporating individuals' life practices into the meaning-making process (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Hurdley & Dicks, 2011). Therefore, multimodality focuses on how meaning is constructed through dynamic interactions across various semiotic modes in space, speech, social practices, interactions and artefacts (Flewitt et al., 2019; Hurdley & Dicks, 2011).

Although combining social semiotics with ethnography is well-established, methodological debates between multimodality and ethnography have been ongoing (Dicks et al., 2011; Kress, 2011; Pink, 2011; Hurdley & Dicks, 2011). Some researchers argue that non-linguistic features are already considered in ethnographic studies, and that explicit adoption of multimodality might fragment researchers' attention from the holistic complexity of fieldwork (Dicks et al., 2011; Atkinson et al., 2008). However, these scholars also acknowledge that descriptions of space, place, and materials are often used as background information rather than explored for their potential meanings in relation to the context (Atkinson et al., 2008). Clark (2011) describes using multimodality in the ethnographic analysis of children's interactions

as “slowing it down” to explore the diversity of ways in which children construct their knowledge. By adopting a multimodality perspective in the current ethnographic study, I was able to focus not only on children’s speech but also on their use of semiotic resources, such as their spatial arrangement in the outdoor playground, their interactions and creative utilisation with natural materials, their drawings of outdoor play and their physical movements in the neighbourhood and school playground. Incorporating these multiple modes helped me to reveal how meaning was constructed through these micro-moments within the complex sociocultural contexts (Flewitt, 2011).

Employing a multimodal orientation within the ethnographic approach enabled me to zoom in on the micro-focused interplay of modes while remaining aware of the “distal” dimension of the broader social context (Flewitt, 2011; Street et al., 2009; Dicks et al., 2011). This dual focus provided a window into children’s social worlds through outdoor play and expanded my attention from what children said to the interplay of modes they employed. For instance, one girl in this study explained that when she first met a peer in the playground, the other child tried to hug her, but she initially interpreted this gesture as aggressive. This mode of ‘hugging’ carried different cultural meanings for the two children at the beginning of their interaction, meanings that became visible through a multimodal lens. By situating this observation within the ethnographic context, I was able to explore the complex social norms and cultural beliefs that shaped their distinctive interpretations. In this way, the

multimodal perspective compensated for the time limitations of the ethnographic fieldwork and enriched the depth and breadth of data available for analysis.

3.4 Research Procedure

3.4.1 Participant recruitment

First step: approaching the school. The first step in data collection was to approach the school and recruit the potential participants. At this stage, I did not reach out to multicultural communities, as I thought I could approach the parents of the observed children through the school. First, because my research involved children and teachers, I needed ethical approval from the University and the city council. I gained the approval letter from the University of Edinburgh (Appendix A) and PVG scheme record (Appendix B). I submitted requests to conduct research in primary schools to the Glasgow City Council and the Edinburgh City Council. I followed their instructions to complete the introduction to my study and the ethics form, then emailed them along with the interview and observation schedules to the education department. After 8-10 weeks of review, the city councils approved my research request (see Appendices C and D).

While awaiting approval from the city councils, I began approaching potential schools. I first used the convenience sampling method to select schools. Initially, I was only looking for the primary schools in Edinburgh and Glasgow that identified as multicultural and provided a wide range of outdoor play provisions. However,

because the data collection period coincided with the school's busiest time, many schools rejected my research requests. Therefore, I expanded the selection scope and sent emails to the headteachers of primary schools in Glasgow and Edinburgh that had outdoor playgrounds, as listed on their school websites.

The emails were sent to the headteachers and briefly introduced the study, its value to the school, and the data collection method and duration (Appendix E). Eventually, one primary school in Edinburgh kindly agreed to participate in my study. The headmaster described the school as culturally diverse and noted that professionally-led outdoor play was provided every Thursday; children also played outdoors during their lunch breaks. After receiving a positive response from the school, I sent a follow-up email to the headteacher to confirm a meeting time to discuss the details of when and how to conduct the study. As the headteacher was usually very busy during the week, I sent a reminder email to the school two weeks later to confirm the meeting time, as I had not received a response. In the third week, the headteacher and I met to discuss the data collection process and teacher consents.

After confirming the school's willingness to participate, I used purposive sampling to select the sample class and the interview participants. I asked the headteacher for suggestions on choosing the sample class, as they were more familiar with the students and knew which class was more culturally diverse. Based on headteachers' suggestions, two classes of Primary One students were selected for the observation part of the study. I then scheduled a meeting with the teachers of both classes to obtain their consent. During the meetings, I explained the purpose of this

study and the data collection process, and both showed great interest in supporting it. The teachers' roles were primarily as informants, providing additional information on the school's background, attitudes, and arrangements for outdoor play, as well as on children's daily behaviours and family cultural contexts. Teachers were given an information sheet (Appendix F). After they read it through, I obtained the teachers' consent (Appendix G). Then, I sent the children's opt-out consent (Appendix I) for observation to the teachers and asked them to forward it, along with the information sheet (Appendix H), to the children's parents for review. Children were asked to put a sticker on an informal consent form before the observation (Appendix J) as a sign of their agreement. The ethical considerations of opt-out consent and obtaining children's consent will be discussed in Section 3.5. After two weeks, I emailed the class teacher to confirm parental consent. Three children withdrew from the study.

Second step: recruiting interview participants. After a month of observation, I intended to invite ten children from different cultural backgrounds in the two classes who showed interesting interactions on the playground to attend a follow-up interview with their parents. However, I encountered significant challenges at this stage. Although invitation letters were sent home through the children, no responses were received from parents. According to the class teachers, this lack of response may have been related to a broader disconnection between the school and parents, as well as a community culture in which families were often reluctant to engage in school-based activities. After several further attempts, even with the teacher's support, there were

still no positive responses from the parents. Eventually, I decided to extend the recruitment scope to the broader community.

To do so, I approached several acquaintances through the University's student community group, the Chinese immigrant community, and a classmate from my Master's programme, and I distributed digital flyers through these networks. With the help of one acquaintance, I posted flyers (Appendix L) in a neighbourhood with a high proportion of international families, many of whom were attending the University of Edinburgh.

There were two major recruiting standards for multicultural families: (1) one of the parents is from a non-UK background, and (2) their children are identified as influenced by two or more than two cultures and studying in Scotland. I did not impose a strict age limit for child participants, as the focus of this study is their stories of intercultural interactions in outdoor play. Initially, five mothers contacted me and agreed to participate with their children. Through purposive and snowball sampling, the number gradually increased, and in total, twelve families from diverse cultural backgrounds agreed to participate in the interviews.

Although recruiting interview participants from families outside the observed school would yield a different data set, it would also add richness to the study. These multicultural families showed great interest in understanding how outdoor play contributed to their children's social interaction and to their social adaptation to the new cultural context.

The current interview participants were appropriate because their backgrounds were compatible with the current research's requirements. Many of the children were experiencing difficulties with transitioning into a new cultural context. Although age may be an important factor influencing the experience, this study focused on children's micro-transitions in the new cultural context of outdoor play. As Angrosino (2007) and Dahal et al. (2024) argued, participant selection in an ethnographic study was not about numbers; it was about how the data participants provided could achieve theoretical saturation and address the research questions. Therefore, I did not set a precise age range or arrival time in Scotland; instead, I used the criterion of whether they are experiencing different cultural knowledge at home and at school at this stage.

In the interview group, some of the mothers had just moved to Scotland to pursue their studies, so their children moved with them and transferred to the Scottish school. For example, Zhang went to Scotland to begin her PhD, and her daughter Zoe, who did not speak English, was transferred to a Scottish primary school and encountered various difficulties with daily learning and interactions. However, she developed friendships through outdoor play. Some children have just transferred from one school to another because of their parents' work shifts or frequent home moves. Some children have lived in Scotland for a few years, yet they still experience cultural dissonance between home and school. The mothers' and children's diverse and rich stories drew my attention, and I was deeply drawn to their cultural journey and their connection to outdoor play. Therefore, although the interview group was different

from the observed group, I believed they had contributed rich, valuable data to the current study.

Three children of these multicultural families opt-out from the interview. I accepted the children's opt-out and decided to still include these mothers in the interview. This was because their children's decision not to participate in the interview was part of the data. At this stage, I wanted to see whether this might yield valuable data. This action might indicate a power dynamic between mother and child, shaped by cultural influences and mothers' attitudes and beliefs about their children's agency and autonomy, which may be reflected in mothers' narratives of their children's outdoor play experiences.

3.4.2 Researcher's positionality

Emic and Etic. The researcher's positionalities in the field and how the participants perceive these have a substantial influence on the research results. As positioning constantly shifts throughout the research process, it is vital to describe and clarify my positionality (Speldewinde, 2022). My positionality here can be introduced from two aspects: one is relatively visible characteristics, such as my ethnicity, gender, and age; the other is invisible, requiring the researcher to strategically reveal it to participants, such as my educational background and experiences (Reyes, 2018).

My ethnicity, gender, and age were visible to my participants, and because my study required me to access the school, both the students, their mothers, and teachers knew I was a PhD student. As a young Asian female student pursuing a PhD in

Scotland, these identities opened doors for me. The mothers and children were more likely to see me as non-threatening because of my student identity and female gender. More importantly, after I claimed my student identity and explained why I wanted to conduct this study, headteachers, as the gatekeepers, usually showed interest and expressed a willingness to support me. Although I still received many rejections due to the school's schedule and my outsider status, all headteachers provided valuable suggestions for gaining access to schools.

My educational background and multicultural learning experience, as invisible traits, helped me establish a sense of 'insiderness' with my participants. Although I did not come from a multicultural family, my experience studying abroad gave me opportunities to engage in intercultural interactions and learn about diverse cultures, which contributed to my understanding of cultural fluidity. Additionally, living between two cultures helped me understand the negotiations and navigations of multicultural families between different cultural beliefs and expectations. These shared understandings with some participants, especially the mothers, who had received higher education in cultures different from their home countries, helped me gain an emic perspective on some of their encounters. As Reyes (2018) suggested, strategically using shared invisible traits is key to building rapport with participants. By sharing my personal experience of living between two cultures and the reasons I chose to study outdoor play, I gradually built rapport with children and their mothers from multicultural backgrounds through interactions. This emic perspective facilitated

the development of my relationship with my participants, helping them feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me (Bergman & Lindgren, 2018).

The emic and etic positionalities are dynamic and continually shifting in context, and a researcher can incorporate both outsider and insider positions within the same cultural group (Bukamal, 2022; Hamdan, 2009). Although the participants and I may share similar experiences, this does not mean I can become an insider in their culture or make any assumptions about it. Every participant had their own cultural norms, beliefs, and values, shaped by their experience and perceived cultural traditions. Even people from my cultural background may hold different traditional beliefs. In this instance, I was assigned as an outsider automatically to observe their perspectives with an open mind.

The identity of a student researcher also made me an outsider to my participants, as I was neither a member of the school nor their family. Katyal & King (2014) asserted that gaining knowledge is not determined solely by the emic perspective and insider positionality; being an outsider is advantageous when the researcher seeks to reveal sensitive information. As an outsider to the school and family, the child participants felt more comfortable sharing their concerns with me because I was not a teacher at the school, and I promised that everything we discussed would be kept between us. This outsider position tended to make them feel free of judgment and gain a sense of security when revealing their perspectives.

However, being an outsider certainly affected my access to recruit participants in many ways. At the first stage of accessing the school gate, as I was not a teacher and

had no contact with the school, it was challenging to approach the headteachers and class teachers. Although I eventually gained access to one school, the closeness of the school environment made my outsider status stand out during data collection. For teachers in the field, many felt observed or judged, even though they were not my participants; my presence seemed to be an invisible pressure for some of them.

Because I was unfamiliar with Scottish School culture, there was an initial boundary between the school members and me. Therefore, it was not easy to have a comfortable, relaxing conversation with the teachers at the initial stage.

On the contrary, children at school accepted my presence more quickly. Instead of defining me as an insider to them, I think it would be more appropriate to say they view me as a reliable person. Not necessarily an adult from the school, as I claimed my university student's identity, and they demonstrated their willingness to be friends with me at a later stage of observation. Neither entirely a member of them, as I was observing them throughout. As I demonstrated earlier, my position shifted between outsider and insider. Nevertheless, I remained a complete outsider to these children's mothers.

Parents of schoolchildren might view me as a stranger who wanted to include their children as research participants. In one parent response email, she firmly stated that she did not want her child "to be studied". The idea of letting their child be interviewed and exposing their perspectives to a complete stranger might make them uncomfortable. Because the school lacked opportunities for me to meet parents in person, this distrust from mothers was difficult to overcome. Additionally, the parents

may have lacked understanding of, and interest in, how outdoor play could mediate their children's cultural understandings and contribute to their micro-transition, which, in turn, may have led to their perception of me as an outsider and their reluctance to participate in the following interviews.

Observer-as-participant. As the researcher was an integral part of the study, the researcher's preconceptions could affect the nature of data collection (Bukamal, 2022). My prior learning and educational experience in China led me to make a wrong presumption before entering the field to conduct observations. In my experience, children felt very uncomfortable with the teacher's presence, so their behaviours were very distinctive from their daily behaviours in the playground. Students tended to identify the researcher as an authorised adult from the 'teacher's side'. Sometimes, teachers would tell students to behave themselves when someone came to observe the class. These previous experiences in the education system in my native culture led me to assume the role of a complete observer so that children's activities would not be disturbed, and I could remain detached and critical in the field. However, after discussing with my supervisors, I realised that engaging in play activities and interacting with children and teachers as a researcher is common in Scotland.

More importantly, researchers were more likely to obtain rich data and a better understanding by adjusting the level of their involvement in observation (Speldewinde, 2022). Sometimes I was a complete observer, with little engagement in children's play when the group was focused, allowing me to take notes and capture

the conversation. However, unexpected events occurred frequently, and children were consistently separated into smaller groups on the outdoor playfield. It was challenging to keep on track and capture all the meaningful interactions. In addition, my attempt to be an outsider was countered by participants who perceived me as an insider, for instance, when children and teachers sought to interact with me during play activities. In these situations, I adopted the role of ‘observer-as-participant’, who can observe and interact with participants (Mertens, 2015). Instead of solely relying on my inferences of participants’ behaviours, this position allowed me to immerse myself in the lived situation and collect more accurate, descriptive and explanatory information (Cohen et al., 2007). I was no longer a bystander who blended into the background. I participated in informal conversations with teachers and children during breaks and took part in some of the activities in the outdoor class. I became influential, but I was still somewhat distant from children’s play. With my continued presence in school, participants’ potential reactivity gradually decreased, and I was able to establish a stronger connection with children and teachers, which helped me better understand the situation.

Negotiating power relations. At the same time, however, this role was also achieved by consistently negotiating my power and position with children and the context. Christensen (2004) suggested becoming an “unusual type of adult” who genuinely explores children’s perspectives while avoiding assuming the child’s status and pretending to be a child (p.174). The researcher needed to recognise and minimise the inherent power imbalance between the adult researcher and the child participants

(Christensen, 2004). To avoid being mistaken for a general adult role at school, such as a teacher or instructor, I introduced myself. I explained my intention in simple language the first time I met the group and emphasised that I was there to learn from them. I was cautious about my behaviour and communication style, as I did not want to be regarded as an authoritative adult. I respected their ideas and decisions, and I obtained their verbal consent at the beginning of the data collection.

The power relation between adult researchers and child participants in the research process was dynamic and fluid (Christensen, 2004; Dennis & Huf, 2020). Therefore, my roles in the field did not remain the same, and the power was consistently switched between me and the child participants. I was an ‘unusual adult’ who wished to learn from them and a ‘friend’ who played with them and listened to their stories. My young age and student identity also helped me establish contact with them. Nevertheless, I was also an ‘observer’ who paid attention to their social interactions and play behaviours. Sometimes, I was an ‘assistant’ in the outdoor play class. When I was their ‘friend’, I followed the rules they set up for play activities, and they shared some secrets with me; the power relation was relatively equal at this stage. When the teacher asked me to join the game and helped arrange the group, I assisted the children with simple questions that arose during play. I seemed to take charge of certain aspects of the activity, but the children still set the rules, so the power shifted back and forth between us.

Being self-reflexive was required during the daily data collection and analysis process to be transparent about the researcher’s position (Gallant, 2008). Reflexivity

involves recognising how a researcher's own history and experiences significantly influence every aspect of the research process, from the study design to the subsequent interpretation of the results (Bukamal, 2022). In the above discussion of my reflexivity, I acknowledged and scrutinised my prejudice and was aware of how my positionality would influence the findings. I was carefully shifting between the roles of insider and outsider, varying involvement levels, and power relations with participants. Through recurring personal introspection, I was trying to keep my voice and perpetuate the participants'. The process of reflexivity was discomfort but necessary for this study.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This research follows the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018) and has been approved by the Moray House School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh. The research ethics form was completed and submitted to the University of Edinburgh (Appendix B), and data collection began after receiving the ethical approval results. Three main principles were highlighted in the ethical guidance: consent, anonymity, confidentiality and data protection, and children's safety. The following section discusses how considerations based on these ethical principles were integrated into the current study.

3.5.1 Opt-out consents for the observed group.

The process for gaining consent from the observed children differed somewhat from that of the interview group. I initially sent the information sheet to the children's mothers. In this sheet, I briefly introduced my role as a PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh. My research focuses on exploring children's and their mothers' perspectives on intercultural experiences in outdoor play. The information sheet also included 1) the purpose of the study; 2) the timing and location of the observation and interview; 3) their rights within the research process; 4) how I will use the data; 5) what will happen with the results; and 6) my contact details. Since some of the mothers of the child participants were not native English speakers, it might take them longer to understand the information sheet and consent form. To assist them, the parent information sheet was kept clear and straightforward. The consent form was provided once the participants had understood the information sheet.

For the child participants who attended the observation, I sent opt-out consent forms to their parents. As I mentioned during data collection, the attempt to include parents of school children as participants was unsuccessful. Therefore, I did not need to obtain their own consent for participation in the research. Instead, I sought proxy consent from the parents for their children. Although I initially tried to get opt-in consent from parents, the class teachers informed me that many parents of children in their classes were reluctant to respond to the school's form. The teachers explained that it was sometimes difficult even for them to obtain signatures. I then considered using opt-out consent to send to parents (Appendix I). This approach was justified for

two reasons. First, due to practical considerations about parents' response times, opt-out consent proved more effective given the limited time I had to enter the school. Second, my observation activities aligned with the school's schedule, which took place during lunch breaks and outdoor play periods. The teachers and staff from the school were present with me throughout the fieldwork. The observation did not disrupt or affect the children's scheduled activities. Finally, I evaluated my research in accordance with the University of Edinburgh's ethical guidelines.

1. It was unlikely to cause psychological stress or discomfort.
2. Did not require any physically invasive or potentially physically harmful procedures
3. The research topic was not sensitive.
4. The process and results of the study were unlikely to trigger disclosures of harm or abuse.
5. Child participants were not identified as a particularly vulnerable group (requiring additional support, physically or mentally ill).
6. It was unlikely that the dissemination of research findings or data would adversely affect participants.

Therefore, using opt-out consents with parents was rational. I sent the consent form to the children and asked them to deliver it to their parents for review. The class teachers were kindly offered help to remind them after a day of allocating the consent.

In addition to parents' consent, I obtained children's consent before the observation began to ensure children's rights and agency in this childhood research (Harcourt et al., 2011). Child participants were given an informal child consent form (Appendix J). This was necessary since a mere absence of refusal is not enough to determine children's involvement; explicit and positive consent from them is required (Hill, 2005). It is also crucial to offer children ongoing opportunities to evaluate the expectations placed on them and decide whether to proceed or decline at any time. (Dockett and Perry, 2007b). I was cautious about children's reactions and responses throughout the research process and stopped when necessary. During the first observation, the research purpose was reintroduced to the children in plain language, and they were asked for verbal consent. For example, the researcher said, "I am here to learn how you play and talk with each other outdoors. Could I do that?" The simple verbal consent was revisited with the child participants at the start of the interview. I patiently explained to the children that they had the right to withdraw their consent at any stage and that this would not affect them. If they disagreed with attending the observation, they could still attend the outdoor play course, and their data would not be used.

3.5.2 Informed consent for the interview group.

I asked each child's mother to review the consent and information sheet with the child, and a space was provided for the mothers' and the researcher's signatures (Appendix K). To ensure children did not feel obligated to participate in the research,

I explained my intentions and my identity as a student researcher. I also asked mothers for permission to be alone with the child participants during interviews, if possible. This was stated in the interview information sheet, and the interview took place in a quiet, safe space at school. I told all participants, including children, that they had the right to decline the research and to refuse to answer any questions, and that there would be no impact on them. In the consent form, I also obtained participants' permission to use audio recordings during the interview and video recordings during the observation.

3.5.3 Anonymity, confidentiality and safeguarding

Although children and their mothers were required to read and sign the consent form before data collection began, this should be understood as provisional (Flewitt, 2005). Prior to the interview, all participants were anonymous and given pseudonyms. Specific information (e.g., school names) mentioned by participants during the interview will be replaced with a generic name (e.g., the school). Only the student researcher had access to the data, and supervisors could access it only when it was de-identified. All files were stored in the University OneDrive account and password-protected. They would be retained for five years after this study. At this time, all files will be deleted.

The researcher prioritised the safety and well-being of participants throughout the research process. There may be a chance that children or their mothers would report sensitive issues that involve the well-being of children during the interview, such as

bullying or isolation. The researcher carefully read the safeguarding policies of the sample school and local authorities for children's protection before collecting data. This can help the researcher develop a more detailed understanding of child protection in the sample school. I informed children and mothers that if I identified any examples of data that I felt warranted concern, the researcher had to report them to the teacher and the principal (in line with the primary school's safeguarding policies, the principal is the school's designated teacher responsible for child protection). The researcher was responsible for informing her supervisors about the issues and concerns, and then discussing the disclosures with them. If necessary, the researcher would discuss the matter with the designated teacher to seek help from a child protection officer or a counsellor/psychologist. For instance, I would say, 'If you tell us that something bad or dangerous happened to you, I will have to tell someone at your school to help you'.

3.5.4 *Validity and Reliability*

Validity and reliability are used to evaluate research quality; however, their interpretation differs between qualitative and quantitative research. In the positivist paradigm, validity refers to the degree to which research findings are accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). It examines whether the 'fact' has been precisely identified and explained (Miller, 2008b). However, in qualitative research within an interpretivist paradigm, there is no objective truth because the researcher's subjective understanding is integrated into the study. It is impossible to apply the same validity principles in quantitative research to the current study. Alternatively, qualitative

researchers suggested focusing on the transparency of the research process (Miller, 2008b), the researcher's intense engagement (Cohen et al., 2018), the in-depth data from participants and 'respondent validation' (Maxwell, 2005). The subsequent paragraphs outline how validity was addressed in this study.

To ensure the research procedure is "coherent and transparent", this study aimed to describe every stage of the research process in detail (Miller, 2008b, p. 911). I reported the process, analysis, findings, and conclusions to my supervisors as a form of peer debriefing. Based on their feedback, I was able to critically examine whether the procedure and content were clearly presented. Yin (2003) advised maintaining a well-documented procedure at each stage of the research process. The data was transcribed at the day of data collection and safely stored in a password protected file. All data was digitally recorded and carefully transcribed to enhance consistency (Silverman, 2013).

The qualitative researcher's interpretation should be grounded in rich data and sustained long-term involvement in the field (Maxwell, 2013; Merten, 2010). I conducted pilot studies prior to the official observation to assess their practicality before full implementation in the field. Visiting the school at least twice per week and observing participants for nearly four months allowed the researcher to gain rich data on children's behaviours and interactions. Through intense involvement, a strong connection between me and the participants gradually developed. I was able to develop a narrative of their natural social interactions during outdoor play by building rapport with the participants.

To gain richer information and a deeper understanding of how outdoor play facilitates the cultural formation of children from multicultural backgrounds, this study adopted a multimodal perspective, which allowed me to more deeply examine and precisely capture the data generated in the field and interviews. As I attempted to interpret children's cultural formation in outdoor play from societal, institutional, and individual aspects, this study recruited mothers, teachers, and children to provide narratives and interpretations. Observations, interviews, drawings, and field notes were used, which helped the researcher gather rich, in-depth data. Member checking was used during the interview process to maximise the validity of participants' responses. After participants responded to my questions, I usually quickly summarised the key points and asked for confirmation that I understood correctly. If I misunderstood, I would kindly ask them to provide further explanations.

Reliability in quantitative research refers to the consistency of findings across different researchers using the same study and procedures (Miller, 2008a). In contrast, qualitative research seeks the phenomena in natural settings without intended control or manipulation. Therefore, reliability is not suitable for the current study as dependability to "attest to the quality and appropriateness of the inquiry process" (Mertens, 2015, p.259). The reliability or dependability of qualitative research depends on the researcher's reflexivity, as the researcher is the primary instrument through which individuals are incorporated into the research process to produce meaningful knowledge (Miller, 2008a).

Reflexivity means that the researcher needs to identify their position and situatedness within the research and acknowledge its effect on the entire research process (Berger, 2015). I had clarified the biases I might bring to the study, such as my cultural background, gender, and learning experience, in the previous discussion. I recorded my reflections, negotiations and biases in the field note. By acknowledging the researcher's role as an integral player, this study provides transparency, thereby ensuring credibility and trustworthiness.

3.6 Data-collection Methods

The data collection was divided into two phases. The first phase involved observation at school, capturing children's dynamic interactions on the school's playground during free play and the more structured outdoor activities, along with teachers' perspectives on children's outdoor play. The second phase gathered insights from multicultural families in the wider community. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers and children, and a drawing activity was carried out before the children's interviews.

3.6.1 Participant Attrition

During the observation phase, three children withdrew from the research after the first week. Their parents communicated this decision to the class teacher, who subsequently notified the researcher. All interactions, video recordings, and

photographs involving these children were excluded from the research analysis to respect their withdrawal. In the interview phase, two mothers informed the researcher that their children were not interested in participating. Additionally, one mother explained that her child was born in Scotland and identified as Scottish; after discussion with this mother about the study's focus on children experiencing cultural transition, the researcher agreed that her child did not meet the study's participant criteria. In total, three children opted out of the interview phase. The final number of participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Number of Participants in Each Data Collection Phase

Phase/Stage of Data Collection	Data Collection Method(s)	Target Sample Size	Actual Number of Participants	Withdrawn/opt-out participants
Phase 1: Dynamic interaction in outdoor play	Observation for children	Two classes of children	43	3
Phase 2: Background information	Interview with class teachers	2	2	N/A
Phase 3: Interview with parents	Semi-structured Interviews	12	12	0
Phase 4: Interview with children	Semi-structured Interviews	12	9	3

3.6.2 Observation

This study aims to investigate children's cultural formation in their child-initiated and adult-led outdoor play activities. Observation, as the first step in collecting data for the current study, can provide a descriptive analysis of the contexts and phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The primary purpose of observing children in two outdoor

play settings was to investigate and compare how children interact with the environment and peers. Two classes from Primary One at a primary school in Edinburgh, comprising 43 children in total, attended the observation, with three children withdrawing from the study. The outdoor practitioner and PSAs of the observed children were included. The class teachers of the two observed classes did not attend the observation, but their perspectives were explored in a follow-up interview afterwards. The observation lasted nearly four months, from Late January to early May.

I examined two aspects: first, the group setting, and second, the interaction content. Observing how the group was organised and separated into smaller groups was done to explore how cultural background might influence children's play. For example, if the group tended to separate by children's cultural backgrounds and if any cultural segregation occurred during the play. The second was to observe how children interact and negotiate in the two settings, and how they utilise the space to play. The content was not necessarily limited to a long conversation; it can be something small but meaningful. By observing interactions and behaviours in structured and unstructured outdoor environments, I gained insights into how children respond in different settings.

After considering different observation methods, I decided to use semi-structured observation in the study. Because the observation was conducted in a school with children and teachers, a basic structure was required so the teacher would know how to fit the researcher into their schedule. The structure of this observation did not refer

to a predetermined list of behaviours for my participants; it was a flexible checklist for myself (Appendix M). It included the date and time of the observation, what I should prepare for and pay attention to before, during, and after the observation, as well as an initial brief idea of what I wanted to observe based on my theoretical framework. This method still situated the research within the naturalistic paradigm but also reminded the researcher of the essential content that required particular attention in the observation process.

Semi-structured observation was considered the most suitable approach for investigating children's outdoor play at school in this study. An unstructured observation is typically used to interpret individuals' cultural behaviours and is underpinned by an interpretive paradigm that acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants (Mulhall, 2003). Structured observation is common in positivist studies. The researcher attempts to avoid bias and follows a predetermined field schedule (Mulhall, 1998). This interpretivist qualitative study explores children's intercultural interaction in both structured and unstructured outdoor settings. As demonstrated in the previous discussion, the researcher's preconception is involved in this study and intertwined with the participants' knowledge. Furthermore, the flexible nature of unstructured observation also enabled me to act in diverse roles, from 'complete observer' to 'observer as participant' rather than a bystander in structured observation. It seemed like the unstructured observation would be suitable for this study.

It was conducted before the interview to capture a general picture of the social setting, and the interview was used to add further details to the context. Mulhall (2003) employed an analogy to describe the relationship between observation and interview in one qualitative research: observation provided the researcher with “the picture on the jigsaw box”, and the interview selected and found the pieces that fit into the jigsaw. Therefore, the dynamic process of cultural formation in children’s outdoor playfields was first documented through observation, and interviews were conducted to elicit in-depth perspectives from children, mothers, and teachers.

During the observation, I wrote field notes to describe the physical setting, the dialogues and actions of children and adults in the field (Emerson, 2011). There was not enough time to write notes during certain occasions, such as when the child moved from one spot to another, so I combined audio recordings of my description and some of the children’s interactions with snapshots and field notes. The audio recordings were transcribed on the same day as the observation, which was beneficial to the researcher in organising the text notes alongside the transcribed data and ensuring that no details were missed. The field note also included a reflective diary, which recorded my thoughts in the field and reflections on how my personal experiences might influence the observation results. It was a self-reflexivity process to review my assumptions and mitigate biases (Fusch et al., 2017).

The observation was conducted at two sites in the school. For child-initiated play, it took place on the playground during the child participants’ lunch break, as this was usually when students took a break and played freely with their peers. For adult-led

play, the observation took place at the site of the class's outdoor play provision. The map of the observed field has been provided in the findings chapter of the observational data (Figure 4). To avoid interrupting children's daily routine, the observation followed the school's lunch break timetable; each observation lasted about 45 minutes, was conducted twice per week, and continued for three months.

3.6.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews enable researchers to explore the issue in depth, examine how participants interpret the world and their lived experiences, and gain insight into the underlying factors influencing their perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018). This study employed face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews to investigate children's and mothers' perspectives on outdoor play in a multicultural context.

Semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews both offer an open nature to conversations. Semi-structured interviews have a flexible framework that allows the researcher to adapt questions to the flow of the conversation (Dearnley, 2005). This is particularly important when conducting interviews with mothers and children with diverse levels of English skills. I could adjust the questions that participants found difficult to understand to a more accessible version. Instead of simply repeating the questions, rephrasing specific sentences with basic grammatical structures, or replacing certain words with simpler alternatives, participants were more likely to engage fully with the conversation.

This open-ended nature of the questions also encouraged participants to feel more relaxed when sharing their stories, potentially promoting the emergence of new concepts. When new themes emerged, I could “re-enter the field at different intervals to develop existing categories and identify concepts that were just beginning to emerge” (Dearnley, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, the interviews with class teachers were also semi-structured. Teachers played an informative role in this study and provided background information, such as children’s behaviour during play in everyday classes, based on their teaching experiences and the school’s attitude towards outdoor play. This flexibility provided me with greater opportunities to refer to children’s behaviours in the outdoor playground and to gain better explanations and links to their indoor behaviours.

Unstructured interviews offer greater flexibility than semi-structured interviews, as questions are raised from the immediate context rather than predetermined topics (Cohen, 2018). This study used unstructured interviews with adults in the field, including the outdoor practitioners and pupil support staff. This allowed me to have open, informal conversations with them during the day when questions arose. However, there was a possibility of losing the knowledge that the study aimed to discover in the conversation due to the unstructured interview’s less systematic nature, which would cause difficulties in data organisation and analysis. Especially for participants who were not very familiar with English, this could lead to confusion about the direction of the interview. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were

conducted with mothers and children with a more systematic structure and flexible inquiry.

3.6.4 Interviews with multicultural families

The interviews with multicultural families were separated from the observed group, as explained in Section 3.4.1. To conduct semi-structured interviews with each family, I asked the mothers to attend first so I could gather background information about the children before the children's interviews. Although I preferred to conduct the interview face-to-face, I also acknowledged that some mothers might be too busy to meet in person. Therefore, seven of the twelve mothers chose to be interviewed online via Teams during their work break. Their interviews were recorded through Teams. The other five mothers were interviewed in person at a place that was convenient and comfortable for them. The time for each interview ranged from an hour to an hour and a half, depending on the length of the stories, both within and beyond the questions. A sample of the interview questions for the mothers can be found in Appendix L.

Children's interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face to build rapport before engaging in substantive conversation and to better interpret their facial expressions and body language. However, two mothers requested modifications to this format. One mother explained that her child was extremely shy and could not speak comfortably with someone unfamiliar, so the mother needed to sit beside her daughter to help convey her words. The other mother indicated that her son had

become accustomed to online interactions during the pandemic and would prefer an online interview. Additionally, she emphasised that their busy schedule necessitated an online format.

Although I attempted to arrange face-to-face interviews at times suitable for all families, I accommodated these requests when mothers insisted. Ultimately, seven out of the nine children were interviewed in person. To address safety concerns and ensure children felt safe and secure, the interview location was clearly visible to mothers while maintaining the privacy of our conversations. Children were interviewed in familiar settings, such as their community garden or homes. Two families who lived a considerable distance from the university arranged to meet me at a café they and their children frequently visited, creating a comfortable, familiar environment. Two children participated in online interviews via Microsoft Teams, which were recorded using both video and audio. These in-person interviews were recorded using voice recording only, as the children indicated they felt too nervous to be filmed. I remained conscious of capturing contextual details and took field notes throughout these interviews to document children's body language and environmental settings. While online interviews posed some limitations for rapport-building, this format still allowed these children to participate comfortably in their home environments with their mothers present. Each interview session was about an hour and contained the drawing activity

To create a comfortable interview environment, I began each interview by welcoming the children in a positive, warm manner and expressing my appreciation

for their help (Morrison, 2013). Einarsdottir (2007) reminded that sometimes children may be unwilling to reveal their honest opinions or wish to please the adult researcher by generating 'right' answers. To reduce the occurrence of such situations, I informed the child participants that I did not belong to the school or their community before the interview. I was just a student who lacked the knowledge that they had and wanted to learn from them (Solberg, 2014). Most of them laughed and found it interesting that I was much older than they were, but still a student, and they were visibly more relaxed after learning my identity as an 'older student'. I also promised them that no one could access the content of our interview, and that the original recordings would be destroyed once the research was completed. I ensured children that their personal information would not be identifiable; they had the right not to answer my question, and there were no right or wrong answers.

During the interview, the interviewer should carefully examine the questions and check the children's reactions to determine how to proceed. Clark (2010) suggested avoiding questions that begin with "why" when interviewing children, as this can confuse and often result in their refusal to answer. It was also helpful for the interviewer to show they were listening carefully and to give prompts to keep the conversation going. As Solberg (2014) indicated, when the interviewer showed interest in children's answers and used body language to indicate understanding, children were more likely to respond to the questions. When children acted quietly or gave only short answers, I first examined whether it was due to tiredness or boredom. If this were the case, a time clarification would be made during the interview. For

example, I reminded one boy who said the interview was too long that “this is the last question” or “there are only two questions left”. The basic interview questions for children are shown in Appendix N.

3.6.5 Children’s drawings before the interview

Before the interview with children, a drawing session that lasted for about thirty minutes was arranged for them. Many researchers seek new methods that depart from the traditional question-and-answer format to contextualise the interview, and drawing has been widely supported as a child-friendly way to complement the interview (Einarsdottir, 2007; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Flear & Li, 2019). Children in middle childhood were familiar with drawing activities and were comfortable being told to draw around a certain subject. Questions were presented as a dialogue process between participants and me based on the picture (Flear & Li, 2019). Drawing assisted children in articulating ideas they were unable to verbalise due to a lack of language proficiency or deeper feelings they had not identified. By combining interviews with children’s drawings, I gained a deeper understanding of children’s perspectives and outdoor play experiences through the multimodality lens.

3.7 Data analysis

The process of my data analysis was broadly thematic. There were three stages for analysing my diverse and rich sources of data. The first step was to examine my observation data at the school’s playground with the teacher, class students and

practitioners. My field notes, including snapshots and audio recordings, were transcribed and stored in NVivo. The pictures were stored with the related transcribed stories in Word and saved in a password-secured file. I employed descriptive coding at the initial stage of data review, as it provided a general picture of my ethnographic inquiry (Saldana, 2021). However, the rest of the analysis relied on extensive reading and the organisation of different forms of data. Then I purposefully selected stories that reflected and responded to the research questions. The stories in the observational findings were represented by children's descriptions of their activities or their own words in the field.

The data analysis of the interview was divided into two stages in my effort to find the most suitable way to represent my data comprehensively and clearly. Initially, I attempted to code the mothers' and children's interviews and organise the data by themes. However, I soon discovered that thematic analysis would result in the loss of a significant amount of valuable data, for two key reasons. First, the interview narratives from mothers and children differed considerably in structure and form. The interview questions directed at mothers mainly explored their views on children's outdoor play and how their traditional cultural beliefs, integrated into current cultural norms, influence their children's outdoor activities. Their accounts were relatively complete, conceptual, and reflective. Children's accounts, by contrast, were more fragmented and intertwined with rich body language and spontaneous reactions. Applying thematic analysis to both sets of data would have flattened these

differences, losing the interesting interactions among mothers, children, environmental settings and the researcher.

Second, although mothers expressed their perspectives well within their own accounts, children usually sat with their mothers and contributed additional reactions during their mothers' interviews. These small interactions and chemistry between mothers and children in the interview were significant in themselves, as they revealed unspoken gaps and dynamics that neither party articulated explicitly. Thematic analysis, which focuses on categorising content across accounts, was not suitable for capturing the relational and interactional dimensions of the data. Therefore, I decided to adopt narrative analysis as the framework for analysing the interviews with both mothers and children.

To help picture the mothers' lives as they navigate two cultures, and to understand the influence of these cultures on their educational and cultural beliefs and expectations, the narratives were organised into sections following the structure of the interview questions and the mothers' responses. I began by reading through the transcripts in full, developing a sense of the mothers' diverse experiences and perspectives as a whole, transcribing and cleaning the data. I then re-read their accounts across the same questions, identifying common elements in the trajectories of different mothers' cultural experiences. Through this process, collective stories emerged that represent these shared experiences, and the structural features underpinning each individual's account were elucidated (Eillot, 2005).

For example, under the question of mothers' attitudes towards the relationship between outdoor play and learning, the mothers' responses were organised into two categories: encouragement and constraint. The narratives were then connected to their past childhood experiences of outdoor play and learning, and their current attitudes were situated within both their native and current sociocultural backgrounds. In doing so, readers can smoothly follow the storyline to discover that, although the mothers' attitudes may appear similar on the surface, the journeys that led them to these attitudes were varied. It is important to note, therefore, that this analysis was not attempting to present a generalised image of a group. Rather, the focus was on tracing the distinct pathways through which each mother arrived at her current position, that is, on the process of travelling, rather than on the destination itself.

Instead of simply reporting what the participant said and what this might mean, this narrative writing was an ongoing interpretive process (Ezzy, 2002). I revisited this part multiple times and sought to represent the mothers' voices and stories coherently while preserving their uniqueness, with attention to the individuals' contexts (Riessman, 2008). I had to abandon some stories to centralise the narratives around the research questions (Stake, 2005).

Compared with the interview with mothers, the children's interviews were still semi-structured but allowed more flexibility. This was because I found that children were easily bored or interrupted if I followed only the question sequence. Some of them preferred to lead the interview by themselves and shared the stories that suddenly came to mind with me. When I reviewed and analysed their narratives, the

nature of 'interacting' became more evident, and I also had an active voice in this process (Riessman, 2008). In this case, I believed that coding would not be appropriate for presenting their voices and stories, and it would risk losing significant details of our interaction. I engaged with the narrative transcripts, which included my field notes on the observation and reflection on children's body language, positions, movements, and environmental settings. My analytical writing followed the flow of our conversations, examined the content and context and presented detailed pictures of each child's story.

To analyse the images and drawings, I employed a multimodal perspective and visual analysis methods. Gillian Rose (2001) suggested examining the image from three aspects: the context, the image itself, and the interpretation by the audience. The context of the drawing was explored through interviews with children and their mothers, focusing on their background stories related to outdoor play and their process of identity construction. The image itself involved considerations of colour usage and the components within the picture. A multimodal perspective required paying attention to the modes in the drawings, such as the positioning, spatial arrangement of elements, artefacts, and the expressions of the people depicted (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). For example, analysing the spatial arrangement of elements in the drawing revealed which aspects the child was most interested in during outdoor play. For instance, in Devin's drawing (Figure 11), the football occupied the centre and largest area of the page, suggesting that football was his favourite and most

frequently engaged activity. He quickly associated his outdoor play memories with playing football.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided an explicit description of the theoretical underpinning, research design and research methods for the current study. My positionality throughout the research process was discussed. The data collection process was divided into two main phases, which were observation at school and interviews with multicultural families from broader communities. The reasons, rationality and procedure had been explained. Finally, I discussed the ethical considerations when conducting research with children, as well as the validity and reliability of the current study.

Chapter Four. Observation at School Settings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I analysed children's dynamic interactions during their outdoor playtime at a primary school in Edinburgh. The primary focus of these observations is to explore how children construct their own play artefacts in outdoor settings and how outdoor play facilitates dialogical processes among children from diverse cultures, supporting their transitions into the new school environment. The observations were conducted during lunch break sessions and outdoor play provisions from late January to 2nd May. Play during the lunch break was characterised as free play, as it involved minimal adult intervention or direction, allowing children to initiate and shape their own play experiences. In contrast, the outdoor play provision was identified as structured, with a more defined environment and adults providing scaffolding to support children's engagement and exploration.

4.2 The Initial Visit:

4.2.1 A map of the children's outdoor play environment at school

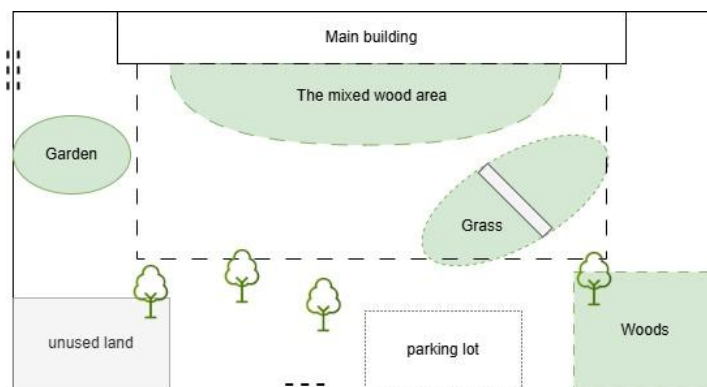
Before officially conducting the observation, I had multiple informal conversations with the PSAs, the outdoor play provision instructor, and the class teacher to gain an understanding of the outdoor play structure and the associated arrangements and staff responsibilities. The lunch break playtime was when the observation activity took place. During this time, the teaching fellows took a break in

the staff room and had “a cup of tea”, away from their supervision duties. The Pupil Support Assistants (PSA) alternated in caring for the children, providing support and supervising their safety. They wore uniforms in vibrant colours to ensure that students could easily locate them when needed. Children of different ages were allocated to play in different playground areas. Children in the lower grades were not allowed to play near the gate, and the teacher used the tree as a boundary marker for the children to remember (Figure 4). The play area for higher-grade children was in the woods and on the concrete land. It seemed like there were no strict boundaries for them, and they often ran over the designated areas and occasionally played with children from lower grades.

The staff informed me that they facilitated an outdoor play provision every Thursday afternoon in the woods until April, delineated by a green-dotted boundary in Figure 4. It operated every Tuesday afternoon and lasted for 45 minutes. The outdoor play provision was designed for P1 children who experienced difficulties during the transition phase or struggled in the classroom. The instructor displayed a few artefacts in the woods to support their free play. The primary job of the instructor and PSAs was to assist and, occasionally, to navigate the group’s negotiations, but they did not interrupt or actively initiate the children’s play.

Figure 4

The landscape of the observed school’s playground



I arrived ten minutes before the lunch break, just as planned. It was incredibly windy outside, but the gusts had at least swept the clouds away, letting the sun peek through. I wandered around the playground to get a general sense of the landscape and the potential to support children’s movement. It took me about ten minutes to walk around the entire playground, including the nature space. It featured a large concrete area stretching from the gates to the entrance, a small patch of grass in the middle, and a grove in the southeastern corner. There was also a section of shrubs and a few trees in front of the main buildings, which teachers and students called the courtyard. I marked it as the ‘mixed wood’ area based on its natural features. These short trees naturally formed a relatively secluded space from the concrete ground. It resembled a secret play area where the pupil support assistants (PSAs) could not easily spot the children’s activities, as PSAs tended to stand between the grassland and the mixed woods to ensure all children’s safety. Near the west gate, the school was establishing their outdoor garden.

4.2.2 First impression of the dynamics of the class children

Racial awareness of children. This was my first official, long observation with the two classes, so I decided to follow the PSA and collect the children from their classrooms. They became excited as soon as they saw me, a new face, leading them to the playground. The enthusiasm persisted once they were free outdoors, with many of them clustering around me and firing off all sorts of questions: “Where are you from?” “Where’s your home country?” “Why are you here?” “Do you have a panda at your home?” It was clear that I was not just a new face; I was also different in these children’s eyes. I am a young Asian woman who is new to this school and comes from a cultural background unfamiliar to them, which attracted their interest.

Their questions made me realise that they were aware of and capable of identifying various ethnicities. They were curious about and interested in cultures beyond their own, as their questions primarily focused on my cultural background and life in my home country. Simultaneously, the children seemed to hold a preconceived notion of adults on the playground, viewing them as individuals responsible for resolving problems and providing answers. Maybe for this reason, I frequently received inquiries and requests for assistance from the children. This served as a reminder for me to continue demonstrating my identity as a student observer to the children on the playground.

A moment of conflict in a children’s group. The group began to disperse. While I hoped to capture everything happening on the playground, it was not easy to achieve that as I was the only observer here. I decided to go to the mixed-woods area, which was chosen by most of the children in the group. The ground was still wet from last

night's rain, and some areas were very muddy. But this did not stop them from running, chasing, or climbing. Some children used wooden sticks as swords to fight each other, while others tried to find snails in the trees.

There were about six boys and girls playing a 'tag' game; I spotted the awkwardness of a boy in the group. It seemed he was just following the others, not really included. One girl in the team also noticed this and says, "*Hey, we have enough people here, maybe next round!*" The boy looked frustrated, walked towards me, and complained that his friends did not want him to be involved. I tried to comfort him, but my response did not appear to help him, as he moved closer to me and mumbles, "*I ask them, like, can I play with you, they said, yes! But then, I am not playing! ... I want to go back, but we can't go inside (to the classroom)*". He became more upset with tears in his eyes. I led him to the PSA, who was standing outside the woods and busy resolving other children's complaints, as I was unsure if I was in the right position to resolve their argument.

A girl who stayed alone. After I explained what had happened to the PSA and prepared to enter the woods again, a girl ran up to me. She was alone, which was unusual in such a large, open playground. Usually, each child would have at least one friend by their side. I do not suggest that this is a rule, but it appears to be an unwritten custom at this school. If a child is alone, other children, including children from higher grades, would come over to check if they are alright. Occasionally, a child might take a moment to themselves, but they rarely stay alone for long before rejoining the group.

“How long before the bell rings?” she asked

“Umm, let me check...about ten minutes.”

“What? Still ten minutes?! Ugh, I want to go home.” She looked at the ground and seemed very disappointed with the long break session.

“You don’t like playing outdoors?”

“No! I want to go home.”

Then she ran away from me to the other PSAs on the playground. It seemed like she trusted more adults than her peers, and she felt more comfortable and safer around the teachers. It might be too early to draw some conclusions here, as this is only the first day, but I could see that the girl is not very comfortable with the various ongoing play activities in this large playground.

The short prelude to my first day with children during their free play time provided an initial insight into how they perceived outdoor play within a multi-faceted space and offered a glimpse into the child-nature dynamics in outdoor free play. It became evident that while interactions in outdoor unstructured play unfolded positively for some children, they were perceived as challenges for others. Because children’s sociocultural encounters outside of school were diverse, their knowledge about how to cope with unstructured, child-initiated play and simultaneous communication was at different levels. The apprehension some children felt toward outdoor play may have stemmed from a fear of natural spaces, or “biophobia” (Ulrich,

1993), or from protective parental attitudes and beliefs (Little et al., 2011). Although playing with friends was a regular motivation for children to play outdoors, it can become an impediment if they have not been adequately introduced to this social culture at home. A key consideration that emerged from this early observation was how consistent outdoor play could gradually help shift some children's negative perceptions and discomfort in natural settings. This question remained open at that stage, but highlighted the need for further exploration in my observations.

In addition, the integrated playground for these P1 children afforded different types of free play. For instance, symbolic play was evident in children's wood-sword fights, exploratory play in their search for snails after rainy days, and rough play. According to Bakhtin (1991), meaning was regarded as an "emergent phenomenon" that was stimulated by the present social and historical context as it was perceived and enacted by individuals. My observations focused on the immediate environment, behaviours, and interactions that occurred naturally or were triggered by particular social events. It was important to examine how these different forms of play unfolded in outdoor settings and how outdoor play encouraged children to co-create meaning through dialogical engagement.

4.3 In the Mixed Wood Area

The scenario of children creating their own play artefacts emerged on the first day of observation and happened every time I observed the group's free play. The playground was expansive for children to run around. It included a diversity of natural

resources, and there were no particular human-constructed toys or facilities. To manage and engage in different types of play, children communicated within their playgroup and created artefacts using materials provided by the outdoor environment.

4.3.1 “Campfire”: Self-directed exploration

Vignette 1. “Campfire” (playground story in the mixed wood area, Feb 2024)

In early February, there were not many exciting natural elements to play with from my boring adult’s perspective. The trees were “bald”, as one boy in the group described. There were only dry leaves and fallen branches on the ground. I saw many children busy doing something on the muddy ground, so I walked into the mixed woods area to find out what was happening. Five girls were squatting in a circle, and one of the girls looked serious and focused. She took the lead and instructed the others, “Right, it needs to be deeper.” Her tone was authoritative, suggesting she had assumed a leadership role within the group.

Gradually, some of the girls began to look bored with the digging process, and a few started using sticks to draw animal faces on the ground beside the hole. One of them looked unhappy with this continuous work and challenged the leading girl, saying,

“I am bored! Can we stop now?”

“No! Because it is not deep enough!” the leading girl responds determinately.

“It is fine! See!” Then she throws her stick into the hole they dug, showing that it is big enough to put something in it.

“But I want a big fire, just a bit more, ” the leading girl explains.

“Okay, fine.” The other girl seems to accept her opinion and shrugs her shoulders.

“We’d better hurry up! The bell time is closed!” another girl reminds them about the time limitations.

“Let’s keep doing it for another 2 minutes.”

After a few minutes, the group collectively decided that the hole was deep enough. Then, the girls left the hole and began gathering leaves and small stones from the surrounding area.

I heard them discussing their selections carefully:

“We need small rocks... No, not that one! It’s too big!”

“And leaves!”

“More leaves here, the dry ones.”

“Chuck them in the pot! We need loads more to start the fire!”

They threw all the leaves, rocks, and some short-fallen twigs into the hole they dug, and then celebrated this achievement with a small cheer. Despite their loud argument, the PSA did not intervene. They stood far away and glanced occasionally to check if they were okay.

In this brief episode of children’s constructive play in the mixed woods, the group of children actively interacted with the artefacts provided by nature and shared a similar motivation to play the campfire game. They collaboratively dug a hole in the soil, gathering a variety of natural materials of different sizes and types to construct a

‘campfire’. Rocks, twigs, and soil were from nature and were not used as play artefacts before the child gave them meaning through dialogues in their constructive play. By discussing among themselves, the group selected the size of the stone and the number of leaves as the materials for the “campfire”. Children acted as active agents in creating their play artefacts and forming the campfire play.

In their dialogue, they created the campfire together and negotiated how to construct it effectively, while the natural environment also inspired their creativity and interpretation. They exchanged their knowledge about “a good campfire” through their interactions. The group seemed to share a common motivation for the opportunity of autonomy and self-directed exploration, as one child expressed excitement at being out of the teacher’s supervision. Outdoor play enabled them to create their own game and negotiate the rules according to the group’s dynamic without adult intervention. They acted as active agents in this dialogical process, exchanging opinions on effective ways to build the campfire and resourcefully utilise the natural elements available on the playground.

4.3.2 Drum play: the transformation of outdoor play’s affordance

Sometimes, unused playground facilities, which adults may perceive as waste, were also used by children as their play artefacts. Furthermore, the perceived affordance of the same thing might be different based on the child’s life experience and home culture. In the following vignette, Raziya was described by the class teacher as “outdoorsy” and did not present many issues during the transition to school life.

Sally was Raziya's friend and always played with Raziya in the classroom, and she also had a smooth transition.

Vignette 2. "Drum play" (playground story in the mixed wood area, Feb 2024)

In the final week of February, a week after the first visit, I arrived at the playground during the school's lunch break to observe the group's free play. The ground was muddy and soggy from the rain the day before. I walked into the mixed wood area and found Raziya and Sally gathering sticks from the wet ground. Raziya was in a leading position, while Sally was curious about what she intended to do and wanted to catch up with her.

"What are we doing?"

"Finding our drumstick!"

"What do you mean?"

"Playing the drum! We hit the bin, bang! Bang! So we need some sticks."

"Ooomph!" She imitates the sound of a drum and seems to understand the playing content

"This one is far too long, it'll snap!"

"How about this one?"

"Nope"

"Hey! I've just found a cracking one. Look how sturdy it is!"

I wandered over and asked, "What are you two looking for?" "Drumsticks!" Raziya turned to me and responded excitedly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Sally

followed and nodded. “Where is the drum?” I asked. Then they pointed towards a black plastic bin in the corner. The bin had no bottom and was light enough for the children to push or drag wherever they wanted. Raziya handed me a stick she had just found and showed Sally and me how to play the ‘drum’.

“See? You think about a song, and just hit it like this, then you find the beat,” she explained, tapping out a rhythm on the side of the bin with her stick. “Did you play the drums before? You did a great job here!” I said. “Not really, I just like playing it, I like music”

At first, Sally merely jumped around the bin and did not actually hit it. She was observing Sally’s behaviour and then joined in. “You have made your own song!” I encouraged them. They became even happier and started singing a song I did not recognise.

Figure 4.1

The “drum”



The symbolic play here constituted a space that mediated children's interpersonal exchanges and cultivated their understanding of others' mind states (Creaghe & Kidd, 2022). Raziya and Sally entered the playground with different social experiences and motivations, which were reflected in how their roles were represented during the drum-play session. Initially, Sally was unfamiliar with drum play, so she acted as a spectator and engaged in cultural learning by imitating Raziya's behaviour in playing the 'drum'. Her motivation for outdoor play may be closely linked to her playmates. Raziya, on the other hand, arrived at the playground with a developed idea of how to symbolise natural elements. She was motivated by the potential to create play in the natural environment, placing her in a more leading position at the outset.

However, they soon developed a shared symbolic understanding by negotiating and communicating the meanings of symbols, a wooden stick and a bin in this case. Although the bin was an abandoned item and no longer functional, Raziya and Sally utilised its hollow characteristic to produce a drum sound and employed the short-fallen branches as drumsticks. They gave these materials meaning and transformed them into their play artefacts. Notably, their positions were different yet equal throughout the child-directed interaction in this dialogical process. Although one initially assumed a leading role while the other followed, they gradually shifted towards being equal co-creators during the collecting process and the song-playing session.

It also demonstrated that children's actualised affordances are closely connected

to their social experiences and beliefs but can be developed or reshaped by their attitudes towards their environment. Children's affordance of outdoor space is a "temporally and spatially continuous process" through engaging activities in the environment (Kyttä, 2003, p.44). For example, although Raziya lacked direct experience with playing a real drum, her interest in listening to music was reflected in her play, where musical elements appeared. Her interaction with the environment stemmed from her socio-cultural understanding, shaped by her home and daily life experiences. In contrast, Sally, who may not share the same focus on music, did not recognise the potential of the bin and branches as tools for a drum-playing game. Although the outdoor play space was physically identical for both Sally and Raziya, their perceptions and use of the space's affordances initially differed. At first, Sally might have seen fewer possibilities in the space for this creative activity than Raziya. However, her friend's actions served as an inspiration, encouraging her to engage in symbolic play, which eventually led to the creation of a new 'drum song'. It is reasonable to suggest that her ability to perceive the affordances of the outdoor space expanded as she began to reinterpret the natural elements as play objects in the same space.

4.3.3 A creative box: spontaneous learning from nature in outdoor play

One of the fascinating aspects of the natural world is its abundance of resources, driven by its ever-changing nature: leaves on trees fall and grow back, grass turns yellow and then green again, and flowers quietly bloom overnight. As spring arrived,

the trees in the playground sprouted fresh green leaves, and flowers outside the gate were sometimes blown to the ground and collected by the child. Children had more options in creating their play artefacts, and the stimulated dialogues around the exploration process may help them acquire knowledge that had not yet been taught in the classroom.

Vignette 3. “Creative box” (playground story in the mixed wood area, Apr 2024)

Yakta showed great interest in playing or talking with me whenever he was either intentionally or unintentionally excluded from the group. He also seemed to enjoy talking to himself to navigate his emotions, as I heard once that he attempted to figure out the reason why his best friend did not want to involve him in the game. I believe this was because I always listened to his stories, which gave him a sense of security during our interactions. His teacher described him as quiet and focused on his own work when indoors.

Zahavi was a very outgoing boy who loved to talk and play with his peers, but he also enjoyed exploring the natural world on his own. He enjoyed sharing his discoveries from nature with me, such as snails and flowers. In the brief vignette, both of them were engaged in creative play.

It was springtime. April in Scotland was always beautiful. The trees turned green, and tiny wildflowers began to pop up. I arrived at the playground slightly late today, and the group was already outside. Just as I walked in, Yakta and Zahavi ran over to me with their snack boxes. Zahavi approached with noticeable excitement and presented a “water box” he had just made. The box was a small plastic snack container with a lid, filled with water, bird

feathers, and leaves he had collected from all over the playground. He looked at me eagerly to show me the 'magic' he could perform. "Look! Bubbles!" he exclaimed, shaking the box as some bubbles formed inside it.

I was surprised by his creativity and asked if I could take a photo. Zahavi's excitement increases as he declares, "I'm going to put some flowers in it! But I can't find any... wait, I can get more leaves, but in different colours!" He then quickly ran to the mixed wood area to seek more materials, an area he was not permitted to enter. I did not intend to stop him, as I wanted to see how far he could go and if the PSA would intervene.

At the same time, Yakta stood beside Zahavi like an observer. He held up a paper snack box and asked me, "Can I make a water box like his?" Before I could respond, Zahavi quickly intervened, pointing out, "No, your box is paper! It'll leak!" Yakta, however, was not happy with this answer, replying, "I want to make one too! My box has a lid as well!" To encourage Yakta's initiative, I suggested he try it out for himself to see what would happen. Both children ran to a nearby shallow puddle, where they scooped water into Yakta's paper box. Zahavi shared leaves with Yakta and put them into Yakta's box; they were fully immersed in the play, excitedly jumping around Yakta and chanting, "Shake it! Shake it!" Yakta then carefully shook the box and discovered that water was leaking from one side. He looked a bit disappointed and shy, and he admitted, "well, it's leaking... I guess it's not sealed well." Zahavi, on the other hand, looked both surprised and puzzled, stating, "I thought the paper would break, but it isn't. That's weird... so water can't beat paper?"

Figure 4.2

The creative box

In this creative play, the outdoor environment both shaped and was shaped by the children's imagination and creativity. Yakta and Zahavi recognised the aesthetic value of nature and crafted their own artefacts during outdoor play. Kellert (2002, p.130) describes children's aesthetic appreciation of nature as "instrumental in a child's emerging capacity for perceiving and recognising order and organisation, for developing ideas of harmony, balance, and symmetry, and for evoking and stimulating curiosity, imagination, and discovery." When Zahavi began playing outdoors, he was initially motivated by a desire to create an artefact aligned with his aesthetic values.

While I was amazed by his creativity, I later learned from his class teacher that he was one of the children who "knew how to play outdoors," because his parents always took him to the garden or park after school. His accumulated knowledge about the outdoors and nature from home was transferable and reflected in his creative play in the school's playground. He energetically ran around, gathering materials from the natural environment for his creation. He magnified the beauty of small things in his

outdoor playground, where bird feathers and fallen leaves were commonly found. The outdoor space shaped Zahavi's imaginative and creative expressions, and his actions transformed the environment into a play space.

Yakta's motivation to participate in this creative play stemmed from a curiosity about the game and a desire to engage with his friend. My conversation with Yakta's teacher and him suggested that Yakta may spend more time indoors than outdoors in home settings. His teacher characterised him as someone who "loves painting in the classroom and enjoys his own time." Additionally, when I enquired about his favourite play activity, he replied,

"I like drawing in the classroom; sometimes I don't like playing here (referring to the outdoor playground) because my friends do not always play with me."

Outdoor play in the playground can sometimes be stressful for him, as he was not given rich opportunities for outdoor exploration at home settings and lacked experience in creating his own play with natural elements. Therefore, his play of "creative box" began with an imitation of his friend's behaviour. Zahavi showed him how to utilise materials from the natural world to create his own play artefact. Encouraged by the adult's compliment and inspired by his friend, he learnt to decorate his paper box.

Meanwhile, their interaction was naturally stimulated by co-creating their play artefacts, and they exchanged knowledge through their actions and speech in this

dialogical process of exploration. Yakta learned from Zahavi how to construct this artefact, and Zahavi was inspired by Yakta on “water cannot always beat paper.” In these embodied interactions with nature and peers, Yakta and Zahavi formed a new understanding of how to play and what to play in this outdoor playground, as well as learned knowledge. They moved their bodies, sensed the leaking water, discussed the possibilities, and observed the results of this exploratory game. Throughout the process, Yakta transitioned from a ‘perceiver’ to a ‘co-creator’ with Zahavi, and actualised the affordance of the natural elements in this playground.

4.4 On the Concreted Land

I did not spend much of my time in the concrete area because I had to move around with my attentive children, who tended to play in the mixed wood area. This concrete land provided the children plenty of space to run and chase each other with their branch swords. More frequently, because the PSAs would wander around in this area to ensure the children’s safety and deal with any issues that arose, it felt as though there was an invisible barrier between the adults’ and children’s activities. Indeed, many children ran around and played group games, with the PSAs sometimes joining in. For example, during lunch break, a group of children approached me and the PSA to ask if we could be Mr. Wolf. However, when they tried to be ‘naughty’ and engaged in activities like rough play or exploratory play, this open space with adults present didn’t seem like their preferred choice. Instead, this area seemed to encourage some children’s desire to challenge adult authority and exercise their agency.

4.4.1 Negotiating the boundaries

During the first three weeks of observing the interactions between adults and children on the school's playground, I noticed that children sometimes use outdoor play as a space to challenge and negotiate the boundaries set by adults. I noted in my field notes that "this might be a moment that a misalignment between children's motives and the school's demands".

Vignette 4. Boys' sword play (playground story on the concreted area, March 2024)

A week after the initial observation, I returned to the playground during lunch break. When I arrived, the PSA had just left the gate with the group I was observing. I positioned myself slightly further from the group, which allowed for a clearer view of their movement patterns. This time, half of the group headed straight towards the mixed wood area, while others engaged in more physical activities on the concrete, such as running and chasing. Nevertheless, all the children in the group either passed by or stayed in the mixed wood area at least once. They navigated within their designated space and were occasionally guided towards its boundaries.

It seemed that the teacher used the tree next to the unused land as a boundary marker to prevent the children from stepping outside their designated area. When a group of boys excitedly ran away from the PSAs with their wooden branches and started a "sword" fight, they pounced and dodged, with branches colliding and making hollow wooden clatters. They ran towards me, jabbing into the air or at each other. I thought the PSA might feel a bit

concerned if they noticed their play, but the boys chose a good running path where the PSAs were not currently present. One of them suddenly stopped and shouted, “No, don’t go there, we are not allowed to pass that tree!” However, not all of them followed the rules. Some of the boys ran around the tree and used the ‘sword’ to stab and hit each other. They quickly ran over the edge and back to their permitted area. It looked like they were testing the surroundings’ reaction to their crossing the boundary.

I moved a little closer to them; they saw me and hesitated to continue their “testing” play. One boy’s face flushed with embarrassment. To reassure them, I smiled and tried to let them realise that I am not the PSA, so I said, “Hi! Don’t worry, I am a student here, not your teacher.” After hearing this, the boys visibly relaxed, laughing excitedly as they dashed away from me. In a burst of energy, they waved their “sword” and passed the tree, chasing each other.

From the school’s perspective, restricting younger children to a specific play area was out of concern for safety and the practicality of supervision. However, the boundaries established by adults often conflicted with the children’s intrinsic desire to play and explore freely. Consequently, challenging these limits became a way for them to assert their agency and negotiate a balance between the school’s expectations and their own autonomy. In the vignette, the boys’ swordplay involved wielding branches, engaging in playful combat, and darting around the playground. Even on the playground, such forms of rough play may not always receive full approval from the PSAs overseeing it. The boys were fully aware of the rules and boundaries, so

they carefully tried to ‘sneak out’ from direct supervision and tested the consequences of crossing the “tree”. When they managed to pass the boundary set for them without being detected by the adult, they were filled with cheerfulness and excitement. This micro-transition moment of practice of their agency marked a celebration of their victory in the power negotiation.

Although we discuss free outdoor playtime at school, children’s freedom is restricted by rules set by powerful adults. For example, the school’s schedule for outdoor play, the designated play area, and safety instructions given by adults. Henricks (2010) argues that children recognise how powerful the external reality is, so they try to exercise or test their agency while acting as players within the narrower internal world by bouncing around the authorised boundaries. They know the risk of being caught but continue to challenge the rules imposed by adults. These regulations may be explicit, such as the boundaries of the play area and the safe height for climbing trees, or they may include invisible cultural norms that influence children’s interactions.

The following vignette was observed during my second visit when I was standing on the concrete ground near the fence of the mixed woods area:

Vignette 5. Secret spots to escape from supervision (playground story in the mixed woods area, Feb 2024)

A group of girls huddled in a small circle behind the shrubs and seemed to be engaging in a shared task. They were using tree branches as tools to dig a hole in the soft mud. I heard

one of the kids say to the child beside her: "I will be dirty, but it's fine; Ms L won't find us."

Figure 4.3

The secret space



The child's narrative suggested that engaging with and covering themselves in mud might be discouraged or prohibited by adults in educational or home settings (Kandemir & Sevimli-Celik, 2023). The child referred to the outcome of playing with mud as "dirty," implying that their family and teachers did not fully accept it as a natural part of outdoor play. In this case, the child's desire to play in the mud conflicted with adults' expectations, as the child expressed excitement about the freedom to get dirty without supervision. This act of 'secretly' challenging boundaries and rules allowed the child to assert their autonomy and agency, negotiating between the school's cultural norms and their personal motivation to play (Clark, 2010). Outdoor play offered children opportunities to navigate the misalignments between

the cultural values they perceive at school and at home, shaping their own forms of play independently.

4.4.2 “I don’t want to be the dad”

After two months of spending time with both classes during their lunch breaks, they became accustomed to my presence. They gradually accepted me as part of their group rather than viewing me as a teacher. A few children, including Yakta, Zahavi, and Raziya, began to see me as a friend and often welcomed me enthusiastically when I entered the playground. They frequently invited me to join in their play and occasionally shared their daily experiences with me. In one conversation with the teacher, I learned that Yakta’s family was from Dubai, and his best friend, Teshi, was from South Africa.

Vignette 6. “I don’t want to be the dad” (playground story on the concreted land, March 2024)

On a day in late March, I walked into the playground and saw Yakta sadly walking away from a girls’ playgroup. Yakta noticed me and then slowly walked towards me with an upset expression. He complained about his playmates.

“They are playing a family game, and Teshi wants me to be the dad. She told me I have to be like this and that if I am the dad, but I don’t want to! It is not Dad! Then they don’t want to play with me anymore!”

“Do you mean you don’t think that’s what a Dad would do?”

“Yay.”

Yakta then pulled me towards the playgroup, insisting he needed me there. It seemed he believed my presence could support him, or perhaps I could persuade his friend to let him rejoin their play. As I walked with him, he kept mumbling about how unreasonable his friend’s requirements for the “dad” role are, and he was tired of playing this character in their pretend play.

Yakta did not explain in detail Teshi’s expectations for the role of “dad” in this pretend play, but it seemed they had different cultural understandings of the role and image of “dad”. In our conversations, he repeatedly emphasised his disagreements with his friends about how the “dad” should behave in the family. According to his description, Teshi did not accept the dad image he created in their pretend play. Both Teshi and Yakta contributed their knowledge of the “dad” behaviour to this pretend play, which arose from their cultural experiences with family structures in home settings. It was possible that their perceptions of fathers’ behaviours, influenced by parental norms from diverse cultures, might differ.

However, this outdoor pretend play gave them a platform to recognise and interpret these differences. Children explored and practised the cultural knowledge they gained through their life experiences in pretend play. In their conversations, Yakta and Teshi each shared their views on the role of “dad” based on the cultural

beliefs of their respective homes, revealing these differences through their interactions. Although the children did not persuade one another, the exchange of cultural knowledge was crucial to their negotiation and understanding of each other's cultural differences. This could be an important part of their ongoing cultural development.

4.5 Near the Grassland

The grassland was situated in the middle of the playground. A narrow pathway connected two sections of the concreted land. One side was designated for the younger children, while the other was for the older children. A narrow path cut through the grass, linking the two areas. The space was plain, with sparse patches of grass and ground that became soft and waterlogged after rain. Tall benches and smaller chairs lined the edges, yet I rarely saw children using them during free play. Ms. L and other PSAs occasionally gathered near the grassland, and children sometimes approached them for help. I seldom linger in this area, as it mainly served as a transitional space, with children running across or passing through without stopping.

4.5.1 Braid hair: a cultural practice to form friendships

Vignette 7. Braid hair (playground story on the concreted land, late March 2024)

It was the last day of my observation before the Easter holiday. Some children were curious about my notes and asked to see what I had written. I handed my notebook over to

them, but their interest faded quickly after flipping through a few pages and realising there were no funny drawings. Raziya and Sally scrambled to write their names and made me promise I had memorised them. After the invitation letters for parent interviews were distributed, I noticed it was nearing the time for their gathering, so I walked to the bench beside the grass and sat down, trying to organise my documents. Raziya followed me, squatted beside me, and asked what I was doing. I showed her my disorganised files and explained that I needed to sort them out. She seemed unimpressed and soon lost interest. I guessed she found it boring; she then walked behind my back and started braiding my hair. I glanced at her hair, which was neatly braided and decorated with colourful bands. I realised that this might be a familiar activity in her home setting.

“Do you braid hair often at home?” I ask.

“Yeah, my mum did this for me,” she says, pointing to her braid. “Sometimes I braid my friends’ hair too. Hey, I can braid yours!” she adds excitedly.

“Sure,” I reply with a smile.

“You are my friend now!” she announces.

But after a few seconds, she became annoyed with my hair because its texture was different from hers and her family’s: “Oh gosh, your hair is so slippery!” she shouted and complained. Some of her friends were attracted to this activity. They ran over and giggled around me. Some grabbed my hair and tried to braid it. An Indian girl touched my hair and then slowly braided it. She said that my hair was very soft and straight. Vienna, a girl with

short blonde hair, didn't braid it but played with it. She told me she had found some grey hairs, and her mum also had some.

Raziya was from a family in South Africa, a place where the art of hair braiding holds deep cultural significance. During our conversations, she mentioned that braiding hair was one of the activities she enjoyed with her friends. This practice seemed to reflect the cultural knowledge she had gained at home, and she used it as a way to interact and socialise with her friends in the playground. I perceived hair braiding carried cultural influence as more than just a typical play activity for her; it.

While hair braiding seemed to be a cultural practice for Raziya, it may not carry the same cultural values for other girls. Raziya approached me warmly and consistently engaged in conversation each time I visited the playground. She expressed curiosity about my presence and activities, but she never explicitly stated her intention to befriend me. When I agreed to let her braid my hair, she declared that this act signified her acceptance of me as a friend. Later, her peers from different cultures joined our activity, but did not show the same level of interest. This moment highlighted cultural variation in play and showed that children brought their home culture into their social interactions, which also shaped their play practices.

4.6 In the Woods - Playing within the Structured Setting

The outdoor play provision took place every Tuesday afternoon, lasting 45 minutes per session. It was arranged in the woods, which were inaccessible to younger children during lunch breaks. The woods area featured taller trees than the

mixed wood area. Because it was a short-term arrangement, I attended four sessions between March and mid-April. The programme was designed for children who experienced difficulties with transition or faced challenges within the classroom environment, and only ran for the two classes of children I observed. The attending group was not fixed; the class teacher selected who needed or wanted to join the provision each time.

During the sessions, the instructor placed a selection of artefacts in the woods to encourage free play. The primary roles of the instructor and the PSA were to provide occasional assistance and to help mediate group negotiations; however, they did not interfere with or initiate the children's play. Even though this outdoor play was not strictly structured, with minimal adult-led activities and considerable freedom for the children, there were more rules governing the use of the facilities and a higher level of supervision than in outdoor free play during lunch breaks. Furthermore, the instructor had organised the environment in the woods with human-made tools and play artefacts. Therefore, I viewed the outdoor play in the woods as more structured rather than entirely free play.

On a bright March afternoon, I followed the instructor to the wood area and assisted him with the arrangement. We placed the tent, hammock, clay, pots, pictures, magnifiers, blocks, and a collection of long bamboo sticks around the woods. I was curious about their intended use, and it seemed that the instructor was also looking forward to seeing how the children would utilise these tools. As he says, "It's up to the children, they'll create their own game."

A few minutes later, the children arrived in a line with the PSA leader and eagerly stepped into the wooded area. I stood at the entrance to the woods and welcomed them. They looked very excited. “*Can I climb this tree?*” “*Look, there is a feather!*” They could not wait to play. Perhaps it was the thrill of exploring a place that was usually off-limits, or simply the joy of being outdoors and free from classroom routines.

However, this freedom came with a few setup rules. The instructor organised the group and asked them to stay quiet and listen to him. He explained some basic rules, such as how high they could climb, and reminded the children to only use one hammock at a time. The children nodded in response, but some exchanged playful glances, clearly more focused on their newfound playground than the rules.

4.6.1 Arguments around the hammock

Once reminded of these boundaries, the group quickly dispersed, and the children quickly ran to their favourite play. The two hammocks were soon occupied by at least half of the group. The PSA stood beside one hammock, and I stood beside the other. She soon became busy helping the child in the hammock. Unlike the abundance of natural resources in the playground, these human-made artefacts are limited, requiring children to wait for their turn. I kept hearing children asking, “Is it my turn now?”

This type of conversation frequently occurred around the hammock, sometimes turning aggressive.

Vignette 8. Arguments around the hammock (playground story in the woods, late March 2024)

I helped one boy get onto the hammock and asked the next in line to push it gently. However, he tried to prank the boy on the hammock by pushing it too high and fast; the boy on the hammock shouted for him to stop. I had to intervene and remind him of the rules once again. Although I initially said I was not the teacher during the observation, I eventually took on the role of assistant at that moment. I looked at the PSA; she appeared to be in a similar situation. She stood beside the hammock, maintaining order, and said, “You would be the next, okay? Please wait in line, thank you... Could you push the hammock gently for him? Remember what Mr. S told you, don’t push it too high.” Later, when one boy tried to cut in line, a girl imitated the teacher’s tone: “You need to wait in line, okay?”

Figure 4.4

The hammocks



The artefacts they used and recreated for play in the mixed wood area were

derived from the natural environment, so the play artefact materials were relatively plentiful. In this more structured setting, while a wide variety of natural resources could be used as play materials, human-made artefacts attracted most children's attention because they were not readily available. However, these man-made play artefacts in this controlled play environment were limited compared to the free play area. For example, there were only two hammocks, but about six children wanted to play in them. They had to wait for their turn if they wished to play. In this case, conflicts between the demand for play artefacts and the child's desire to play seemed to occur more often than during previous free play in the mixed wood. The adults had to organise the waiting line to ensure safety. Additionally, because the distance between adults and children was closer in this previously planned setting, children relied more on adults to resolve these issues rather than communicating calmly or negotiating independently in free play.

It is natural for children to compete for the ownership of objects in their play space (Moore et al., 2009). This may be because the hammock was a familiar setting in their home or neighbourhood, where they were used to playing with it alone. Alternatively, the hammock might have been a toy they had limited opportunities to use, leading to a desire to spend more time playing with it. However, the expectation to understand and follow social norms, such as 'waiting patiently' and 'sharing with friends,' was also part of what both school and parents expected during play. These norms were often introduced and reinforced by adults, as children might not have known or practised them enough before. By playing with the hammock repeatedly,

children learned these norms. As shown in the vignette, the girl learned the teacher's tone and calmly told and negotiated the rules with peers. This outdoor play offers a space where children can learn social norms from school and practise them with friends.

4.6.2 Adults scaffolding in a “campfire play”

The instructor told me that Teshi refused to let Yakta play in the classroom, so Yakta was a bit upset. I remembered Teshi; Yakta told me earlier during lunch that she was one of his best friends. They played campfire together in the mixed woodland area and used their lunch packages, leaves, and sticks as the ‘fuel’ to light the campfire.

Vignette 9. Campfire with adults’ support (playground story in the woods, late March 2024)

I looked at Yakta; he was not as cheerful as he was earlier. He squatted down beside a tree and used the branch he found on the ground to scrape the soil's surface. The instructor noticed that and walked over to squat down beside him, meeting him at eye level.

“What do you want to play?” He asked gently.

“I don't know,” Yakta muttered. After briefly pausing, he added, “Teshi doesn't want to play with me.” He sounded very disappointed and upset.

The instructor nodded sympathetically, then offered, “I have some blocks here and a bag of clay if you'd like to make something. What do you think?”

Yakta hesitated, looking down at the twig in his hand. After a moment, he came up with

an idea. "Oh! I can make a campfire in the pot! I need blocks."

"Great, what colours of blocks do you think the campfire needs?"

"Red, hmm, maybe yellow... and, and white!" he said excitedly.

"Here you go", the instructor encouraged him with a smile.

As Yakta got up, I noticed his gaze drifting towards Teshi, who was currently playing with a group of other children nearby. I gently asked, "Do you want to play with her? Why not try asking her again?"

Yakta hesitated, "But... but she says she doesn't want to play with me today," he mumbles.

"Well, I think you two could have fun playing this together," the instructor encouraged him.

Yakta nodded hesitantly and began walking towards Teshi, glancing back at us for reassurance. Both the instructor and I gave him warm, supportive smiles. However, when he approached Teshi and asked again, she still did not seem very up for playing with Yakta.

"Who wants to set up a campfire?" The instructor noticed this situation and called out to the group with a playful enthusiasm. "Come along and join us!"

The invitation caught Teshi's attention, and a few other children quickly abandoned their current activity to gather around the pot. Yakta was surprised when Teshi showed interest in the campfire game. He walked over to the group and started explaining, "We need these blocks, and fire in the pot!" His voice became more assertive, and he was clearly pleased that she was now part of the activity. He picked up a few blocks and handed them over to Teshi and others. The campfire play then began.

Unlike the unstructured free play during lunch breaks, the structured environment offered adults more opportunities to observe and assist children in initiating play. Yakta was not motivated to play at the start of the session. He was upset and seemed to need more personal space. The instructor quickly observed this and assessed his situation through their interaction. He patiently encouraged and guided Yakta to consider his interests in this outdoor play setting. Yakta then decided to play a campfire game with the artefacts provided.

When Yakta was more cheerful, both the instructor and I noticed that he still preferred to play with his friends in the group, so we encouraged him to approach his peers. However, Yakta faced exclusion from the group, as his peers did not readily accept his participation. Establishing a dialogue to support their negotiation was difficult because their motives for the outdoor play session were not aligned at this point. While Yakta's primary intention was to reconnect with his friends, Teshi and the other children seemed to prefer to continue their existing play activities.

The instructor's sensitivity to the social dynamics of play and scaffolding was crucial in fostering prosocial interaction among children (Acar et al., 2017). By supporting Yakta in initiating the "campfire" play and facilitating dialogue between him and his peers, the instructor played a pivotal role in connecting the group. He helped bridge the gap between their differing play intentions and assisted Yakta in engaging collaboratively with his peers in the campfire play. Notably, the group's responses were different depending on the initiator of the play. This may reflect the

trust children place in adults or the effectiveness of the instructor's playful and engaging approach, which seemed to capture the children's attention more easily. Through this guided intervention, Yakta transitioned to more active participation, gradually developing confidence in leading and engaging in both play activities and group interactions. The scaffolding provided by the practitioner not only supported Yakta's immediate reintegration into the peer group but may also help improve his social competence within the play context. It also suggested that proper adult scaffolding in children's social interactions can be instrumental in mitigating social exclusion.

4.7 Transition in Outdoor Play

Vienna came from a mixed-cultural family. According to her class teacher, she had been experiencing difficulties adjusting to school life. Prior to this year, Vienna had no formal schooling experience, as her parents had homeschooled her since birth. Playing outdoors in the large playground was not her favourite activity. While Vienna showed intelligence and strong verbal skills, she remained reluctant to engage with her peers in the classroom or during lunch breaks. Even for simple requests, such as borrowing a pencil, she relied on the teacher to mediate communication with her classmates. I described her story separately as I witnessed her development throughout the outdoor play sessions in the nearly four months of observation. Therefore, I believed that it was meaningful to share her stories here.

4.7.1 Intimidated about playing in the outdoor playground

Lack of outdoor play practice in home settings. After a brief conversation with her on the playground during the first week's observation afternoon, I met Vienna again in the outdoor play session the following week. Vienna held a doll in her hand and stood alone under the 'shelter space' built by the instructor using a poly tarpaulin. She did not intend to attend any play or interact with peers. Instead, she focused her attention on the doll, speaking quietly to it as she leaned against a tree. The instructor later shared that Vienna found it challenging to adjust to school life, often seeking the company of adults rather than her classmates.

Vignette 10. Introducing myself to Vienna (playground story in the woods, Feb 2024)

I walked towards her, briefly introduced myself, and asked if her doll had a name. Initially, she was very shy and spoke to me in a whisper, making it difficult for me to hear her clearly. I gently asked again, and this time she responded clearly, saying the doll's name is Lucy. She proudly told me that she had made a bracelet for the doll. Perhaps because I listened to her stories and accompanied her, she seemed to like me. She held my hands and asked if she would see me again. After receiving reassurance, she appeared very happy. Shortly after, Vienna asked how much longer outdoor playtime would last, repeating the same question she had posed when we first met. She told me she found outdoor play "boring" and expressed a desire to go home as soon as possible.

As a new and unfamiliar presence within the play space, I did not expect her to engage with me easily. However, perhaps because of my interactions with the teaching fellows and her greater comfort interacting with adults, Vienna gradually opened up during our interactions. Although hesitant at first, she became increasingly comfortable, and our communication unfolded more easily.

Playing in this outdoor natural environment with other children may not have been a common event in the past daily routine of Vienna's homes. The outdoor play provision was relatively structured, incorporating familiar play settings for the children and providing them with play objects. In contrast to the larger playground available during lunch breaks, the wood area was more compact and surrounded by trees and fences. This smaller group size and enclosed playground typically fostered a more intimate, less overwhelming atmosphere, which helped alleviate feelings of social pressure. Nonetheless, Vienna represented noticeable anxiety. She held tightly to the doll she had brought from home, suggesting it provided a sense of comfort and security. This might have been the form of play to which she was accustomed at home.

To better understand her play behaviours and attitude, I inquired with her class teacher about her family situation. The teacher indicated that outdoor play was quite challenging for her as it had not been an important part of Vienna's home routine:

“Going out in playtime was very difficult. She didn’t actually like the playground for a long time; it was like too big...She doesn’t really know how to play at times. And I think at home, a lot of what they do is reading, writing, like it’s not really play... her dad was showing her (some readings) like eight sixteenths and fifths... that has an impact on so many other things and her socialising”

The teacher’s narratives provided valuable information for Vienna’s unfamiliarity with outdoor play and limited social interaction with peers. The demands and expectations she perceived from home prioritised academic activities, such as reading and writing, but did not place a high value on play. All the activities arranged for Vienna were primarily indoors and associated with formal education, and outdoor play was not part of the daily socio-cultural practices in her household. This conflicted with the institutional expectations of fostering outdoor play and play-based education. The teacher expressed concern, particularly regarding its impact on Vienna’s cultural formation. Facing these conflicts and transitioning to an entirely new cultural school environment, I was worried about Vienna but also curious to see how consistent outdoor play might affect her.

Biophobia. A week later, I met Vienna in the playground during lunch break. I saw her from a distance, so I walked towards her. She was running between the different PSAs on the concrete ground. Her favourite PSA appeared to be a young lady, who I would assume was about the same age as me. She was excitedly saying something to her and jumping around. When the PSA talked to other children, she ran

to me and gave me a big hug. She seemed very happy to see me on the playground. As usual, she was alone. She told me she was annoyed because she wanted to go inside, but the teachers were not allowed to do so during lunch break. I took her hands and walked towards the mixed-wood area. Just as we were about to enter the field, I was already standing on the edge of the mixed woods; she dragged me quite forcefully and showed me a disgusted face. “Bah, don’t go there!” She looked at the soggy ground and refused to go inside.

With the adults’ support on the playground, Vienna seemed happier and more comfortable staying there. She ran around the playground searching for familiar adults to interact with. Significantly, she no longer clutched her doll, and her body language showed greater openness and confidence. However, Vienna still exhibited signs of biophobia towards the natural outdoor environment. During my observations, I noted that her movements were confined mainly to the concrete areas, and she seldom ventured into the mixed-wood section, which contained more natural elements. When we walked there, she also showed strong resistance to contact with the natural surroundings. This aversion, or fear of nature, is suggested to develop when children cannot form meaningful connections with the natural world during critical stages of their growth (Cengiz & Boz, 2019). Building on the earlier discussion of her limited experience with outdoor play within her home environment, her reaction to the playground’s natural elements further illustrated the influence of her parents’ beliefs on her motivation to engage in outdoor play. She perceived the soil as dirty and disgusting and did not believe or accept that it could be a space to play.

4.7.2 Showing interest in a peer's play

Vignette 11. Vienna's interest in playing bubbles with peers (playground story in the concreted land, at the edge of mixed woods, Mar 2024)

Yakta ran up to me and eagerly showed me his bubble set. Vienna noticed Yakta holding the bubble set and appeared interested in playing with it. She tugged at my sleeve and quietly asked, "Could you tell him that I want to play that?" I encouraged her to ask Yakta herself, but she was visibly shy, hid behind me, and then quickly ran away.

Although Vienna's main motivation for participating in outdoor play continued to focus on interacting with adults, the influence of the school's culture and her peers' play practices gradually shaped her engagement. Signs of a growing interest in outdoor activities started to appear. When her peers played with bubbles, Vienna's attention was caught by the activity. Although she avoided direct interaction with her classmates and still needed an adult's support, she showed a desire to join in the play. Her motivation for outdoor play was not just about interacting with preferred PSAs; it also reflected a growing inclination to explore and engage with the play artefacts.

4.7.3 Climbing tree: learning and imitating from other children on the playground

Vignette 12. Attempt to climb the tree (in the mixed woods, Mar 2024)

Two weeks later, I saw Vienna again on the playground during the lunch break. It had been a month since we first met. Vienna ran over to show me a crystal stone she had found on

the playground. Unlike before, she did not ask me to join her. Instead, her attention seemed more focused on what was happening around her. She turned to me as I spoke, but kept glancing at a group of girls climbing a nearby tree. Our conversation ended abruptly as she slowly made her way towards the group. She paused near the tree, hesitated, and then asked if she could join them. I stood behind her, deciding not to intervene at this point. I was curious to see if she would talk to her peers on her own. This time, she did not seek my help. She wandered around the tree with a shy smile, occasionally making eye contact with the other children nearby. Eventually, Vienna was invited by one of the girls to join them. While she still did not actively engage and was unsure how to climb the tree, I could see she was learning by observing and copying their movements. Until the bell rang, she stayed with the group and did not ask for any adult support.

I was surprised by her change. In a later conversation with her class teacher, the teacher explained that she made efforts to introduce Vienna to other children when they were indoors. The teacher usually took the lead in the group with Vienna to support her in engaging in play activities with her peers, and sometimes initiated conversation within the group to ensure Vienna could participate and express herself. Although the progress was slow, her teacher described it as “progressing slowly, but it is working”.

In this episode, Vienna appeared more integrated into the school’s culture, and outdoor play felt less intimidating to her. Perhaps influenced by her peers, she began to view elements such as “stones” and “trees” as play artefacts, which motivated her

to participate more actively in outdoor activities. Compared to my previous two observations, Vienna was less resistant to engaging with the natural environment in the mixed wood area. Notably, she no longer refused to walk on the soil or expressed discomfort to me about walking on it. In a surprising shift, she showed curiosity about the surrounding trees and even expressed a desire to climb them. This shift represented a micro-transition moment. It reflected that she began developing new cultural knowledge about peer interactions and play in natural spaces through scaffolding from teachers and peers, as well as through her own navigation of different cultural knowledges between home and school.

One significant change she demonstrated was that she did not depend on adults to manage her social interactions with her peers. Although she did not communicate verbally with her peers, she used body language, such as smiling at the children and making eye contact, to show her interest in joining the play. Sometimes, in children's play, 'talking' may not be the main or necessary condition for forming friendships or engaging in dialogue. Using body language and movement is also a crucial part of children's dialogue process during play (Ødegaard, 2020). Other children in the group recognised her nonverbal cues and invited her to join their climbing tree activity. At this moment, Vienna shared the same goals for climbing as her peers.

4.7.4 Engaged in active outdoor play with friends

Vignette 13. Vienna play in the mixed woods area (May 2024)

After Easter holidays, I returned to the school's playground on Tuesday. I wandered around the concrete area, trying to find Vienna, but she did not seem to be here. I assumed she might be absent from school today, so I headed towards the mixed wood area. Surprisingly, I spotted her near the shrub. Her peers were climbing on the branches of the shrub, acting like soldiers looking out from their castle. Vienna jumped around the shrub and looked very excited. She laughed loudly and tried to touch the leaves, but her hand quickly retracted. It seemed she also wanted to climb the shrub's branch, but she looked a bit scared. "Could you pass me one leaf?" she asked her friend on the shrub. Her friend passed her a leaf and said, "You can try to smell it, like this!" She crumpled the leaf in her hand and showed it to Vienna. Vienna laughed; she smelled the leaf but did not crush it as hard as her friend.

Suddenly, some flies passed her face. "There are so many bugs! They'll bite me! It's toxic!" She was panicked and warned her friend. She approached me anxiously and asked if I could shoo the flies away. I looked at the flies and reassured her that they were safe and common in outdoor areas; they were not toxic. However, she remained unconvinced and explained to the other children that her parents had warned her that these flies would bite me. Nonetheless, I noticed that she was not trying to leave this field; she was still standing close to her peers, gripping the leaf in her hand.

"Tag!" I heard a group of children run into this area. Vienna's peer came down from the shrub and joined a tag game initiated by another playgroup. I assumed that Vienna was close to this child, as she followed her and quickly engaged with the new playgroup. Even during the running "tag" game, she stayed close to this child. She lifted her hands, pretending to be a tiger, mimicking roars and running towards me and the other girls in the "tag" group.

Other children laughed and shrieked, teasing her to chase them. Vienna eventually caught one of the girls, tagging her and appearing very happy. Vienna seemed to immerse herself in play with her peers and forgot she had been bothered by the flies a few minutes earlier.

The social situation at the playground did not change identically; however, the way she interpreted the circumstances seemed to shift. Initially, Vienna viewed the mixed-wood area as “disgusting,” and she disliked going into it. Similarly, Vienna also described outdoor free play during lunchtime as “boring” and intimidating. She did not know how to interact and socialise with her peers before, which led her to seek the company of adults for a sense of security. Over time, through consistent participation in outdoor play and repeated exposure to different play interactions, Vienna’s initial perceptions, rooted in the cultural beliefs shaped at home, appeared to change. The influence of institutional values, combined with the strong play motives of her peers, was likely to contribute to this transformation.

This shift was reflected in her actions and interactions. This time, her activity setting moved from the concrete land to the mixed wood area with more natural elements. Vienna directly engaged with the outdoor environment and its natural features, such as jumping on the soil near the shrub, holding leaves gathered from the trees, and energetically running through the mixed wood area. The dialogical process between Vienna and her peers reflected increased verbal interaction and sensory exploration. More importantly, this process unfolded independently without adult intervention. When Vienna was curious about the leaves but hesitated to pick them

directly from the tree, she chose not to ask for help, even though I was standing nearby. Instead, she voiced her interest to a peer. With her friend's encouragement, she learned to take the time to explore nature and smell the leaves. Similarly, in the later "tag" game, Vienna employed her body movement and facial expressions to actively engage with peers. By pretending to be a monster chasing other children, Vienna contributed to the game's imaginative dimensions. Her creative involvement seemed to increase her peers' enjoyment. All these transitions reflected not only her growing comfort in outdoor play but also her emerging role as an active participant in the play narrative. The culture of her school and friends shaped her, and she also brought new ideas to the play.

Furthermore, her friend played a vital role in helping her explore the natural world and enjoy outdoor play. Through observation, her friend appreciated outdoor activities and showed a strong interest in discovering and interacting with nature. By modelling playful behaviour, she subtly guided Vienna in finding new ways to play outside, turning the natural area from a muddy, unfamiliar place into a space full of potential fun and creativity. Her friend also demonstrated playful ways to stimulate the senses, such as teaching Vienna how to smell the leaves to fully appreciate their scent. Although Vienna did not entirely follow her friend's approach, the interaction strengthened her bond with the natural environment through sensory exploration. Later, Vienna naturally joined her friend in the new chasing game, smoothly transitioning into the larger playgroup. Her increasing motivation to engage in outdoor play seemed closely linked to her friend's presence and actions, indicating

that her friends' attitudes and values about outdoor activities could greatly influence her developing motives and attitudes.

However, we can still see how the value and objectives of home practice shaped her motives and view of nature. In the episode, she showed a clear dislike for the insects commonly found in Scotland's outdoor environments. While caution around potentially dangerous creatures was reasonable and important during outdoor activities, Vienna's nervousness may reflect an overprotective, critical attitude towards outdoor play in her home setting. Her initial hesitation and discomfort in outdoor situations might also be connected to her family's beliefs. Nevertheless, in the "tag" game, she did not display signs of biophobia and appeared to thoroughly enjoy herself in the same playground. It has been suggested that outdoor play with Vienna's friend helped reduce her feelings of intimidation and supported her transition into school life.

4.8 From the Teacher's Perspective: The conflicts in Developing Outdoor Play at school

After nearly four months of observation, I arranged separate interviews with two class teachers from the group I had been observing, in order to gain more insight into the children's background information and the school's overall attitude towards outdoor play. As demonstrated in the methodology chapter, I did not intend to delve too deeply into or provide a comprehensive overview of the value placed on outdoor play within Scottish schools. Therefore, the interviews with teachers were primarily to

supplement the observational data. However, in addition to understanding the teachers' beliefs and learning more about the children's family backgrounds, I was, somewhat unexpectedly, able to glimpse the existing tensions surrounding the promotion of outdoor play at the school through these discussions.

The interviews took place during a particularly busy period. It was close to the school holidays, and no spare office rooms were available, so we conducted the interviews in a large basketball practice room at the end of the corridor, where expansive open windows overlooked the playground.

4.8.1 Teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards outdoor play

We began by examining the current outdoor play opportunities at the school, progressively moving to the teachers' perspectives on the school's overall stance towards outdoor play. Both teachers shared their positive attitudes and beliefs about the significance and advantages of including outdoor play in students' school routines. Their names had been substituted with initials.

“There are lots of times when they are inside. They will run around the classroom, throw things, and be very boisterous. They need to be taken outdoors.”

Teacher Ms. E believed that taking children outdoors was beneficial for them to expend their energy and focus better in the classroom. She appeared to be exhausted

from organising her energetic students on her own in the classroom.

“I suppose outside there, you see the ones who have imaginations more because when there are limited resources, they have to think outside the box. Whereas in the classroom, they’ll often just stick to the things that they know how to play with or it’s not gotten you know, they’ll play with the dollies because it is a dolly and that’s kind of the limit of it. Whereas outside, the ones that have the creativity and ideas, like can use a stick for a wand or a stick for, you know, endless opportunities, um, and that’s probably a big difference”

Teacher Ms M suggested that outdoor play was more conducive to fostering children’s creativity and imagination, which she felt were challenging to nurture within the classroom. She further elaborated on the benefits of integrating outdoor play into learning, emphasising its potential to support broader educational outcomes.

“I think just play in general, whether that’s inside or outside. If you provide, the right scaffolds to children, then the right resources and the right amount of input. Then what they can learn independently through the play is quite amazing.”

4.8.2 Teachers’ concern about the outdoor play at school

Meanwhile, the teachers also expressed their demands and concerns regarding the school’s current outdoor play arrangements. As noted in my observation field

notes, the outdoor playground lacked purpose-built play equipment or facilities apart from the natural environment. Although I would argue that the dynamic and ever-changing outdoor nature provides children with rich play experiences, the absence of structured outdoor play provisions remained a prominent concern for the teachers, who felt this aspect needed further development:

“I think one thing about the school, though, is that a lot of the parents would say you could have developed better (in outdoor play). We have a lot of space outside, but it is a lot of cost...”

Teacher Ms E carefully chose her words and slowly finished the sentence. She believed that outdoor play at school still required improvement, but the cost of refurbishing, rearranging, and organising the physical space would be too high for the school. From what I learned from the headteacher and staff, the school has already been struggling with managing their financial costs, and developing the playground was almost impossible for them at this moment.

Ms E then highlighted the difficulties the school faced in balancing the demands from the city council for academic achievement with the need to foster outdoor play and learning opportunities.

“I suppose our journey is more about outdoor learning and trying to get that into our practice. But it is just hard when you have so many other curriculum

pressures... So outdoor play is definitely in our kind of plan, and everyone is trying to. It is just constantly having different priorities and trying to kind of fit it all in... We have got a lot of pressure from the council at the moment to raise those (academic) achievements and attainments. And it is then just hard to, you know – and it is difficult because they can learn so much through outdoors and everything”.

When I asked the same question to Teacher Ms. M, she first expressed her satisfaction with the school’s outdoor space:

“It is a really nice space because it is enclosed, but it is outside, and it has got lots of resources for them to play with. And there are some planters that they can explore, and there are lots of nice resources down there for them”.

Regarding the negative aspect, she looked at my voice recorder and hesitated for a few moments. I reassured her once more that this information would remain confidential and known only to me.

“We’ve got a lot of pressure from the council at the moment to raise those achievements and attainment. And it’s then just hard to, you know – and it’s difficult because they can learn so much through outdoors and everything. So, yeah, it’s just getting the right balance...”

She expressed a similar concern to Ms E, conveying the belief that outdoor play positively contributed to children's learning and development. However, she noted that the academic achievement pressures imposed by the city council led the school to prioritise classroom-based learning, thereby neglecting the importance of outdoor play. I was somewhat puzzled by these perspectives, as the teacher seemed to frame play and learning outcomes as a binary opposition, despite recognising the benefits of outdoor play. By the end of the interviews, the insights shared by Ms E helped me identify a potential disconnect between teachers' perceptions of children's outdoor play and the actual play occurring on the playground:

“Before I was a teacher, I was a PSA, it was so interesting to see how the children were in the classroom and then outside the classroom...But now I feel I miss out the outdoor part, I don't get to see that part. I see how they interact in the classroom, and if we go outdoors as a class, we get to see that through play. But I'd love to see how they play.”

Overall, the teachers held positive cultural beliefs about outdoor play, aligning with most children's motives to play outside. The teachers' demands for developing outdoor play mainly focused on improving the playground. The educators expressed a clear desire for a better-designed outdoor space, which is a reasonable request given the evidence suggesting that a well-designed playground can enhance a school's

inclusivity, safety, and promote physical activity levels among children (Broekhuizen, 2014; Harris et al., 2024; Olsen et al., 2008; Hyndman, 2015). However, after completing my observations, I remained sceptical about whether the obstacles perceived by the teachers would actually hinder children's cultural development during outdoor play. Specifically, I questioned whether children truly need a larger, more structured play area with diverse facilities to support their interactions and various types of play. Furthermore, the teachers' absence during the children's outdoor lunch times may have led to a lack of awareness of the actual interactions taking place on the playground. There seemed to be a mismatch between the teachers' and children's understanding of the affordance of natural outdoor play space.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter offers a narrative of children's outdoor play in the school playground during lunchtime. It progresses chronologically, reflecting the rhythms of the playground and capturing the everyday stories that emerge in its different areas. As the fieldwork progressed, the children showed how various natural spaces supported different types of play, how they creatively used natural materials to create their own play artefacts, and how the micro-transition occurred in this process. The summary of the finding as shown in the following Table 2:

Table 2.

Summarise the Findings of Observation

Section	Vignette(s)	Findings
4.2.2		Children displayed emerging racial awareness through their interactions in outdoor play.
4.3.1	Campfire	Natural environments supported children's creativity by enabling peer-influenced exploration and the creation of play artefacts.
4.3.2	Drum play	Symbolic play mediated children's social interactions and shaped their understanding of others' perspectives.
4.3.3	Creative box	Children's imagination and peer interaction shaped how outdoor environments were used in creative play.
4.4.1	Boys' sword play; secret spots	Children negotiated agency by challenging adult-imposed boundaries on outdoor play.
4.4.2	"I don't want to be the dad"	Pretend play enabled children to explore and negotiate cultural meanings of family roles.
4.5.1	Hair braiding	Children incorporated home cultural practices into peer interactions during outdoor play.
4.6.1	Arguments around the hammock	In structured settings, closer adult presence influenced how children engaged with materials and resolved conflicts.
4.6.2	Adults' scaffolding in campfire play	Adult scaffolding in structured play supported children's prosocial interaction.
4.7	Vienna's stories of transformation	Peer interaction and outdoor play supported children's social participation and cultural learning over time.

Entering the playground as an outsider, I began as a quiet observer and gradually moved closer as I was accepted into the children's world. Over time, the dynamic interplay between the children, the environment, and the supervising adults became clearer, shaped not only by immediate interactions but also by deeper cultural values embedded in everyday practices. Through play, the children subtly conveyed how beliefs and values from their home lives influenced their actions, motives, and the ways they engaged in play. At the same time, the outdoor play space became a site of transformation, where new understandings of self and culture were negotiated and

expressed in relation to the environment and to each other.

I then provided a detailed account of Vienna's transition, involving a child who had previously been homeschooled and had limited experience with outdoor play or peer interaction. Her journey of adaptation became a key theme throughout the observation period. Initially, she appeared overwhelmed by the size of the playground and was hesitant to join in the play activities with her peers. Through the consistent influence of school cultures that encouraged outdoor play and the exchange of knowledge with her peers, she gradually reframed her earlier cultural beliefs about outdoor play and experienced multiple micro-transitions. By accumulating these transitional moments, she demonstrated a significant shift from her initial behaviour on the playground.

The final section of this chapter investigated interviews conducted with the teachers of the observed group. In addition to providing background information about the children, the teachers' reflections also offered insights into their attitudes towards outdoor play in the school context and highlighted the challenges the school faced in supporting and developing such practices. These conversations further revealed potential gaps in understanding between the school's and the children's perspectives on the affordances of different outdoor play spaces.

The next chapter will move away from the school and delve into the perspectives of families from broader communities on children's outdoor play and its role in the children's transition phase.

Chapter Five: Findings: Experiences and Perspectives of Mothers from Non-UK Cultural Backgrounds

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores mothers' perspectives on outdoor play and its significance during children's transition to new school environments. The participants were from very diverse regions, including South America, North America, Europe, Asia, and Northern Africa. Given their varied cultural backgrounds, their norms and values may differ from those in Scotland, which further shape their experiences and cultural understandings of outdoor play. The mothers shared their childhood outdoor play experiences in their native countries and reflected on the differences with their children's current outdoor play in Scotland. Through the interviews, the mothers also revealed how their native cultures influenced their beliefs and expectations regarding their children's outdoor play.

The representation of mothers' accounts differs from the observation section. Interviews yielded more condensed narratives focused on the similarities and differences in mothers' lived experiences of outdoor play and how these experiences influence their educational beliefs about their children's outdoor play and learning. Using outdoor play as a unifying thread, I have woven together mothers' stories of navigating life between two cultures, employing different themes to illuminate their adaptation processes and challenges in their children's education. Conversations with children or comments they made during their mothers' interviews were interwoven to

enrich the mothers' accounts and reveal potential tensions between mothers and children regarding outdoor play.

The first section examines the different play environments between mothers' childhoods and those of their children, especially regarding play facilities. The mother expressed concerns about the impact of digital play on children's learning and outdoor physical activities. The second section discusses the mother's safety concerns about children's free outdoor play, which is closely linked to living in a different cultural context. The third section explores how traditional cultural beliefs from the mother's home country about outdoor activities on rainy days shape mothers' attitudes and further influence children's perceptions. At the same time, it considers how these beliefs are reshaped under the cultural context and practices in Scotland. The final section investigates the conflicts and integrations between mothers' cultural beliefs and those of Scottish schools concerning outdoor play and learning.

In the first section of the interviews, I invited mothers from diverse cultural backgrounds to reflect on their childhood experiences of outdoor play. The participants' voices are emphasised using italics, "inverted commas", and indented text for longer direct quotes, with shorter direct quotes left in-text to foreground the participants' voices (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). This section also includes excerpts from the children's responses to better represent the stories of multicultural families. Because the included responses were sometimes brief, I added transcripts of my conversations with the child to provide clearer context for the data. Conversations with children are presented as indented, italicised text, clearly labelled with my name

(Jianing) and the child's name. The child's name is in bold.

5.2 Introducing the Mothers

As stated in the methodology chapter, except for Li, most mothers were recruited through the PGR community and the university's overseas family neighbourhood. Therefore, most of the mothers had accepted higher education and had an awareness of the benefits of outdoor play.

Li was recruited through the Chinese community in Glasgow. She was interested in the study concept and wanted to support a student from her home country. She contacted me on a weekday morning and explained that it was the only time she was available for the interview. She had lived in Scotland for over 10 years and was currently running a family-owned retail business serving the Chinese community in the United Kingdom. As a mother of three, she worked every day until late at night and woke up early to count stock. The interview was conducted through the video chat. She seemed like a very strong and resilient woman. When talking about her children, I could sense her strong protective attitude; it felt as though she hoped to help them overcome all the negative emotions and experiences.

Ayla was from Azerbaijan. After getting married and having a baby in Georgia, she decided to pursue her PhD in Scotland, so her family relocated with her. Through her determination, she secured a position at a university in Scotland. When I interviewed her on Teams, she looked a bit tired, as her baby daughter had just gone to bed. Two weeks later, I met her and her children at the university café. It was a

sunny day, so they had walked there from their home. She described the walk as enjoyable for both her and her children, especially since the path passed through a green park.

Batima lived in a small rural area of Kazakhstan. She moved to Scotland over ten years ago and currently works for the education department at the university. During holidays, she often took her children on trips abroad or spent time outdoors together, valuing these experiences as vital for his development and wellbeing. She shared that she had few friends outside of work during her first few years in the United Kingdom. However, after having her son, taking him to local playgrounds gave her opportunities to connect with other mothers, thereby expanding her social network.

Chloe was from Hong Kong and came to Scotland to pursue her PhD. She grew up in the city centre of Hong Kong, where access to outdoor green space was rather limited. She was introduced by one of the other PhD students. Her son transferred to a Scottish primary school when they moved to Scotland. Although I attempted to invite her child to the interview, she claimed her child had rejected the invitation. She explained her child did not really want to interact with someone he had not met in person. The interview was conducted via Teams.

Darika was from India and had just begun her PhD journey this year. Her son, Devin, had attended an international school in Indonesia for six years before moving to Scotland. She noticed my recruitment poster in the PhD community. She expressed interest in children's intercultural interactions and outdoor play, especially since her son had recently transferred to a new school in Scotland. We met in a cafe, and she

became visibly more relaxed after we shared our experiences of living in a different cultural context. She told me that her mother was a teacher, so she did not really have many opportunities to enjoy outdoor play as a child. Because of this, she wanted her son to have more time for outdoor play in Scotland.

Ekib was from Egypt and moved to Scotland in 2015. Her daughter, Eshe, transferred to a new primary school last year after Ekib completed her Master's degree in education. Our interview took place in the backyard of her house, which was covered by neatly cut grass. She told me that her Master's dissertation focused on outdoor play and learning, so she wanted to attend my research after seeing my poster. She also mentioned that her best friend was from China, which may have contributed to our open and extensive conversation during the interview.

Fiona was specialised in childhood education and moved to Scotland for her PhD. I chatted with her and her son through Teams. She grew up in Texas, in the countryside. Two years before migrating to Scotland, she and her children lived in a subdivision with a large, fenced play structure. Hence, her children had rich opportunities for outdoor play, and she frequently observed their play behaviours. She was a schoolteacher before starting her PhD. Therefore, she brought rich knowledge about school structures, play-based education, and parenting practices.

Gabriela had just started her PhD at the time of our interview. Her family had recently moved from Paraguay to Scotland. She grew up in a supportive family environment where her parents generally encouraged play. However, she shared that she and her friends were only allowed to play in the outdoor area of their house

because her parents were concerned about safety. I had posted my participant recruitment information in her neighbourhood through Hannah, and Gabriela was interested in my topic, so she agreed to take part in the interview. Although our initial conversation was online, we later met in person for her children's interview. She had two children, one in primary school and the other in nursery.

Hannah was from the United States and was a Master's student in outdoor education; we met during the course. She decided to pursue a PhD after completing her Master's degree. She had moved to Scotland with her husband and two children. Our interview took place in the neighbourhood's communal garden.

Imman was a student in the Master's programme in outdoor education. She was from Indonesia and had moved to Scotland with her family during her studies. We first met in a crowded café. After the interview, we walked to her home, where I met her daughter, Ivy. She was very shy and did not speak to me at first. However, after I chatted with her mother for a while and then played with her, she started to open up. She became noticeably excited and did not want our playtime to end. Although her verbal communication was limited, she clearly showed a strong interest in outdoor play.

Janka was from Hungary and had been working in Scotland for several years. She had two children, and when I visited their flat, one was being tutored while the other was practising the piano. Janka was observant and intelligent; she often anticipated my next question and answered it before I asked. She was also very active in arranging the community activities. The first time I met her was in their

neighbourhood, where she was taking her children and other neighbourhood children out to play together. The second time, when I revisited the neighbourhood, she was hosting a community party for the local families.

Zhang was introduced to me by a Chinese friend. After I sent her the participant recruitment flyer, she quickly agreed to take part in the study. Our interview was conducted online through Teams. Her daughter, Zoe, had moved to Scotland with her while she pursued her PhD. She was from a well-educated family, and her parents were strict with her academic work. Therefore, she did not have much time to play outdoors as a child, which made her want to provide her child with as much play freedom as she could.

Table 3

Country of Origin for Participants and Their Children

Mother's Name	Child's name	Native country
Ayla	Azeri	Azerbaijan
Batima		Kazakhstan
Chloe		Hong Kong
Darika	Devin	India
Ekib	Eshe	Egypt
Fiona	Frank	The United States
Gabriela	Gisel	Paraguay
Hannah	Hope	The United States
Imaan	Ivy	Indonesia
Janka	Juli	Hungary
Li		China
Zhang	Zoe	China

5.3 Mothers' Childhood Outdoor Play with Limited Play Facilities

When reflecting on their children's outdoor play, most mothers noted that there were not many toys or facilities available to support such activities during their own childhood. In many cases, they tended to engage in physical activities outdoors and play with the natural materials they gathered from the ground.

Batima recalled that there were no designated playgrounds in their village, so active play, such as running, climbing trees and picking fruit on farms, became a central part of children's play and exploring experiences.

"It was just like we were exploring the world, and we were always trying age-

appropriate stuff.”

When play materials were limited, active play, which usually occurred in the outdoor environment with fewer restrictions, was the children’s preferred choice, according to the mothers’ memories. Ayla engaged in games like hide-and-seek and, at times, more physically intense activities such as ‘garbage fighting’ between different residential blocks. Imaan shared that the most popular outdoor game she played required only rocks and a rubber band, and they would jump around the rubber band while singing nursery rhymes. They played that game every afternoon or evening whenever the weather permitted.

The space limitations and absence of entertainment indoors motivated the children to go outdoors to seek playmates for more interesting play activities, while the adults at home also encouraged the children to play outdoors so they could have time to relax or focus on their work, as Ekib demonstrated:

“My parents actually appreciated it (outdoor play time), because if we didn’t play outside, the home isn’t that big for you to play. And we, before, we didn’t have, like, everyone had a playground, a telephone in his hand and the TV open 24 hours; you know, we have the cartoon for a limited time during the day.”

For Ekib, going outdoors was the primary means of connecting with friends and engaging in playful activities. The lack of indoor play resources, particularly digital

devices, prompted her to spend time outside and be inventive in her play. When reflecting on her own childhood in comparison to her son's current experiences, Ekib highlighted the impact of the widespread availability of digital entertainment. She suggested that the constant access to screen-based activities, such as watching television and using smartphones, might diminish children's creativity and motivation to explore the natural world:

“But now you have, you can play cartoons for the kids all day. They can have their phone. They watch anything they want. We didn't have this option. So if you don't go outside to play with your friends, you will be bored all day. I didn't have any toys. I only remember one toy – a ball. that the rest was just outside with kids and just making things ourselves, or ball. Yeah, we had a ball.”

5.4 Digital Play and Outdoor Play

5.4.1 The widespread use of digital devices at school

As Ekib described, the widespread use of digital devices in both home and school environments emerged as a recurring concern among mothers. Many mothers lamented that their children now have an abundance of indoor entertainment options, particularly through access to digital technologies. Although this provides convenience, it has also been observed to reduce children's inclination to engage in outdoor play. Moreover, the integration of digital devices into educational settings

may further shift children's play preferences, as they have become accustomed to screen-based interactions. Fiona shared:

“The teachers will tell them, go here or go there on your cell phones and it's just expected that everyone has that. And then for my twelve-year-old son, he begins every morning doing language lessons on his phone in class. And if they don't have a phone to do it directly through an app, then they're on class iPads doing it.”

The dependence on digital devices also emerged in the interview with mothers. While speaking with Gabriela, her children entered the room twice to ask her to change the cartoons they were watching. She offered a quick apology to me and explained that cartoons could keep the children quiet and occupied, allowing her not to worry about them while managing household tasks. Gabriela acknowledged that her children's digital play occupied a significant amount of time in their routine.

“I have noticed with my kids when screens are allowed. Yeah. They tend to play around and watch cartoons or, you know, do games on iPad”.

In a later interview with Gabriela's daughter, Gisel, she reinforced her mother and my earlier observation about her preference for digital play at home. She shared that how she preferred staying indoors and playing an online game after school, which

was an app widely used in children's learning:

"I like playing more indoors because that means I'll get to use an app called Minecraft Education. And I have a lot of parrots in there, and I make them all dance with music boxes, and they're like, like this, and they look so happy like that. You just give a parrot a few seeds and then, it appears like a button that says 'tame' and then you press a lot of times until you find a, you see a 'sit' button, which means you've tamed the parrot so then it just sits and stands.

The prevalence of digital devices in schools appeared to influence children's play preferences and habits. Smartphones and iPads had become everyday tools that children carried between school and home, leaving limited space to disconnect from screens. In narrating her digital play, Gisel seemed to regard the game as a task-based routine, through which she could gain a sense of progress and achievement. This ongoing engagement with digital devices appeared to reinforce her preference for remaining immersed in the virtual world beyond school hours and reduced her outdoor play time.

When I asked Gisel who she played the game with, she replied, "I just play it by myself, in my room." The game had already created a vibrant and imaginative world, and within that space, Gisel did not appear to need a playmate. Her engagement with this digital environment seemed to offer sufficient stimulation and fulfilment on its own. This inclination towards digital play may limit her interactions with family and

peers, as she often withdrew into play alone “in her room”.

Although many contemporary digital games allow children to connect with others in virtual spaces, these interactions remain qualitatively different from those that occur in the physical world. Embodied forms of dialogue with the natural environment and with people, typically present in outdoor play, such as body language, physical touch, shared laughter, and spontaneous verbal exchanges, were largely absent from her digital play. What emerged instead was a form of interaction that, while engaging, was characterised by social detachment, shaped by the immersive yet isolating nature of screen-based environments.

5.4.2 The reduction of outdoor activities

During an interview with Darika and her son, Devin, it became clear that their views on digital play were not entirely aligned. We sat in a small café, where Devin occupied a chair nearby, absorbed in an iPad while I spoke with his mother. As our conversation turned to the topic of digital games, Darika explained that Devin’s interest in platforms like PlayStation and Nintendo Switch had noticeably increased since transferring to his new school. Overhearing our exchange, Devin interjected with a note of frustration, challenging his mother’s stance:

“Other kids have it. Why can’t I have it? Why are other kids allowed to have Roblox and not me?”

Darika acknowledged the growing pressure she felt to permit digital play, admitting that it had become increasingly difficult to avoid in the context of modern childhood. She had spent considerable time deliberating over the matter, frequently consulting other parents. Her concerns were particularly focused on the potentially harmful effects of certain games, especially those with violent content, which she feared might encourage addiction and aggression.

“I asked my friends, they were like, ‘It is not; it kind of has some violent content in it, and it makes you more addicted, and sometimes, violent.’ So I didn’t want him to be exposed to Roblox, but they said Minecraft is okay. So I was like, ‘Okay, you can have Minecraft, but not Roblox.’ We’re not opening that for you now because when you go to high school, you can decide”

Despite eventually allowing Devin limited access to games like Minecraft, Darika’s apprehension remained visible throughout our conversation. She also worried about the broader implications of digital play for her son’s physical well-being and lifestyle. The encroachment of screen time into their family routines, particularly outdoor activities, was something she found troubling.

“I want him to get enough physical activity. Otherwise, he’ll be with his laptop and his iPad all day, and then he won’t get that physical activity.”

Darika's efforts to mediate her son's digital engagement reflected a broader tension for parents about how to strike a balance between screen time and more traditional forms of play. She placed high value on the benefits of outdoor activities, which she feared would be compromised if digital play was not carefully regulated. For her, managing digital access was not merely about content, but also about protecting the rhythm and quality of everyday life.

Fiona offered a different perspective. While she also restricted her children's screen time, her concerns focused more directly on the cognitive and educational implications. She worried that excessive use of screens, particularly for boys, might undermine their ability to concentrate and engage meaningfully in schoolwork:

"If you look at some of the studies, you'll find that boys, the more time they spend on screens, specifically that have shorter attention span demands. Their ability to then focus and work productively in class decreases exponentially, so the more that I can give them sustained play and sustained unstructured play, the better it is for them."

Although Fiona acknowledged the educational value of digital devices, she remained cautious about their overuse at home. Her emphasis on limiting screen exposure was based on the belief that unstructured outdoor play was more conducive to developing focus and resilience. In this way, her perspective echoed Darika's while introducing a more explicitly cognitive rationale for reducing digital engagement.

5.5 Mothers' Concerns about Children's Outdoor Play across Cultures

5.5.1 Safety concerns for independent outdoor play

Most mothers recognised the importance of providing children with regular access to outdoor play. However, for mothers who had migrated from cultural contexts distinct from Scotland's, safety concerns often emerged when engaging in outdoor activities. They tended to stress the need for adult supervision, which contrasted with the freedom they had experienced in childhood. This tension between their past experiences and their current beliefs regarding adult supervision was particularly clear in Batima's account:

"It's not that parents accompany you to the outdoor areas. They let you go and play. It's a small rural area, it's very safe. There are other kids playing on the street, and you just go and join them and do whatever you want to do spontaneously. There is no specific supervision like the way I do to my children. I have to actually make an effort to take them out of the house and then go and take them to the playground."

Ekib reflected on her childhood outdoor play environment, describing it as "safe" for her free play. In contrast to her child, she noted that the neighbourhood environment surrounding their houses did not support Eshe's free outdoor play. Consequently, Eshe's access to outdoor play was limited to safer environments, such

as a specific “playground”. Ekib explained her safety concerns stemmed from the different street construction between Scotland and her native country:

“It’s actually different in Egypt because we always play outside all the houses together. So we have our free time when we go to the street. It was safe because we lived in like side street. So it was very safe to go and play together. So it was fun time. But I think in the UK we don’t have this so much. We have maybe ... our garden, our space, but it’s not safe maybe to play in the street like we used to do in my country.”

The interview with Ekib was conducted at her home. It was a detached house located in a neighbourhood beside the main road. In front of her house, there was a moderately busy street that allowed cars to pass. From Ekib’s account, the concept of “street” seemed to hold different meanings across cultural and geographical contexts. In her native country, the side street was seen as an extension of the private sphere, a shared space with the neighbours where children could play freely. Fewer vehicles passing through and the community trust reduced parents’ concerns about children’s free outdoor play. Conversely, the streets in her Scottish neighbourhood were public and bustling with cars. Ekib also mentioned that they had recently moved to this neighbourhood. This meant that she and her family may not yet have developed strong social connections with the neighbours, which further contributed to her hesitation to allow Eshe to play outdoors unsupervised. Due to these safety concerns,

Ekib tended to arrange parties with Eshe's friends in their backyard garden every weekend, allowing them to play outdoors.

While in the later interview with Ekib's daughter, Eshe expressed a desire for her autonomy in her outdoor play and engaging more free play:

Eshe: I like free play, just me and my friends.

Jianing: What if your mom isn't at home and you want to play? Can you go out?

Eshe: No, I need to be home.

The differing perspectives of Ekib and Eshe highlighted a conflict in their beliefs about autonomy in outdoor play. While Ekib had enjoyed free outdoor play during her own childhood and continued to believe in its developmental benefits, her parenting practices were shaped by the realities of living in a different cultural and environmental context. Her heightened concerns about safety, particularly in what she perceived to be a less familiar and potentially riskier setting, led to a reliance on adult supervision. This, in turn, limited her daughter's opportunities for autonomous play. Despite Eshe's apparent preference for independent outdoor experiences, her ability to engage in such play remained constrained by the availability of adult supervision.

5.5.2 Discrimination.

A similar tension emerged in my conversation with Li. She recalled a free, more autonomous childhood during which she played unsupervised on the grasslands and

riverbanks near her home because “*All neighbours were very close, we knew each other well.*” However, she found it challenging to allow her child the same freedom in outdoor play, as she perceived Scotland to be less safe than her home country. When I inquired whether her son played outdoors after school, she explained:

“Now that he’s made friends, he usually heads straight home after school. Unless the weather is really nice, I might let him play outside for a bit. He rides his bike home, and I always make sure he’s back by 5:20 PM because I need to guarantee his safety. I told him, “If you’re not home by then, I’ll have to call the police.” The school is about a 13-minute drive from our house, and I also need to ensure the safety of my other child. So, there’s not much time for me to supervise him to play outside—maybe just 5 minutes at most before they have to hurry back home.”

In the interview with Li, her use of phrases such as “call the police” if the children did not return home as scheduled reflected a tension between protecting her children and fostering their independence. Although such an attitude and method might be interpreted in the Scottish context as overly protective, it becomes more comprehensible when viewed through the lens of her experiences as a migrant mother. According to Li, both she and her children had encountered instances of discrimination. Her son had been bullied at his previous school, and she herself had witnessed discriminatory behaviour while waiting to collect him from school.

“Once my youngest boy told me that a child used some words related to racial discrimination towards him after school, and he did not know how to react. That child was older than him, so I asked why he said that to my child. He explained that it was just for fun. I told him that it was not funny at all; if my child said something hurtful to him, he could respond in kind. I asked him to apologise to my child, and he did say sorry afterwards. I told my child that if he experiences something similar, he needs to let me know. I will speak to the parent or the headteacher to resolve it as soon as possible.”

These experiences of racial discrimination and her broader position as a migrant mother in a culturally unfamiliar environment significantly shaped her views on safety and autonomy. Although Li had lived in Scotland for over a decade, she still did not feel entirely secure in allowing her children to play outdoors unsupervised. The demands of her daily life reinforced her protective stance, as she needed to work until late, which left little time to support her children’s outdoor play. Thus, her parenting decisions around autonomy emerged from the intersections of migrant discriminatory experience, perceived cultural difference, and practical time constraint.

5.6 The Weather Conditions for Outdoor Play

Weather emerged as a recurring theme in my conversations with mothers, shaping both attitudes and practices around children’s outdoor play. Scotland is

known for its strong winds and frequent rainfall, especially during the winter months. It is common to see children playing outside despite light drizzle. However, for families who migrated from countries with significantly different climates, outdoor play in wet weather was not fully encouraged.

Mothers' attitudes influenced children's perceptions. In many of the families I interviewed, especially those from warmer, drier regions, playing in the rain was often associated with illness risks and therefore restricted by adults. Gabriela, for example, worried that her children would get sick from playing in the rain:

"I don't want to go when it's rainy, because they can get sick very easily. So I don't really take them out in the rain."

Gabriela's cautious attitude towards outdoor play in wet weather may also influence her child. In a later interview, her daughter Gisel explained that she had not yet adjusted to the wet weather in Scotland, which was very different from the climate in her home country. She preferred to stay indoors, particularly when it was wet outside. Gabriela's concern about illness seemed to shape Gisel's association of outdoor play in the rain with negative experiences.

The local norms gradually shaped mothers' beliefs. Ayla's narrative echoed similar cultural logics but also traced a gradual process of adaptation. Reflecting on her own shifting perceptions, she described how her family's initial reluctance to venture out in rainy weather began to ease as they became more integrated into

Scottish life:

“We have overcome these cultural restrictions. In our culture, you don’t go out in the rain because you’re going to get sick, and you don’t go out when it is windy. Yeah, you know, you don’t do those things in our culture because you’re going to get sick, but here. They don’t like hiking somewhere and stuff like we have lived here for four years, it took us a lot of time to go to the mountain nearby. However, we were living five to ten minutes away from there. But yeah, because of the culture we never thought that. Why would you go to Mountain in the rain? Yeah, but, but it’s changing. It’s changing slowly.”

Ayla’s account illustrated a gradual renegotiation of her cultural beliefs regarding outdoor play in rainy weather, shaped over time by her family’s immersion in Scottish society. Initially guided by the norms of her home culture, where rain and wind were strongly associated with illness and thus discouraged as play conditions, Ayla found it challenging to embrace Scotland’s customs of playing in wet weather. She used the proximity of her home to a local mountain as a metaphor for this internal struggle. Hiking was not an outdoor activity her family was accustomed to in her native country, but was popular in Scotland. Despite living just minutes away, it took her family years to contemplate visiting it. Through this example, Ayla vividly conveyed the tension between her inherited attitude towards the ideal conditions for outdoor play and the practices she observed in her new environment. By the end of her

narrative, she acknowledged that her previous beliefs had begun to shift under the influence of local norms. Scottish attitudes toward outdoor play, marked by a sense of openness and adaptability, gradually reshaped her perceptions and daily practices, revealing the complex, ongoing negotiation in the lives of migrant families.

The school practice increased mothers' acceptance. Some mothers noted that their children's schools in Scotland were well-prepared for outdoor activities, even in wet weather. Zhang expressed her surprise at the extent to which schools in Scotland embraced outdoor learning, even in less-than-ideal weather. Her memories of childhood included being promptly called indoors at the first sign of drizzle. Yet her child's school experiences challenged that expectation:

"I think they have lots of outdoor activities, even if it's raining outside, like drizzling, it does not seem to be a problem for them."

Although she found it was uncommon in her culture, she believed the school would be responsible for taking care of the children. She told me, *"If the teacher thinks it was acceptable, it must be safe."* Her child may be influenced by her open attitude to the rain; she was also positive towards playing outdoors in the rain. She explained that she sometimes enjoyed it because *"the noise was cool."*

Imaan offered a similarly reflective perspective, explaining that rather than viewing wet weather as a barrier, Scottish schools treated it as a condition to be managed through preparation:

“I think every time the weather permits. Or if it’s just like a little drizzle, um, they will encourage the children to play outside with proper clothes on.”

These accounts illustrated how mothers from diverse cultural backgrounds began to reconceptualise outdoor play in wet weather as a culturally situated practice shaped by personal beliefs and wider social and institutional norms. In the Scottish context, appropriate clothing, school practices, and local attitudes toward weather collectively work to reframe what constitutes acceptable risk. Rather than evaluating which cultural perspective on weather and play is ‘correct’, my intention in presenting these narratives is to highlight how parental beliefs are reconfigured through processes of cultural adaptation. These shifting understandings, in turn, shape children’s own attitudes toward outdoor play. As seen in several examples, the cautious perspectives held by mothers regarding rain and illness often filtered into their children’s preferences, while exposure to new norms—particularly through school—opened up alternative ways of engaging with the outdoors.

5.7 Mothers’ Attitude towards the Relationship Between Outdoor Play and Learning

Many mothers also spoke about the contrast they perceived between the role of outdoor play in their native cultures and in Scotland. In particular, they reflected on how outdoor play and learning were often in opposition during their own childhoods,

both at home and within the school environment. This contrasted with their observations of Scotland's play-based educational approach, where outdoor play is more integrated into pedagogical practices. To better understand how the mothers interpret the relationship between play and learning for their children, this section first explores their childhood experiences. It then considers how their past encounters continue to shape their current perspectives on outdoor play.

5.7.1 Constrain outdoor playtime in childhood.

Strict after-school schedules set up by mothers. A few mothers described how outdoor play was not part of their daily routine in childhood, often constrained by cultural expectations that prioritised academic achievement over leisure. The duration of play was carefully monitored, as spending too much time outdoors could be interpreted by adults as a sign that the child was not working hard enough.

Chloe, for example, recalled that her opportunities for outdoor play in Hong Kong were extremely limited. There were few accessible outdoor spaces in her neighbourhood, and the only nearby park she occasionally visited was small and crowded. Due to her mother's safety concerns, the major play area for her was the city's public library, where she could meet and talk with other children in a more controlled environment. Although she was sometimes permitted to play at a friend's house, her after-school routine was tightly scheduled and filled with homework, piano practice, and indoor activities. Outdoor play was also strictly timed: "I was only allowed to play for ten minutes," she recalled, "otherwise you might be questioned,

like, why aren't you home yet?"

From Chloe's description, it was clear that her parents did not view play as an important part of childhood. This impression was confirmed when she reflected further:

"Oh, definitely not encouraged to play. Yeah, so no one mentioned the importance of play. I think that the first time I heard about the importance of play was when I was in university."

Beyond physical constraints, cultural beliefs and adult attitudes played a significant role in shaping her limited engagement with outdoor play. As she recounted, her playtime was strictly monitored, lasting only about ten minutes per day before her family would call her back home. Her daily routine was structured around academic work and extracurricular training, leaving little room for outdoor play. In Chloe's childhood context, learning was prioritised far above play, which was often perceived as unproductive or even indulgent. However, her views began to shift during her university studies, when she was first introduced to theories highlighting the developmental value of play in early childhood. This educational exposure prompted her to reflect on her own upbringing critically and to begin reconstructing her beliefs about play.

Chloe chose not to replicate the attitudes towards play that she had grown up

with. Instead, she actively encouraged her son to engage in a wide range of outdoor activities. The school he attended further supported this approach by offering rich opportunities for outdoor play, reinforcing Chloe's belief that play need not be separated from learning. Reflecting on her evolving perspective, she remarked that she now viewed "play as a form of learning"—a significant departure from the binary opposition between play and study that had shaped her own early years.

For Zhang, her opportunities for outdoor play were even more restricted than Chloe's; from Primary 1 onwards, she was regularly enrolled in after-school tutoring classes, which significantly limited her time for outdoor activities.

"I think the first year in primary school might be the changing point for them. Before that, they did not care about my homework. But after P1, they started letting me go to many after-school learning classes. Compared with outdoor play time, they valued learning more."

In Zhang's culture, children began developing the foundation for future academic achievement in primary school. In order not to let Zhang "lose at the balkline", her parents hoped she could keep learning after school. Except for the consideration of learning outcomes, Zhang further explained that her parents' busy work schedule might be another reason contributing to her limited free outdoor play hours:

"The other reason for the after-school class may be because, well, it was not only

about academic achievement, but also studying there kind of releasing them from taking care of me. They were both full-time doctors in the hospital, and they did not have much time to take care of me. so I think this might be the other reason, I think.”

Once Zhang entered the schooling system, her after-school time became increasingly structured around academic activities and learning clubs. She recalled having little opportunity to play outdoors with friends after starting primary school; this may be because her primary task, as perceived by teachers and parents, was to achieve high grades. Additionally, her parents’ intense work commitments required an alternative form of childcare, with after-school study programmes fulfilling a dual purpose: supporting academic achievement and alleviating the burden of direct supervision.

Regarding the education for her child, Zhang expressed a clear departure from the beliefs embedded in her native cultural context, where highly structured academic routines were often prioritised over play. Instead, she advocated for a more balanced approach that respected children’s need for unstructured play. Reflecting on her own upbringing, she explained:

“Actually, my past has a great influence on me. Just like I mentioned earlier, I started attending after-school classes from P1, so I felt my childhood was too boring. After coming to Scotland, I hope that my child does not have to “juan”

(A Chinese term popularised online, “juan” refers to involution—a form of escalating competition where individuals feel pressured to work increasingly harder just to keep up, often leading to exhaustion and diminishing returns.) I hope she can have a happy childhood and play more.”

Zhang’s narrative revealed how her childhood experiences, shaped by an intense focus on academic success and limited play opportunities, informed her current parental choices. Rather than reproducing the cultural beliefs she had internalised while growing up, she recognised the detrimental effects of a childhood deprived of play, both in terms of developmental potential and emotional wellbeing. Her critical awareness of the pressures associated with educational ‘involution’ allowed her to reframe play not as a distraction from learning, but as a vital part of a happy and healthy childhood. After moving to Scotland with her child, she gained a deeper understanding of the outdoor play practices within the school’s educational system, which made her more supportive of her child’s free play. In doing so, Zhang actively resisted the cultural expectations she had grown up with, choosing instead to create space for her daughter to engage freely in outdoor play and to enjoy a more holistic early-life experience.

In their interviews, both Chloe and Zhang recounted how strict parental restrictions on outdoor play shaped their childhood experiences. In many Asian societies, there is a deeply rooted belief that “knowledge can change your destiny”, reinforcing social expectations that children must devote themselves to academic

success in order to secure a place at a prestigious university. This belief, often intensified by competitive and densely populated educational environments in countries such as China and India, positions learning as the child's primary task, with outdoor play perceived as a distraction rather than a developmental opportunity.

However, the beliefs these mothers inherited from their upbringing were not fixed. In the cases of Chloe and Zhang, both critically reflected on their own educational experiences and expressed concerns about the potential side effects of overly structured academic childhoods. By perceiving higher education and observing Scottish early childhood practices, where play-based education was widely encouraged, they became more appreciative of the value of outdoor play. Consequently, they intentionally diverged from the parenting models they had grown up with and instead encouraged outdoor play as part of their children's daily routines, viewing it not as an interruption to learning but as an essential part of it.

Although this study does not investigate the broader economic or historical forces shaping educational pressures in certain Asian countries, the narratives gathered reveal how parental beliefs about outdoor play and learning are shaped, challenged, and transferred into a new cultural context. The examples of Chloe and Zhang demonstrate how migrant parents actively navigated between inherited cultural values and the new educational landscapes they encountered in Scotland.

Marginalisation of Outdoor Play at School. Some mothers described how outdoor play was either marginalised or absent in the schools they attended in their

native countries, particularly when contrasted with their children's experiences in Scottish education. The integration of play into learning was uncommon in their own education. In some cases, outdoor play was perceived as a distraction from academic work or even as a sign of not studying hard enough.

Ekib's account vividly illustrated how outdoor time in her primary school was not associated with relaxing or learning, but with punishment. She recalled that physical education (PE) was not part of the official curriculum, and students rarely experienced structured opportunities for outdoor activity. Instead, outdoor spaces were often repurposed as disciplinary tools, reinforcing negative associations with outdoor time:

“Actually, the school system was for punishment, not for playing...Because if someone made any mistake, they sent him or her outside just for punishment. So we couldn't have any outdoor time. Yeah. Our break time, we used to collect the rubbish from the playground. Okay. It was a very, very big ground. So we didn't have like a proper PE session in my country”

Ekib then described her experience as a teacher in Egypt, where she often questioned whether she was on the right path in educating young children. She recalled her discomfort with the system, where children were frequently overwhelmed by excessive homework and confined indoors for most of the day. These concerns became more pronounced during her pregnancy, prompting her to reflect on whether

she wanted her own children to endure a similar schooling experience.

Her understanding of the value of outdoor play began to shift significantly during her postgraduate studies in education in Scotland. Through her academic engagement with outdoor learning theories and educational research, she developed a deeper appreciation of the developmental benefits associated with outdoor experiences. She also observed that her children's schools in Scotland placed greater emphasis on play, incorporating it meaningfully into the daily curriculum. As a result, her children enjoyed school more and had more opportunities to play and explore.

“But later, when I came here—no, I found it very encouraging, very helpful for encouraging outdoor spaces and learning. So it was, yeah, better. So the school, like her primary school, offered a lot of different outdoor activities during the school days… So we can go outside to learn. Yeah. So they have this flexibility here.”

Reflecting on her earlier experiences, Ekib noted that the restrictive schooling environment in her home country shaped her desire to seek more supportive and child-centred educational opportunities for her children. She contrasted her own encounters with what she observed in her children's school in Scotland, which offered more inclusive and play-oriented approaches to education. This exposure, combined with her postgraduate studies in outdoor learning, enabled her to develop a deeper understanding of the role that outdoor play can have in children's holistic

development. Her evolving beliefs about outdoor play and learning were shaped by a process of critical reflection, which involved the limitations of her own schooling and the observation of her children in Scottish educational practices and knowledge from academic research.

Imaan shared that although her family offered her great opportunities to access the outdoors, her school in Indonesia placed a strong emphasis on academic achievement rather than outdoor play, and she noted that this remains the case in some schools in Indonesia today. She indicated that this might be aligned with parents' high expectations because children are "*expected to study and deliver your academic achievement at school*". Moreover, her outdoor playtime at school was mainly limited to PE classes, where activities were highly structured by the teacher. Consequently, opportunities for free play were rare and occurred only occasionally, typically during the PE assessment periods. As she recalled,

"Usually, when the teacher was assessing scores for something and the other students were waiting to be assessed, we would just play with whatever we could at the time."

At the time of our interview, she was pursuing her Master's degree in outdoor learning. This learning experience offered her a new insight into her child's development. In contrast to her own schooling experiences, Imaan expressed a different outlook when discussing her daughter's education. Like Ekib, she believed

that being immersed in outdoor environments is, in itself, a valuable learning process.

5.7.2 Encouraging outdoor play

Parents encourage outdoor play without identifying its value. Among the mothers I interviewed from Europe and North America, outdoor play was generally described as a natural and accepted part of daily life. Unlike the more structured or restricted accounts shared by participants from other regions, these mothers recalled few limitations on their outdoor experiences during childhood. In many cases, their parents valued these moments as opportunities for a break. However, it was indicated that the awareness of outdoor play's benefits was not recognised among most families.

Hannah, for instance, described her mother's affection for the outdoors, which shaped her own early connection to nature.

“We loved being outdoors. Moreover, just my mom's engagement with the outdoors was, she was very interested in wildflowers and identifying flowers and a few certain, um, you know, trees or butterflies or things like that.”

For Hannah, spending time outdoors was not something to schedule or negotiate; it was part of family life. Walking in nature, learning about plants and animals, and following her mother's curiosity about the natural world provided moments of learning and bonding. In a later interview, Hannah reflected that this early exposure

fostered her appreciation for the environment and shaped her educational beliefs about her own children, emphasising the importance of outdoor play and interaction with their surroundings in children's cultural formation.

Fiona, who grew up on a farm in the countryside of Texas and pursued her PhD in education in Scotland, offered a different but related perspective. Her time outdoors was closely tied to the routines of farm life, where work and play often overlapped. She recalled:

“I don't think it was ever a second thought that my parents ever paid to the fact that we were going to be outside and we were going to spend most of our time outside”

In Fiona's family, outdoor time was inevitable and was not considered valuable because of its potential benefits for children's development. Being outdoors was inseparable from the labour and responsibilities of farm life, and as such, it was rarely discussed or intentionally cultivated. For Fiona's parents, the idea that outdoor play could be “good” for children may have felt redundant, as it was so embedded in their way of life that it required no justification.

What emerges from these narratives is a shared pattern: while outdoor play was accepted and even welcomed, it was not always explicitly valued or understood as an essential component of children's development. For some parents, it provided a practical break from caregiving; for others, it was integrated into daily routines of

work or exploration. In these accounts, outdoor play was normalised, but not necessarily theorised.

Fiona and Hannah's beliefs about outdoor play and learning were shaped early on by their families' attitudes, but these perspectives were later reshaped through their professional engagement in education. In their childhoods, outdoor play was not positioned as something separate from learning, nor was it explicitly discussed in developmental terms. Instead, it was simply part of everyday life, a natural activity embedded in the routine of family and community.

However, through their later academic studies and work in the field of education, both Fiona and Hannah began to engage more critically with the concept of play-based learning. Their studies in educational theories and observations of practices encouraged them to reconsider their previously held beliefs. Outdoor play transitioned from a mere activity to a vital pedagogical tool. As educators, they began to recognise the benefits of integrating play into school curricula and came to see outdoor play as essential for children's development and well-being.

Outdoor play was valued in school. Gabriela and Li shared memories of enjoying outdoor play at school and noted that it was incorporated into the school's schedule without being overshadowed by academic demands.

Gabriela, who grew up in Paraguay, described her school as having designated outdoor playtime and a playground for students. She believed that outdoor play was encouraged in her culture.

“We had two recess times during the school day, and it was like there was plenty of room, there was a park and plenty of places to play in my school. we would get together with all of the girls and pretend that we were superheroes. Sometimes we would have to face the boys who were our enemies and stuff like that. My parents and teachers encouraged our outdoor play, it was common.”

Gabriela illustrated a school environment that not only supported but actively facilitated outdoor play, providing specific time and space for children to engage in such activities. This positive attitude towards play at school may be influenced by broader cultural expectations in Paraguay, as Gabriela emphasised that both the school and her parents encouraged outdoor play. It suggested that outdoor time was highly valued in her native country, contributing to a cultural belief that promoted active engagement with the outdoors.

Li grew up in a rural village rich in natural resources, and the competition in her town was considerably less intense than in the capital cities. She described enjoying playing with plentiful natural elements at school, which was full of trees, grass, and flowers. There were also simple slides for the students to use during recess. Occasionally, the school’s teachers would guide them in making soy milk and watering the plants. The headteacher reused the wall in their backyard as a canvas for the children to paint creatively. Regarding her outdoor play at school, Li shared:

“One day a week, all students would clean the backyard together; you know, that was actually free play time for the kids, although we did have the tasks. The teachers sometimes led us to do some outdoor activities and encouraged us to play together.”

Regarding the relationship between outdoor play and learning, Li shared that although they had homework after school, the study task was not too heavy to occupy their outdoor play time: “I mean our primary task was still studying, but we got time to play outside as well.”

Although her outdoor play was sometimes structured by the teacher and associated with work, such as cleaning duty, she still regarded it as fun and joyful because they were not indoors. Li explained that children could often find ways to break away from the set rules and create their own spaces for free play. In contrast to other mothers from Eastern Asian cultures, Li reported a less academic-centred school experience. This difference may be attributed to the location of her hometown, which was a rural village far from city centres. People were more focused on small businesses or farm work, so they did not view going to college as the most important standard of success, which may have potentially reduced competitive pressure for academic achievements.

Both Gabriela and Li expressed that the only expectation they held for their

children was to have a “happy childhood” and did not have high requirements regarding academic achievement. In their words, as long as their children could follow the school’s schedule and focus while studying, they did not want to impose additional academic demands.

Gabriela emphasised the value of outdoor play as a space where her children could independently initiate social interactions and explore the natural environment. She saw outdoor play as a fertile ground for nurturing creativity and imagination and developing social skills, which she highly valued in her children’s development. Li emphasised her children’s mental health and wished them to be resilient. She believed that outdoor play played a crucial role in reducing her children’s anxiousness, and it offered a space for them to build confidence through physical engagement and peer interaction development.

5.8 Conflicts Between Mothers’ Native Cultural Beliefs and Scottish Perspectives on Outdoor Play

When migrant mothers spoke about their attitudes towards outdoor play and learning, most expressed that their perspectives were largely aligned with those of Scottish schools. However, in the cases of Ayla and Janka, both mothers indicated a deeper conflict between their growing trust in the Scottish educational system and the lasting influence of their own cultural values and educational experiences.

Ayla’s reflections highlighted this conflict. She described her early schooling as heavily focused on academic success, with students punished if they did not achieve a

“good score” on exams. Under this pressure, her after-school hours were consumed by homework, leaving little room for relaxation or recreation. As she put it, “We always had homework, so we were doing homework. Before or after, I don’t know, whenever.” Within this system, outdoor play was discouraged by both home and school. Ayla recalled how being seen outdoors could be questioned by adults:

“Spending time outside, like, even teacher, our teacher was living close to our house and she would be like, oh, why are you outside? Why aren’t you studying? Alternatively, my mom would say that the teacher has put the camera in our house, that was a trauma for us.”

The fear of not performing well academically had been deeply internalised. She recounted a painful memory of receiving punishment in her early years at school, describing how her teacher would ask students to stand and read aloud, and how, as a young child, she was beaten for being unable to recognise two letters:

“I remember that my teacher would ask two people to stand up, like in second grade, or I don’t know, first grade. I remember being beaten in my first grade because I couldn’t read these two letters.”

She then reflected on her children’s school life in Scotland. She was relieved to know that her children had more access to play and did not receive too much pressure

from school,

“Here they pay more attention, being happy, being fun and like my son goes to school and comes out, and he’s like, how was your school? And he’s like, I had fun!”

However, as she recalled, her hard work in the past significantly contributed to her current life, which she felt satisfied with. Regarding her son’s play and learning, she shared, “This is one of my weakest points, and also it’s where I feel immigrant identity very much.” She found it challenging to fully accept the practices and beliefs of another culture.

“For me and my husband. It has taken so much to come where we are now. We are working at this university and I did my PhD. Now he’s doing his PhD, so we have achieved all those things by working hard, really, really hard. It comes from childhood, like we have been studying all our lives

Although Ayla disagreed with the cultural emphasis on overemphasising academic achievement while neglecting the importance of outdoor play, she still felt its influence when educating her son. She describes her mind as battling between two cultures. On the one hand, she understood and valued the principles of Scottish education, which emphasise the developmental significance of play. On the other

hand, her personal belief, rooted in her native culture and shaped through years of effort, led her to question whether play-based learning could adequately prepare her child for the future.

“Because I am in childhood studies myself, I know the theory, I know play and all those things, but because of my childhood ... But for my son, things are a bit easier. Things are a bit like given already, he has so many toys, he has so many clubs, he gets many things, and he gets entertained a lot. Sometimes we feel like he takes it for granted, so he doesn't study. He doesn't put enough effort... so that's why I scare him sometimes that you will end up on the streets, you have to think about your life and stuff. So yeah, he does play a lot, sometimes too much.

Ayla's narrative reflected a conflict embedded in living between different cultures. While she wanted to offer her children the freedom she had not enjoyed in her childhood, she was anxious that it might have a negative effect on her children's development. She disagreed with the cultural beliefs about outdoor play and learning in her native culture, yet was simultaneously deeply influenced by them and by her path to her current life. Although she wished her son to enjoy outdoor play, the lack of homework and structured learning time after school made her worry that her child might not gain enough knowledge at school.

This conflict between mothers' inherited beliefs and those of Scottish schools was also evident in Batima and Janka's account. Batima compared her childhood

experience with her child's; she agreed that education in Scotland was particularly beneficial for fostering children's confidence and self-expression. However, she hoped her child could spend more time learning.

"I think we're on the other edge of that scale where they believe that they're so brilliant and so cool. Nice, but they still have to, maybe it would be nice to know something, I think it's about sort of fighting with your own mind, like, learning from your own culture that, oh, should I push him a bit or is this not right here? ... I'm trying to balance, exactly. "

Janka shared that she studied at a private school in Hungary and was always one of the top-tier students. Perhaps due to her excellent work, she did not encounter additional pressure from her family regarding academics. Nevertheless, she admitted that her school enforced strict discipline on the academic schedule, which restricted time for outdoor play. She reflected on her childhood experiences and lamented that, in school, she spent most of her time indoors, whereas in Scotland outdoor play was integrated into learning, and she found that her child enjoyed it immensely.

"In my school, I mean, learning was definitely confined to the classroom. All the rest is well, the children are allowed to play, and that's, you know, it's fine, but it's not part of the learning. Here, I would say that in the nursery, Juli had specific days when they would do outdoor learning. They would do the forest school with

one or two parents accompanying them. Even if not, I think the nursery had little corners in their garden where they could plant trees. Where it was specifically part of the education process to observe.”

Janka described how her daughter’s nursery supported outdoor play and purposefully structured learning opportunities through nature-based experiences, such as Forest School sessions and gardening activities. She demonstrated a positive attitude towards the school’s arrangements and acknowledged the educational value of the various outdoor play activities.

However, she also expressed uncertainty and doubt, particularly when reflecting on her older child’s lack of homework. Although she appreciated the emphasis on outdoor play and emotional well-being, she remained unsure about whether sufficient academic learning was taking place:

Like my son hasn’t had homework and he’s S2. But we did get our children a teacher after school... that’s more my conviction that I just see on them. If they need it, they need it. We’re just so lucky to have it. Um, so although it’s not schoolwork that they would need to concentrate on, I think it’s, it’s a balance that is probably needed by the kids just to have their quiet time as well. And, uh, and this active, movement time for which it’s really necessary that they have a little bit of space at least. And I feel really concerned because I don’t know, like if they understand the knowledge perfectly, but then I think, um, this school system is not

about knowledge, not in primary school.

Janka expressed her conflicting feelings about balancing her children's outdoor play with their learning time. The misalignment between her beliefs and the school's approach led her to compensate by teaching her children at home for extra hours after school. Janka appreciated the benefits of play-based learning in the Scottish school system, but she was not fully convinced that outdoor play could contribute to children's academic learning.

All three migrant mothers made significant efforts to study and work diligently to establish their careers within a cultural context markedly different from their own. They recognised and criticised the psychological strain caused by the academic pressures embedded in their native cultures, yet they were still deeply influenced by the belief that academic achievement was a major measure of success. Therefore, when placed in a new cultural setting that emphasised the role of outdoor play in children's education, they found themselves grappling with conflicting values. The conflict, in essence, arose from the contrast between two opposing cultural beliefs regarding the relationship between play and learning. Their experiences reflected an ongoing negotiation—an attempt to reconcile these differences. They found a meaningful balance that aligned with both their expectations for their children and the new beliefs they had begun to embrace within the Scottish educational context.

The generating conflict might reflect limited communication between home and school. Due to their lack of experience in involving children in play-based learning,

they were uncertain about how outdoor play and learning are structured and how this would benefit their children's academic development. Even when they supported the underlying principles of play-based education, a lack of clear dialogue with educators could sometimes hinder their complete trust in the approach. In this case, transparent, culturally situated communication between school and home could help families understand and engage with alternative pedagogical models.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter explores how the attitudes and beliefs of migrant mothers regarding outdoor play were shaped and reshaped by the influence of two cultures. By reflecting on their childhood experiences, the mothers shared their varied perspectives on children's outdoor play. The conflicts between their cultural beliefs and those of the Scottish school are also revealed in the interviews.

In the first section, the mothers compared the play facilities from their childhood with those of their children. They noted that the increasing prevalence of digital devices in both school and home settings considerably affected the nature of children's play. Although mothers acknowledged the potential benefits of digital play, they also expressed concerns that their children might become addicted to it, which could reduce the time spent outdoors. Hence, they employed various strategies to limit their children's screen time and access to digital devices.

Some mothers expressed their concerns about letting children play independently outdoors. The lack of community trust and access to nearby playgrounds made the

mother feel unsafe letting her children play outside unsupervised, which also constrained their autonomy in outdoor play. The experience of discrimination was another factor that led the mother to limit her children's outdoor free play time. As a mother from another culture, and witnessing her child's racial discrimination near the school, her attitude toward unsupervised free play tended to be more cautious and protective.

The influence of the differing climates between their native countries and Scotland on children's outdoor play was mentioned multiple times during the interviews. The mothers' accounts illustrated how their attitudes affected children's perceptions of outdoor play in wet weather and how their prior cultural beliefs changed after observing how the school supported children's outdoor play practices on rainy days.

The last section discussed how the mothers' own childhood experiences and the traditional cultural beliefs surrounding outdoor play and academic learning continued to shape their parenting. Most mothers experienced different levels of demands on academic achievement, and outdoor play was often marginalised or discouraged by both schools and families. However, through their own educational journeys and critical reflection, many came to recognise the value of outdoor play in supporting children's holistic development, which aligned with current cultural beliefs about Scottish schools.

Meanwhile, some mothers also reported a conflict when it came to fully embracing the play-based learning approach adopted in Scotland, as it contrasted with

their experience. Although they acknowledged the developmental benefits of outdoor play, they doubted whether the amount of playtime provided at school might influence the academic learning outcomes. This conflict reflected a process of navigating between cultural expectations that highly valued academic achievement and the more child-centred education practices they encountered in their new cultural context.

Chapter Six: Findings: Perspectives and Drawings of Multicultural Children

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the stories of children from multicultural families, focusing on their experiences of outdoor play. The narratives are grounded in the children's voices, with their mothers' perspectives interwoven to provide background information and context. Before each interview, the children were invited to draw their favourite outdoor play activities. These drawings are featured at the start of each child's story. The images not only capture their experiences in the physical world but also reveal glimpses of their unfolding inner worlds (Wigglesworth, 2017). Consequently, at the beginning of each story, I offer an interpretation of the child's drawing before reading their words, attempting to uncover what they might have wanted to express but did not articulate verbally. Each section begins by introducing the interview context and sharing my impressions of the child. The stories then unfold, weaving together the significant and everyday moments in the children's narratives. The order in which these stories are presented is based on the sequence of the interviews.

6.2 Frank: Playing Sports with Neighbourhood Friends.

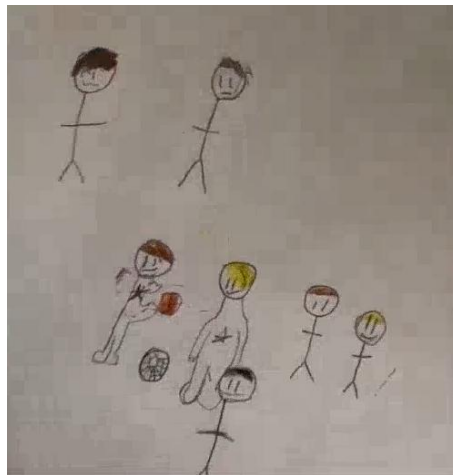
Frank was the first child I interviewed, and the arrangement was made online. Talking through the screen with the child I had not met in person made me feel awkward initially, but Frank seemed to sit comfortably in front of the screen. According to his mother, Fiona, he had been used to chatting with people online, especially after the

pandemic. However, I still found it challenging because I did not have time to get to know him, and I was not sure whether that was partially why his answer was so short.

6.2.1. Interpreting Frank's drawing

Figure 5.

"Friends are nice"



Before moving on to the interview, I would like to read Frank's drawing first, as it offered a compelling glimpse into how he experienced outdoor play. What first caught my attention was the way he emphasised the relationships, rather than a place in his drawing. There was no indication of the physical environment, no trees, buildings, or playground markings. Instead, what emerged were seven figures of boys, each distinguished by different hair colours and styles.

Two boys at the top of the drawing stood noticeably taller than the others, which

perhaps signalled an age difference. In the middle of the page, two boys with more details and marked with stars were guarding the football. I was drawn to the possibility that one of them was Frank himself. It suggested that, for Frank, outdoor play was deeply interwoven with friendship, social interactions, and the embodied joy of playing football together.

6.2.2 Playing sports as a medium to build friendship

Frank transferred to the school two years ago. Reflecting on his feelings at the start of the transition, he described it as “awkward and anxious”. Building new friendships was both a stressor and a motivator for his new school life.

“I got used to the new school, friends are nice ...All the kids started talking to me and all this stuff, and then we became friends.”

Dialogues naturally occurred between Frank and his peers on the first day of transferring to the new school. The curiosity towards a new student seemed to prompt his peers’ spontaneous dialogue with him. Meanwhile, play became a key medium for nurturing these initial connections. When I asked about the best thing in the new school, he replied without hesitation: *“Meeting to play with my friends!”*. Play for Frank was deeply entangled with the process of social integration and friendship-building. Throughout the interview, every play activity he mentioned involved companionship, including indoors and outdoors, at school and after school. This close relationship

between play and peer interaction was also vividly represented in his drawing (Figure 5), where the absence of a detailed background and the focus on a group of children playing together suggested that the social aspect of play was instrumental for him.

When discussing outdoor play, Frank immediately associated it with sports, such as football and basketball, which were Frank's favourite outdoor play activities. He excitedly shared his "happy play time" with me:

Weekly basketball! A ton of basketball!"

Such group play activities offered him rich opportunities to interact with his new peers. His mother reflected on the significance of sport in helping him adjust to his new cultural environment:

"Becoming a part of a group such as a sports team makes things easier, cause you already have common ground (to make friends)."

Through incorporation and collaboration with his team members, playing sports in the team seemed to offer Frank a sense of belonging. Furthermore, football was a familiar practice for Frank from his home country. His mother explained that the popularity of sports and the way schools organised sports teams were quite similar between the United States and Scotland. This sense of continuity may help him reduce stress and integrate quickly into the new school setting through shared activities and a

sense of belonging.

6.2.3 Play with different age groups

Fiona told me that Frank had attended an international school before moving to Scotland. She believed this background contributed to his confidence in engaging with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds within the school setting. It was evident in our later conversation when he introduced the characters in the drawing he created. Pointing to each figure on the paper, he named friends from various cultural backgrounds and age ranges. The group, he explained, included children “from Primary One all the way up to Secondary One”, and age was not a barrier in his world of play. On the contrary, it was something he embraced:

“I actually like talking with my friends from an older age because they would know what I’m talking about.”

Frank’s mother also spoke positively about these mixed-age interactions. From her observation, allowing children to play across age groups had great developmental benefits. She shared that older children often stepped into a scaffolding role, supporting their younger peers when difficulties emerged during Frank’s play. This dynamic encouraged both groups to develop skills in problem-solving and conflict resolution. “*The older teach the younger,*” she explained, “*and in some cases, support them to work through conflict. Teaching resolution is something you should learn from those who are*

older than you.”

In one of our conversations, Fiona reflected on how children in Frank’s playgroup regularly resolved their own disputes without adult involvement. Her tone carried both admiration and conviction:

“Children are very good at working out their own differences. It’s always when the adults put upon the children these predeterminations and judgments that you see conflict that can not be resolved. But now there’s never been a situation that they have not been able to resolve on their own.”

6.2.4 Neighbourhood bonds and the emergence of play autonomy

Fiona became part of what she described as the “walking community” connected to Frank’s school. Each day, she and Frank would walk home alongside other parents and children from the neighbourhood. Over time, she developed a close relationship with two other mothers in the group, whose children, in turn, formed strong friendships with Frank. As Fiona explained:

“One of those mothers has three children, the other one has two children. I have three children who attend the primary school, so you’re looking at a very large group all walking home together. If time allows, they’ll stay together and play. We’re only about two blocks from where both of those families live, so they’ll come over here.”

These daily walks home activity became more than a routine, but a social thread weaving families together. The walk in the outdoor from school to home offered a shared space in which parents could talk, exchange concerns, and gradually build trust, while children formed connections through shared experiences. For Fiona and Frank, this regular interaction deepened their sense of belonging in the local community.

The proximity of the other families' homes also helped reduce parental concerns about safety, particularly when it came to children playing outdoors without constant supervision. The children's growing autonomy in outdoor play seemed to emerge naturally from the trust fostered during these walks and the familiarity of the local environment. As Fiona remarked, with a tone of playful confidence, *"We have a park directly in front of our house. It's lovely, I can 'kick' them outside."*

6.3 Hope: Playing Football and Fostering Social Integration

6.3.1 Interpreting Hope's drawing

Figure 6. Hope's drawing



I first met Hope in their neighbourhood garden while interviewing her mother, Hannah. She ran to us, and Hannah introduced me to her; she was shy at the beginning. After finishing the interview with the mother, Hannah led me to their home, as Hope felt more comfortable being interviewed at home. Although it was unintentional, I did not specify that the drawing activity related to outdoor play. Instead, I asked her a simple, open-ended question: “What’s your favourite activity?” Without hesitation, Hope linked the question to play, responding: “*Could it be the playtime?*” which steered our conversation towards the theme of outdoor play, without any direct prompting from me.

Hope drew a group of girls playing football on the grassland, with three tall trees nearby. The entire picture depicted a large, open green space, free of concrete buildings and adult supervision. This environmental setting suggested it may be outside of school and was perceived by Hope as unstructured, free outdoor play.

All the girls playing football were depicted in the same size, colour, and style. Hope did not emphasise any individual within the group, suggesting she views herself as an integrated member of the team. Furthermore, the lack of emphasis on the individual features of her playmates suggested that ethnicity or cultural background was not significant for her during this play activity.

6.3.2 Structured play and social integration

Hope had transferred to her current school in Scotland just a year prior. Although she came from an English-speaking country, the shift into a new educational and

cultural context initially caused her stress. Her mother recalled that Hope struggled to adjust to the Scottish accent and found it challenging to keep up with literature reading during the first half of the school year. This period of adaptation also coincided with her first experience of joining a structured sports team.

“But that [learning at the new school] was a stressor. And maybe partly because of that, she really took to being here. It was the first time she’d really done organised sports, and she loved it, and she was like, PE is my favourite subject.”

Sports at school, which Hope’s mother referred to as more structured play, helped alleviate some of the academic pressure and facilitated Hope’s social integration within her new school environment. She reflected on Hope’s transition phase and said, “Sports was a way for her to feel really competent and like part of the group”. With adults guiding and leading the play activities, Hope found it easier to participate in group interactions, especially when she was still unfamiliar with her peers and the school setting and feeling overwhelmed by the new curriculum. The scaffolding provided by the adults during structured play seemed to offer her a sense of security and belonging, prompting her to engage confidently with the group.

Interestingly, football was not particularly popular in Hope’s native country, and she had never been involved in such play activities there. However, after moving to Scotland, Hannah and Hope realised that football held significant social value, as it almost served as a common cultural reference among Hope’s peers:

“Football was something we were never involved in, but here it was like pretty clear early on that like everybody does football and like you should do football and then you’ll know what’s up. So, I think it was like a big social draw for her to at least like try out playing, and so then it was like more of a social thing. So yeah, for her, it certainly helped her to find her place nice.”

In Hannah’s description, she used phrases such as “you should do,” “you will know what’s up,” “big social draw,” and “at least try out” when explaining the cultural expectations she felt about playing football in Scotland. This was found in Li’s description of her persuading her child to play football to make new friends at school, even though it was not a popular sport in her culture. Playing football was more than a simple sport for Hope and Hannah; it was a way to adapt to prevailing cultural norms and adopt socially recognised behaviours that allowed Hope to engage in meaningful interactions with peers. Hope explained to me that many of her peers play football at school, and she liked playing football because *“it’s nice being active and **getting to be in a team.**”* Playing football operated as a form of embodied cultural semiotics and became a physical and social practice that granted Hope access to the peer culture of her new environment and helped her negotiate her place within it.

6.3.3 Playing in and exploring neighbourhood nature

Hope spoke about her experiences playing football and basketball with peers and

neighbourhood friends, and I noticed that these activities mainly took place outside of the school context. At school, outdoor play was primarily limited to the lunch break, typically lasting 30 to 46 minutes under teachers' supervision. This relatively brief and structured period often constrained children's ability to engage in play forms that required sustained, uninterrupted time. Hope shared that:

"I like playing after school, usually because there's no set time that I have to get in."

The neighbourhood garden where Hope usually played after school was lush with greenery, featuring tall trees and several open, grassy areas surrounding the building. Although the overall space was not large, it was thoughtfully designed and offered distinct outdoor areas where children could explore and play freely. Moreover, the richness of the natural elements and wildlife, such as birds, squirrels and bees, provided Hope space with exploration. Hannah shared a moment that captured Hope's enjoyment of bird watching:

"This morning, actually, she was looking out the window while people were getting ready for school, and she ran up to me and told me about... She's like, 'Mom, I saw a robin! ... and she was so happy that she's like, 'Oh, I saw a blue tit and a blackbird and a robin,' and she was really like pleased about it and went and was like, showing my husband about it."

Hope gradually developed a connection to the natural environment through her daily interactions with the space and friends. Outdoor play in the neighbourhood had also become an important site for Hope's social connection. She mentioned in the early interview that she preferred to stay indoors to read after school. However, during one of our later conversations, while we were talking about her play experiences in the garden, she paused and suddenly added:

“Actually, if there are other people who are my friends outside, then I play outside.”

This spontaneous shift from staying indoors to playing outdoors highlighted the central role of peer relationships in shaping her motivation to engage in outdoor play. What drew her outdoors was not just the environment itself, but the connection to friends. Thus, the garden for Hope became a space with fewer structures and demands, encouraging relatively consistent, free social interaction.

Hannah also noticed this social shift in Hope's behaviour and reflected on the changes she had observed in recent weeks:

*“I have just recently seen her outside here, playing in the neighbourhood. I see her **more socially engaged with the kids here**, and I haven't seen that in a little while, so it's nice to see her running around and playing with kids here who are also in her class at school. So that tells me that, like, something social is going on; she's like expanding her friend group”*

Taken together, these reflections and observations demonstrate how the neighbourhood garden served not merely as a physical space for play, but as a socially and emotionally significant setting. It fostered Hope's connection to the natural world, granted her autonomy over her playtime, and facilitated the development of meaningful peer relationships. In contrast to the restricted, supervised play opportunities available at school, Hope perceived the communal garden, which offered a more expansive, child-centred environment, as a space to interact and connect with friends.

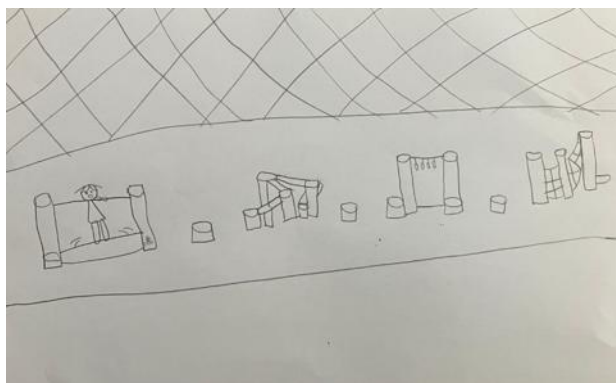
6.4 Zoe: Language in Outdoor Play

The interview with Zoe and her mother was conducted online. Although I attempted to speak with her directly, she felt uncomfortable interacting with someone she had never met in person. She preferred not to show her face on camera. During our interview, she whispered her answers to her mother, who then relayed them to me. According to her mother's account, Zoe had arrived in Scotland without knowing any English, yet I was surprised by her fluent English during the interview.

6.4.1 Interpreting Zoe's drawing:

Zoe shared her drawing with me by holding it up to the camera. She explained that the image represented her school's playground.

Figure 7.

Zoe's drawing

Notably, Zoe chose not to use any colour; the entire drawing was composed of black lines. She structured the drawing and divided it into three distinct sections. She positioned herself in the middle section, standing alone on one of the trim trails. The top section was densely filled with crosses, while the bottom remained entirely blank. The composition suggested a confined, perhaps even restrictive, outdoor environment. The absence of trees, grass, and natural elements, along with the predominance of stark lines and empty space, suggested that green space in her school setting might be limited or underutilised.

What was also interesting was Zoe's depiction of herself as the only figure in the entire scene. There were no other children, no signs of shared activities, and no visual references to social engagement. Her lone presence on the trim trail may suggest a preference for independent play, or, alternatively, raise the question of whether the school playground actively encouraged or supported peer interaction across different cultures.

6.4.2 “Language was not a barrier to making friends”

Zoe moved to Scotland with her mother three years ago, and this year she started Primary 1 at a new school. When she first arrived, Zoe could not speak any English, which was a significant concern for her mother, Zhang. However, despite these initial worries, Zoe adapted remarkably quickly to her new environment. Her teacher later told Zhang that Zoe calmed down almost immediately after receiving a warm hug—and soon she was playing with her classmates. Zhang described Zoe’s intercultural interactions with her peers, “Language was not a barrier for her to make friends!”

Although there were few children with similar cultural backgrounds, Zhang observed that Zoe formed meaningful friendships through play. Language did not impede her from carrying on intercultural interaction with her peers, even within a new cultural context. Zoe shared how she met her best friends from different cultural backgrounds, because they approached her when she transferred to the new school and invited her to join their play.

“They came to me and said, ‘Can I be your friend?’ Then we played together, and now we are friends.”

However, both Zoe and her mother expressed that the time allocated for play during the school day felt limited. Zhang shared that Zoe still often wanted to go outside and play with her friends after school, even when she was permitted for screen time. This desire for more outdoor play seemed to resonate with her drawing, which depicted a narrow play space with little interaction with other children. However, Zoe’s English was not as fluent as that of her peers who spoke it as a first language. The interactions in play were significant to her, and they did not necessarily need to be entirely verbal.

From her perspective, the school environment may not fully support or encourage this kind of embodied, intercultural exchange.

Aware of these limitations, Zhang often arranged for Zoe to attend after-school clubs and a local Girlguiding group. These organisations offered a rich mix of indoor and outdoor activities and provided important social settings for Zoe beyond the classroom. During my conversation with Zhang about these clubs and Zoe's playdates, Zoe suddenly leaned toward the screen and declared loudly:

"I love playing with my friends! Very, very much!"

Zhang laughed, affirming Zoe's enthusiasm, and added that her daughter was "absolutely crazy about playing with her friends", especially when they met in outdoor settings such as the large park near their neighbourhood. Whether during school break times, after-school clubs, or informal playdates, outdoor play served as a powerful medium through which Zoe connected with others.

6.5 Gisel: Nature Affection in Outdoor Play

I met Gisel in the communal garden of her neighbourhood. Her long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, weaving through the air with each of her lively movements. On interview day, her neighbourhood hosted a community celebration party in the backyard garden. Before we met, she was playing with her younger brother and neighbourhood friends around the trees. Gisel was going to Primary 6 this year, and her

expression skills were excellent. She seemed very comfortable in the natural environment, settling down on the grass with her back comfortably against a tree in a relaxed position when we started talking.

6.5.1 Interpreting Gisel's drawing

We sat on a patch of grass and used a tree stump as a table for drawing. She loved drawing, so when I introduced the idea that the interview would start with a drawing about her outdoor play, she became very excited and immediately started picking out the crayon colours. For Gisel, drawing itself was a form of play, as she later explained.

Figure 8.

Gisel's drawing



Gisel's drawing depicted her imagined ideal outdoor setting in which she and her best friend could play together. She drew a large sun at the top of the picture and underlined the word "Paraguay" within it. To Gisel, the outdoor play is associated with warm and sunny weather. By associating the sun with Paraguay, Gisel may connect the

sunny weather with her home country rather than Scotland.

The surrounding environment in her drawing features various forms of wildlife, including birds, a fox, and a ladybird on a tree. The image is visually divided into two halves, with Gisel and her friend positioned at the centre. Two trees are on either side of them, located at the left and right edges of the page. Gisel and her friend are embedded in the natural environment with the animals. This spatial arrangement may suggest her affection towards the outdoor nature.

Additionally, her friend's hair was wrapped in a hijab, suggesting that she and Gisel shared different religious backgrounds. In the drawing, both Gisel and her friend were smiling, their arms open wide in an expression of pure joy. Their body language captured the delight they shared in playing outdoors together.

6.5.2 Decreased outdoor play time at school

Although English was not Gisel's native language, she had experience studying in an international school in Paraguay, so she was accustomed to intercultural interactions with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, when she moved to her current school a year ago with her mother, her mother described her process of transition at the beginning as "*a fish in the water*"

Our conversation began with the question, "Do you like playing outdoors?" I did not specify the context in which this happened. Gisel looked down at the ground and answered:

“We don’t, quite play. Well, we normally just read during break time...I like reading”

She automatically linked my question to the outdoor play at the school’s setting, as she referred to “play” as something allowed during “break time.” Based on her answer, she may either not enjoy playing outdoors or may not have had many opportunities to play at school. This could be related to the fact that she was entering a higher grade, and the academic demands placed on her were increasing. The outdoor play time was potentially decreased and occupied with study tasks.

Gisel’s mother added that the outdoor play space at Gisel’s school was rather limited, which was another reason why Gisel did not perceive her school as a space that could afford rich play opportunities.

“My daughter doesn’t have a playground, it is just mainly a big building. They have gymnastics in the school, which is pretty small. But for activities that require more movement, they would pick a day to go to the park together.”

The limited availability of outdoor play space diminished Gisel’s motivation and interest in participating in activities during breaktime. Much of the area was dominated by concrete buildings, leaving little room for children to explore or create their own play in a natural setting. Along with the potential increasing demands on learning, Gisel was not provided enough access to outdoor play at school.

6.5.3 Gisel's story of her scary animal

Gisel did not show much enthusiasm when I first asked her about outdoor play. Sitting beside me in the communal garden, she wrinkled her nose slightly and said the cold and rainy weather in Scotland often made her feel “grumpy.” Going outside was not something she actively sought out, especially during the winter months. Even in summer, she associated strong sunlight with uncomfortable experiences from Paraguay, where she would burn easily. As she put it, it made her become “brownier.”

Initially, it appeared that outdoor play was not a subject that engaged her, but her attitude changed when our conversation shifted to animals. Gisel suddenly brightened and told me that she genuinely loved animals and discussed them frequently with her friends. She began enumerating all the creatures she liked before sharing her stories:

“I like almost every single animal, except for spiders and snakes. One time, there was a snake under my bed!”

Then she told the story of finding the snake under her bed when she was in Paraguay, her home country.

“It was in Paraguay, my home country, well, my mom, I didn't actually see this snake under my bed, but my mom did, and it was a grey snake, one of the scary ones! Luckily, it didn't have any teeth or wasn't poisonous, but my mom didn't know that ... when I was just like eating my dinner, my mom was cleaning. We forgot to

leave the door closed, and then as the snake slithered into the house without us noticing, and then crept under my bed, and then my mom wasn't just gonna like clean, clean under my bed, and then the snake popped out and scared her."

Her body language became more active as she began narrating her past experience with the "scary animal". I recorded this in my field notes:

She leaned in slightly, her voice rising with a mix of fear and excitement, and began recounting what had happened back in Paraguay. As she spoke, her words tumbled out quickly, full of vivid detail and childlike intensity. She jumped around the stump and her hands moved to mimic the slithering snake, and she spoke with a rhythm and drama that pulled me in. I was deeply attracted by her story. (fieldnote. 05/03)

Gisel was an excellent storyteller, and her vivid narratives explained why she was so scared of snakes. She was also a great observer; she noticed the snake's colour and physical details, such as "no teeth". This storytelling seemed to mark a shift in our interaction. From that point on, she was more at ease, more engaged. She invited me to follow her to her "secret spots" around the garden, which were places she liked to visit on her own.

6.5.4. Imitating the birdsong

As we strolled slowly down the garden path, her eyes started scanning the trees

above us. *“Today, this morning, I saw a few birds, and I tried to copy their sound.”* Gisela turned to me and said. Then, without warning, she broke into birdsong, imitating the high-pitched trill of the bird. The sound she made was startlingly accurate. I looked at her with wide eyes and clapped for her performance, and she was very pleased.

Spurred on by my reaction, she tilted her head and grinned: *“Maybe I can try to make the sound of a crow?”* She took a breath, then launched into a deep, rasping call that echoed slightly in the open space. It was playful, yes, but also a moment of connection between us, between her and the birds she had come to know, and perhaps, between her and this space that was beginning to feel a little more like her own.

Perhaps my curiosity about the birds she had seen encouraged her, Gisela was motivated to share more of her observations on birds. Her stories drifted from the neighbourhood garden to her home country, and she started talking about the birds she met in Paraguay. In our conversation, she repeatedly brought up that her native country had *“a lot of animals”*, and she was clearly proud of that:

“Have you heard of the Bare-throated bellbird? That’s one of our national animals in Paraguay... There were a lot of animals. One time (during the pandemic), I was at home doing online courses, and I just saw a hummingbird. Wow. It was a very beautiful hummingbird. It was a greenish mixed with blue hummingbird. It looked very cool. So I didn’t dare to move, so I didn’t scare the hummingbird.”

As she spoke about the hummingbird, Gisela suddenly reached for her drawing and

began to add the bird to the scene she had already created. “*Oh, I can also draw the hummingbird,*” she announced, her voice lifting with excitement. She paused for a moment and looked at the crayons. She carefully attempted to pick the correct colours to capture the details of the hummingbird.

“I still remember that the hummingbird I saw was a spatula-tailed hummingbird... and the photo looked a bit purplish and bluish and greenish.”

It became clear that her fascination with birds extended beyond casual observation. Gisel’s interest had led her to learn more about bird species and their habitats. She told me she had even bought a book after she moved to Scotland, which included a photograph of the hummingbird she had seen. This book, she explained, helped her to look at birds more closely and notice their details, to understand where they lived.

6.5.5 Scared of bugs

We stopped at a quiet spot surrounded by tall trees and thick grass. Gisel pointed up at one of the trunks and said, “*I also like climbing, but not that much, because if I climb too high, I get scared.*” Her mother had mentioned earlier that before moving to Scotland, Gisel had never climbed a tree. In their home back in Paraguay, there were no trees in the garden, and tree climbing was not something she was familiar with. But things had changed since they moved into this neighbourhood, where the trees were tall and plentiful. She told me that her friends here had taught her how to climb. The activity

of climbing trees with her friends had gradually improved her confidence in interacting with the natural environment and expanded her agency. At one point, Gisel's mother recalled, she and a group of children even built a small treehouse together.

She led me further into the wooded area and found a tree to sit against. I noticed she picked up a leaf and smelled its fragrance. As we settled down, ready to continue our conversation, she suddenly gasped and pointed at my shirt. "There's a bug on you!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with concern. I looked down and saw a small fly resting on one of my buttons. I flicked it away, and we both laughed.

The moment triggered a memory for her. Without needing much prompting, she launched into a story.

"When we were just going to make our salads in my home country, I saw a worm, and then I was about to touch it. But then I saw a worm, my body had already made the action. And I touched the worm. And then I just, like, screamed a bit, because I was, I just, I mean, I just touched a worm! (She was pretending to throw up.) That was a bit, like, scary. It was kind of scary, but the worm didn't move. It was just, like, a position, like. (She curls her arm to show me the worm's position)"

She then told me that she also "hates" spiders, because "a bug with eight legs that makes sense, that has eight eyes and a weird mouth with sharp teeth" was really "disgusting" in her opinion. Interestingly, she was stung by a bee before, but she did not think the bees were scary. She was rather positively described as having found her

way to avoid being stung by them.

“I just put it like this and just move around slowly. And then they just try to do it. Just move slowly, like a moving thing. They would just think it’s some sort of other weird animal.”

Her strategy of coexisting with bees stood in contrast to her strong aversion to spiders. I was reminded of something her mother had shared earlier in our conversation: one of Gisel’s close friends, whom she often played with outdoors, had a particular interest in bees and liked to protect them in the communal garden. It was possible that her friend’s attitude had influenced Gisel’s own. Perhaps her willingness to accept bees, even after being stung, was shaped not only by experience but also by the social context of play and peer relationships. Through shared outdoor experiences, Gisel may have come to see bees less as a threat and more as part of the natural world she was learning to navigate alongside her friend.

6.5.6 Outdoor play as a space for interaction

Outdoor play for Gisel seemed to be more like a space for interaction. Although she claimed at the beginning of the interview that she did not like outdoor play, her behaviours and stories seemed to suggest otherwise. She showed a great interest in observing the animals in the natural world and revealed that she engaged in multiple outdoor play activities with her neighbourhood friends. In her drawing, she also

represented a joyful moment of playing outdoors with her friends. I was touched when she explained her friends' cultural clothes of hijab:

"I wish I can see her hair, I bet it is beautiful!"

She looked at the world from her innocent and sympathetic eyes, used her creative and imaginative ways to connect and interact with nature: she learned the chirping of different birds, touched the grass, and smelled the leaves. She also explored creative ways to negotiate with the bees and avoid their stings.

From my observation during our walk while interviewing, she was expressive and excited to share her perspectives. Her excellent skills in applying storytelling in our interview conversation suggested that this was an approach that she was familiar with when she interacted with her friends. Her mother also confirmed this, telling me that Gisel was noticeably more communicative when she played outdoors. "She found people to play with," her mother said, "and she talked a lot." Therefore, compared with letting Gisel read indoors, her mother preferred to let her play outdoors as she "interacts a lot more than when she is indoors."

6.6 Interview with Azeri:

I met Azeri in the university cafe; it was a beautifully sunny day. Azeri's mother accompanied him, carrying his younger sister. After ensuring everything was settled, she sat at another table, leaving Azeri and me alone for the interview. Azeri spoke in a

soft voice, almost as if whispering, and I found myself leaning in slightly to catch his words. After a brief introduction, I offered him crayons and paper to begin his drawing. He seemed somewhat unsure about it, saying, “*I am not the best at drawing.*” I encouraged him and reassured him that it was not about how impressive the drawing was, but rather about expressing what he wanted to share about his favourite outdoor play. That seemed to put him at ease, and after a moment’s pause, he began to draw.

6.6.1 Interpreting Azeri’s drawing

Azeri drew a bright, sunny day with a blue sky stretching across the page. For him, warm and sunny weather seemed to be an important part of what makes outdoor play enjoyable. In the centre of the drawing, he used grey to mark out the basketball court and included a hoop, along with two figures. One of them is holding a ball and asking the other to “pass” it, a small detail shown through a speech bubble.

Figure 9.

Azeri’s drawing



This brief dialogue moment stood out. It suggested that talking and negotiating

with friends were important parts of Azeri's experience. The drawing was not only about the basketball play, but also about the interactions. There were no adults in sight, only Azeri and his friend on the basketball court, which suggested that the play was self-directed and spontaneous, not a structured match with rules or teams. It seemed to reflect a shared moment of freedom when Azeri and his friend were enjoying each other's company in their own space.

6.6.2 Outdoor play as a space to escape from the feeling of instability

Azeri's family had moved home several times since migrating to Scotland due to changes in his parents' work, rising rents, and other challenges. This constant relocation, from one unfamiliar setting to another, was something Azeri clearly did not enjoy. As he began to settle into a new place, they would often have to move again soon. Thus, he preferred to stay outdoors. In his description, playing outdoors offered him a space to temporarily gain a sense of freedom and security from the uncertainty:

"I usually like to go places, outside. I don't really like to stay at home. Because when I was a bit younger, we were always moving houses. But now we've bought this house, so I've got a little bit more of stability."

Each move also meant leaving the familiar neighbourhoods, transferring schools, and parting from playmates who lived close to each other. Azeri shared with me that he was sad when he found out his best childhood friend was going to enter the school he

was in before moving.

“It was a bit sad when I moved. It was a bit sad. I was in P3, and then I found out, I’m almost moving, and then I found out that my – that the first friend I met in Edinburgh was entering P1 in my old school. So I was a bit sad that I had to move.”

I looked at Azeri’s drawing and asked who the other child was on the basketball court. He told me it was his childhood playmate who had been a friend of his for more than four years. The friendship between Azeri and his playmates continued after he moved to the new school. He was surprised that his friend was in the same school with him after he transferred to the current school:

“we moved, and then he moved to school. Now I moved to this school he’s in it.”

This reunion seemed to bring him a great deal of comfort. Unlike previous transitions, this time he did not have to start completely from scratch. Knowing someone in this new environment helped to ground him and offered a sense of familiarity amidst all the change. He recalled the anxiety he felt at the beginning of the school move, the uncertainty of what awaited him and worried that he might have no one to talk to:

“Because you just transferred to the new school and you had nobody.”

Having a familiar friend by his side helped ease those initial fears. Azeri shared his friend supported him in navigating the new environment and introduced him to other classmates:

"He kind of showed me everywhere, and I made a lot of new friends. "

Playing together with his friend and new peers seemed to create a sense of comfort and inclusion. As they spent time together outdoors, he began to feel more relaxed. These shared moments of play helped him gradually build new connections, and he soon found himself making more friends through those interactions. For Azeri, the outdoors offered him a sense of stability and an opportunity to escape the uncertainties at home.

6.6.3 A peak through the potential communication gap between Azeri and his mother

A gap in communicating the feelings in transition. However, Azeri's feelings of unsettlement and uncertainty in the new environment did not appear to be fully acknowledged by his mother. His anxiousness reminded me of when I asked Ayla about his transition to the new school; she focused instead on how excited Azeri had been about the move, particularly because the new school offered more green space:

"He was really excited...My son was in a different school before, but the new

school has very nice trees, so that is the main reason he wanted to go to there: that area is really nice to play in, with lots of trees and wooden stings...He wanted to play in a big playground and in this forest place.

In Ayla's account, Azeri's enthusiasm for the new school seemed closely tied to his affection for natural outdoor spaces. Features such as trees, grass, and gardens were presented as the main sources of his motivation to attend school. This certainly aligned with Azeri's own expressions of enjoyment in outdoor environments. However, when speaking about his emotional experience of the transition, Ayla did not mention Azeri's anxieties or concerns prior to the move. Instead, she emphasised his excitement about the green spaces and his strong social skills, describing how he "quickly made lots of friends."

This emphasis certainly reflected one part of Azeri's experience, yet it may also suggest a misalignment in how his emotional needs were perceived or communicated at home. While Azeri acknowledged the positive aspects of his new school, he also spoke openly about his nervousness and fears of loneliness during the early phase of the transition in the interview. The contrast between his account and his mother's may point to a gap in emotional expression and interaction between them during this period of change.

A sheet of a timetable. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Azeri's mother, Ayla, was grappling with the challenge of balancing play and learning—a tension shaped by

the interplay between her native cultural beliefs and the expectations she perceived within Scottish educational culture. While Ayla acknowledged that play was important, she also expressed concern that too much play might interfere with Azeri's academic progress. As she put it, "He needs to learn. I always say not everything is about play." In an effort to maintain this balance, she hoped that Azeri would adhere to a structured "timetable" that would help him manage both learning and play.

Although Azeri did not directly articulate his views on the relationship between play and learning, he did share some thoughts about his home routine at the end of our interview. Despite having no formal homework from school, he explained that his "home teacher" would often assign him additional exercises. This work was accompanied by a schedule he was expected to follow:

"I have a few books I still have to practice. However, I also have a sheet to tell me what to do."

Just before I left, Azeri leaned towards me and whispered that he would much rather play with friends after school, like he did in his after-school club. Earlier in our conversation, he had described how much he enjoyed the outdoor activities offered there. For Azeri, the after-school club was more than just a break from formal learning; it was a space where he could release tension, engage his imagination, and enjoy free, spontaneous interactions with friends. He described it with enthusiasm:

"It's where you can like do whatever you want. "

He repeated the phrase "do whatever you want" several times, underscoring how meaningful this freedom was to him. It seemed to contrast with the structure of his home timetable and the more formal expectations surrounding learning.

6.7 Eshe's story: "It's like one culture"

I arrived five minutes earlier than our arranged interview time, and when I texted her and rang the bell, Ekib had not yet properly wrapped her hijab. She looked slightly embarrassed but welcomed me warmly, inviting me to sit on the couch with Eshe while she went upstairs to finish getting dressed. Because she had not mentioned her religious background beforehand, this encounter made me realise that appearing with her hair uncovered in front of a stranger must have been deeply uncomfortable for her. She apologised for being late and not fully dressed, and I reassured her, hoping to ease her discomfort.

Meanwhile, Eshe sat beside me, watching me with curiosity. She had black, curly hair and beautiful, dark eyes. She asked what the interview was about, and I briefly explained that it would focus on her outdoor play. She laughed and showed interest in it. Later, Eshe and her mother led me to their back garden, which was neatly kept and covered with freshly cut grass. It was a sunny day, and the quiet outdoor space was familiar to Eshe, which helped her feel relaxed.

Her mother went indoors to sign the consent forms. Eshe took my hand and led

me onto the grass, her eyes gleaming with excitement. She began to show me all the movements she could do, such as backbends and the split. She was obviously very excited about gymnastics. I watched her and was sincerely impressed by her skill and the sheer joy she seemed to draw from every stretch and pose. Then she looked at me with eyes brightened, and said, "You try too!" I hesitated for a moment, as these were not movements I had ever done before. However, her eagerness was impossible to resist, and I did not want to disappoint her. So I lowered myself onto the grass and, rather stiffly, tried to mirror her splits. She squealed, and a kind of joyful laughter bubbled out of her. In that moment, I realised this was not just play for her, it was her way of making new friends. It was a small but significant door to enter her world. After this play, she became noticeably closer to me and sat beside me during her mother's interview.

6.7.1 Interpreting Eshe's drawing

Eshe used vibrant colours to illustrate her outdoor play on a sunny day, taking place on a stretch of green grass. All three girls in the drawing were depicted with cheerful, smiling faces, each engaged in a different gymnastic pose. This joyful scene indicated that Eshe derived great enjoyment from playing outdoors with her friends, especially on pleasant days. The image also conveyed a sense of close and frequent interaction with her peers, as well as a clear appreciation for the natural surroundings.

Figure 10.

Eshe's drawing



Notably, Eshe chose three distinct colours to depict her friends' hair, carefully highlighting the variety in their hair textures. The girl doing the splits had curly, dark brown hair; the one in the middle had thick black hair; and the girl performing a handstand had straight, ginger hair. These details reflected Eshe's attentiveness to her friends' physical characteristics and suggested a sensitivity to their diverse cultural backgrounds. However, this awareness of difference may not affect her play or relationships. The close physical proximity between Eshe and her friends, all within the open green space, conveyed a strong sense of inclusion and connection.

6.7.2 In play, there is only "one culture"

We sat together in the sun and waited for the interview to begin. Eshe's mother went to the kitchen to prepare some tea for us. Eshe looked at me quietly for a moment. Then, with a shy smile tugging at her lips, she leaned a little closer and said softly, "Your hair is so beautiful." I was slightly surprised by this topic, but touched by her compliment. Her own hair caught the sunlight, rich, black curls that glistened with movement. I smiled and replied, "Your hair is very beautiful as well, I mean it." She

smiled, though something in her eyes suggested she was not entirely convinced. “I like your straight hair,” she said after a pause. “It’s very smooth.” She leaned towards me and lightly touched my hair.

Just then, her mother brought us a pot of tea from Egypt. She heard the last part of our conversation. She turned to Eshe, and her voice was calm and warm. “Your hair is beautiful too,” she told Eshe, placing the teapot down beside us. *“Different, but lovely.”* This time, Eshe nodded with a small smile and repeated, “Yeah, my hair is beautiful.”

Eshe’s mother then explained to me that Eshe was experiencing confusion about her identity and was still trying to understand the differences between herself and others. She told me that Eshe had once asked her:

“I have curly hair, and why do others have straight hair?”

Realising Eshe’s confusion as she navigated her cultural identity, Ekib tried to explain their cultures and help her make sense of the diversity:

“I say because all people in our country have curly hair. It’s very beautiful. Now she loves it better, but when she was young, she always said, ‘I want straight hair.’”

In addition, play was a significant medium through which Eshe encountered other cultures and transcended cultural differences. Ekib laughed with me and joked about how difficult it was for her to make new friends in a work environment so different

from her own culture. By contrast, Eshe quickly interacted with her peers through play and outdoor gymnastics. Eshe's school also made great efforts to create inclusive play environments by introducing different cultural festivals. Ekib concluded:

“For the kids, no, they play with each other like they are all from one country.”

Eshe agreed with her mother and shared that her friends were coming from different countries and cultural backgrounds. When I asked her at what moments she noticed they were from different cultures, she paused for two seconds and replied firmly that she did not notice any differences, except for the varied food in their lunchboxes. Eshe told me that religion and ethnicity were not criteria that decided who could be her friend; personality was the only standard:

“It's like one culture, yeah. I don't think there's anything different... We made many friends, and we also learned about different cultures and countries and stuff like that”

As captured in the section of Eshe's drawing, although she paid attention to the physical differences between herself and her peers, which were related to their cultural backgrounds, she did not interpret these as obstacles to forming friendships. This awareness of racial diversity was a natural process of cultural formation when Eshe sought to make sense of her identity in the new cultural environment.

In my conversations with Eshe and her mother, they viewed play as an important medium for Eshe to engage in intercultural interactions and learn about her friend's different cultures. They both emphasised many times that they believed there was only "one culture" in the play. I think they were trying to express that the play taught children to respect cultural differences while simultaneously acknowledging that these differences existed. However, rather than dwelling on the differences, children themselves chose to discover the common ground that transcended them and focused on the culture of "playing" itself.

6.7.3 Outdoor recess play with different age groups

Eshe transferred to a new school last year. Although she had lived in Scotland for about 2 years, transitioning to a new school and leaving her previous classmates made her sad. On the first day of transition, Eshe could still recall how nervous and shy she was. She did not speak to anyone until lunch break, when all the children were sent to the courtyard to play. Two girls reached out to her and asked her to join their play group. "That's how I met my best friends!" she explained.

Eshe shared that her favourite time was playing gymnastics with her friends in the outdoor playground at school, because the school playground offered a specific area to do it, and she had opportunities to meet new friends, and it was not the time to "get to do homework". She compared playing outdoors and indoors, and explained that:

"It's easier to make friends outside! Because inside, you're just in your class, but

outside, you find lots of classes and you could be friends with them. So, you can have friends of different ages. Yeah, I got friends from P4 and P6.”

In Eshe’s understanding, the outdoor environment often offered a larger, less structured space than indoors, providing them with more freedom to play without constant adult interruption or supervision. Recess time at school further extended these opportunities, allowing children to engage and interact with peers of various ages. Eshe made friends not only with her classmates but also with children both younger and older than herself through play on the school playground. This inclusive atmosphere fostered connections among children who may not normally interact within the more age-restricted classroom environment.

6.7.4 A moment with the spider

We finished our interview, and she moved to the grass again. She started showing me some taekwondo she learned from her after-school club, and invited me to do the same movement with her. I found it very interesting and decided to join her.

Suddenly, she stopped mid-movement as a spider dropped onto her sleeve. She quickly shook it off and darted away from the spot. I wondered if she was uncomfortable with all insects. She said, *“I don’t like bugs. I’m really scared of bugs, spiders.”* However, despite her fear of these creatures and knowing that they were ever-present, she never considered stopping playing outdoors.

“Cuz it’s their home! You can’t ask them to leave their home!”

She explained it as if it were a simple, universal truth that everyone should know – and in a way, it was. This small moment seemed to capture her attitude towards nature. Much like how she treated her friends who came from different religious backgrounds, she adopted an equal and inclusive approach to the world around her. Whether in the human world or the natural world, she found a way to embrace differences with acceptance and respect.

6.8 Devin: Negotiating Racial and Cultural Difference in the Transition

I met Devin and his mother at the university’s café. Darika told me they had been playing at the nearby park and had walked here. Both Darika and I were PhD students, living and studying in this different cultural context; particularly, her need to bring her son sparked her interest in my topic. Devin had moved to Scotland with Darika about two years ago. I interviewed Darika first, while Devin was allowed to play on the iPad during our interview.

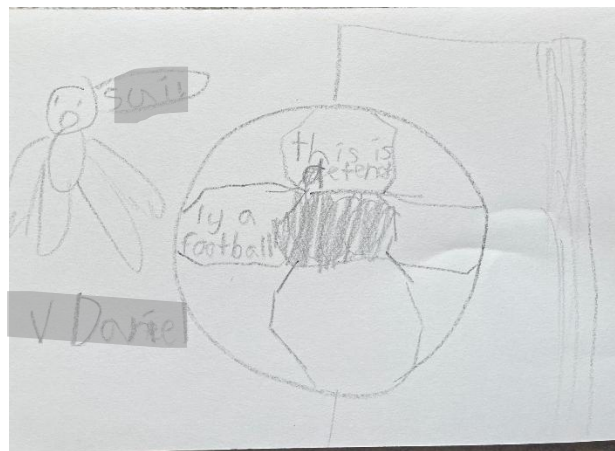
6.8.1 Interpreting Devin’s drawing

Devin did not depict the context of the play. Instead, he drew a large football in the centre of the picture and a net behind it. This may indicate that football was his primary outdoor play activity and that it dominated much of his playtime. Inside the football, he wrote phrases such as “this is pretend” and “Ly a football”. Although the

meaning of “Ly” is unclear, it is possible that Devin was attempting to re-emphasise the subject of his drawing as a football.

Figure 11.

Devin’s drawing



To the left of the drawing, Devin drew a friend and included both his own name and his friend’s name in a speech bubble (which have both been obscured here to preserve anonymity). He drew the figure with a wide-open mouth, which may suggest his excitement and enjoyment during football play with peers. Moreover, the absence of a detailed environmental setting might reflect that the social interaction and the act of playing football itself were more significant for Devin than the physical surroundings in which the play occurs.

6.8.2 “Why didn’t God give me peach colour?”

Devin shared that he had felt nervous before transferring to the school in Scotland, because he was unsure whether he would adjust to the new cultural environment well

and make new friends. Although he had previously attended international schools in Malaysia, most of his classmates there were from Asian countries, and he did not have a chance to interact with children from other cultural backgrounds. Hence, when he first transferred to the Scottish school, Devin experienced a period of racial and cultural dissonance, and even now, he still sometimes feels unsure about the differences between the cultures of school and home. Devin's mother described:

“He consistently talking about everyone looks so different, everyone talks differently.”

The conversation around different skin colours occurred multiple times in Devin's household. One time, he asked his mother why he was the only one in his class with brown skin, while all his classmates had what he described as “peach colour”:

“Why didn't God give me peach colour? All of my friend have peach colour”

Devin was sensitive to these racial differences between himself and his peers, and this confusion was especially evident during the initial stages of his transition. Having moved from a cultural setting more familiar and aligned with his own heritage to an entirely new environment, he felt unsettled and disoriented. At the same time, he became increasingly aware of how he differed from his classmates and expressed a desire to fit in with what he saw as the more ‘common’ skin tone in this new context.

This did not necessarily suggest that Devin experienced any direct discrimination due to his ethnicity, but it illustrated how he felt a sense of alienation and self-consciousness when he navigated this early stage of adjustment.

Devin's confusion extended beyond racial and cultural differences; he also wrestled with the contrast in religious practices between himself and his friends. In his family, Sundays were reserved for church, a ritual that formed a significant part of their lives and cultural identity. Nevertheless, Devin could not understand why this routine was unique to his family. He noticed that his friends were free to play football on Sundays, while he was required to attend church with his parents and siblings.

“None of my friends have to go to church on Sundays, they are free, they can play, but me because of you guys, I have to go to church. Why do you force me to do this?”

His mother noticed Devin's growing confusion about his identity. She began having conversations with him about why they looked different from Scottish people, helping him to make sense of the cultural diversity around him. Darika believed that this process of understanding was not shaped solely by family and school education; it was also deeply influenced by the friendships Devin began to form in their neighbourhood. Living in a university community that was home to a rich mix of cultures, Devin gradually found himself surrounded by children from many different backgrounds. Over time, as these friendships grew, his questions about ethnicity

seemed to fade, replaced by a more settled sense of belonging within this diverse environment.

6.8.3 Outdoor Play as a Social Space

Devin enjoyed playing in the outdoor communal garden of his neighbourhood with his friends. The natural environment itself held a special affection for him, as he closely linked his play with the elements he encountered outdoors.

“I like squirrels, which are animals, so I like animals. I like playing in the grass, which is grass, so I play. And I like trees because I can climb up. And if they’re trees, that means they’re trees.”

His words captured his connection with the natural world. For Devin, animals, grasses and trees were woven seamlessly into his daily life of play. The outdoor space also offered rich opportunities for Devin to join different play groups and meet new children. As he described it, his ‘move’ for making friends was to tell them a joke that would make them laugh and invite him into their play:

“When you meet them, and they’re outside, just go to them and just prepare as many jokes as possible. Okay. One time, I said a joke, and it was like, ‘no rain, no pain, ’ and they laughed, and we played”

“Sometimes they come up to me and just say a bit of jokes and talk about the stuff that they’ve been doing. And then I also talk about it, and then we just go”

Dialogues were essential in Devin’s friendship-building process; he used his playful humour in the interactions to get close to new friends. I noticed he specifically mentioned ‘outside’ as the setting for these encounters, so I asked why he preferred the outdoors for socialising. He explained:

“Because you get to play with them, and then they start to get the hang of it. The hang of how you behave, how talented you are, and how good your game is, how fast you can run”

From Devin’s perspective, outdoor play was not simply for games; he viewed it as a social space where he could learn about his peers. Through these interactions, he observed their behaviours and abilities, while also revealing his own. In this way, outdoor play was seen by Devin as a social platform for exchanging knowledge and creating new dialogues. In these playful moments, he found their shared interests and began to decide who would become his friends.

6.8.4 Conflicts in outdoor play

Play was not always a source of joy for Devin. He recounted to me how he had been “bullied” twice during playtime with his friends. One incident occurred during a

“warrior game” when a boy in the group suddenly caught his hand at the back and pushed him roughly towards another girl who was chasing them. Devin felt very uncomfortable and tried to run away, but the boy ignored him and became very aggressive. Devin’s mother saw this from her window and was very angry, but she did not say anything; she just told Devin to go home. However, Devin described that he felt his mother’s hesitation:

“My mom got so angry she tried to shout. She tried to shout there and tell the boy not to do that to me, but she was too nervous because the boy might cry, and then she might get beaten; she thought she might hurt him, his dad might fight with her.”

Darika recounted this incident during our interview. She described feeling caught in a delicate position, unsure whether she should intervene in the conflict that had emerged during the children’s play. On the one hand, Darika was friends with the boy’s parents, and she felt it would be inappropriate for her to directly criticise the boy without the presence of his parents. On the other hand, she believed that children’s play should remain as free and unstructured as possible, trusting that they could work through their disagreements on their own. Although her presence could prevent the fight, it also disrupted the natural flow of play, potentially blocking the important social negotiation processes children needed to experience. She hoped Devin could express his feelings when he was in arguments with friends.

“We know their parents, and then we can’t directly deal with a child; we cannot do that, so my being there itself will prevent most of the fights, so I’m not sure...He could have easily said no, ‘I don’t want to play; I just want to go home.’ I think that is one difficulty he faces with saying no, that he’ll learn slowly.”

Another incident happened when Devin was at school. A boy who was in Devin’s football team bullied him. One day, after they had finished playing football, this boy grabbed Devin’s hat and threw it away. When Devin finally found it, the hat had already been broken. The other day, the boy kicked Devin in front of his classmates and laughed at him. Devin told me that the boy said “some bad words” to him:

“He started laughing and said, ‘You are so, so weak.’ I then ran back to someone, an adult, and asked for help. They just made fun of me, but then the adult scolded all of them. After that, I thought, ‘Thank God that happened.’”

From Devin’s description, I can feel his fear when he faced the kid who bullied him. Devin did not clarify the “bad words” and was unsure why he got bullied. His mother mentioned the same incident and described how those words hurt Devin:

“Like those words that are spoken to him, they’re so that carried so much weight, so I had to kind of dismantle it and tell, ‘no, you are not that. You don’t have to accept everything that has been spoken to you.’”

This reminded me that Devin had shared that no other child of his religion was in his class. Coupled with his early feelings of confusion and self-consciousness about his ethnicity and skin colour, it might be that he has experienced some form of discrimination at school. These experiences seemed to weigh heavily on Devin and had a noticeable impact on his life at school.

6.9 Juli's Story:

I met Juli in her room, a quiet space still embodying the focused atmosphere of her recent lesson. She had just finished a class with her home tutor and was sitting on the floor. Her study materials were neatly arranged around her. Juli gave the impression of being very organised, and when she began to speak, her confidence in expressing herself shone through. She babbled, and her narrative often included detailed observations. It felt as though every word was carefully chosen.

6.9.1 Interpreting Juli's drawing

Figure 12. Juli's drawing



Juli chose to draw the landscape of her school and used a variety of semiotic signs to represent playground facilities. The large square outlined in orange, which occupied a significant portion of the image, seemed to represent the main school building. The surrounding areas may have indicated spaces accessible to children during recess. There were a few green spaces in the bottom-left and top-right corners.

However, the play settings in the image were spread and general. It was challenging to identify a specific location where Juli engaged in outdoor play or to infer any particular play activity she enjoyed. Notably, no child figures were included in the image. This absence may suggest that the school playground setting did not afford rich or memorable opportunities for outdoor play in Juli's experience.

6.9.2 Girl's football team

Juli shared with me that her favourite day of the week was Thursday because it was the designated girls' football day at school. In her mind, the school week was neatly divided into football days and non-football days. According to her, the teachers organised various activities depending on the day: on some days they might do climbing, while on others they were given a ball to play with. Football was reserved for Thursdays for the girls, and Juli was on the team.

However, except for the joyful moments of playing football, she also noticed a difference in how the school arrange the football teams for boys and girls:

“There’s like boys and girls’ football day. Although for some reason there’s more boys’ football days.”

Juli was puzzled by this arrangement, as she had observed that the number of players on the girls’ and boys’ teams was roughly equal, yet the boys were allowed to play more often. She tried to rationalise it, but her uncertainty was shown in her answer:

“To be fair, it’s only P5 to sevens can play football, I don’t know”

From Juli’s description, she was beginning to recognise a potential gender inequality in how playtime was allocated at school. Although she was sensitive to the imbalance, she was also hesitant to draw any firm conclusions; this may be due to her trust in the school’s authority to set the rules and her uncertainty about whether there might be other organisational reasons behind these different arrangements.

6.9.3 Different languages in making friends

Juli shared with me how she met her best friend when she first moved to Scotland—a story that began with a misunderstanding of body language. Her friend was from the same neighbourhood and had attended the same nursery as her. She recalled that this friend ran to her and “squished” her when they first met. Juli was initially confused and felt a bit “unhappy”, as she interpreted her friend’s behaviour as unfriendly. She shared this with her mother, who offered an alternative explanation: the

girl might have been trying to hug her.

“I came to my mom and told her there’s this girl squishing me, but she told me she thinks that she was hugging me, and then I realised that she was hugging me, she was hugging me! And then I thought I should hug her, and I thought, ‘That’s it, we became best friends!’”

It was interesting that Juli interpreted her friend’s social behaviour differently. This encounter happened during her early days in Scotland, at a time when she was still adjusting to the unfamiliar cultural setting. Thus, she might not be used to perceiving “hug” as a social cue of making friends. In her own cultural setting, the gesture of a hug might not hold the same significance or was perhaps not as common as in Scotland. However, after her mother’s gentle intervention, Juli reframed her understanding of this behaviour, and it transformed into an opportunity for building a connection with the girl. As she claimed in the interview, they became best friends afterwards and played outdoors in their neighbourhood every day.

6.9.4 Nature connection with the neighbourhood environment

Juli looked at the window, and the sounds of children playing outside in the garden caught her attention. She pointed to the tree close to their flat, and told me she loved climbing the trees with her neighbourhood friends. What surprised me was her careful observation of nature when climbing different trees; she developed a great nature

connection with her neighbourhood environment:

“We climb trees, and almost every season there’s like something that grows in the garden that we can pick and turn into sort of like jam or cordial or something like that... we also climb some smaller trees, and we sometimes take elderflower to make elderflower cordial, but that only happens in springtime, like right now. Then also, like in autumn, there are black brazen apples which you can make jam out of, they grow at the same time”

Juli spoke with remarkable precision, naming the plants and linking them to their seasonal rhythms. Her intimate knowledge of the neighbourhood’s natural environment seemed to speak not only to her curiosity but also to how children can become attuned to the changing seasons through playful exploration. Through her description, she showed her appreciation for the natural environment of her neighbourhood. She played in nature and transformed the ingredients she discovered in the local nature into “jam and cordial”. It was suggested that Juli had built a meaningful connection with the natural world and fostered a sense of place through outdoor play.

Speaking of nature in the garden, she showed empathy and care for the bees, which were the creatures that were regarded as dangerous by some children. She was mad because these children always threw mud at the bees, thinking the bees might sting them. She challenged these children’s cultural attitude and attempted to explain to those children:

“But usually it’s bumblebees that can’t fly, and those aren’t really aggressive, and if you don’t touch them, if you don’t like trying to catch them, it’s fine.”

She then took the initiative to rescue the bees, an activity that had never been done in her neighbourhood before. She learnt how to rescue them online and began doing it on her own. She found this activity both meaningful and fascinating, as it allowed her to observe the bees closely.

I bring them to a dry place first, mm-hmm, and then also give them honey. Usually, sugary water depends on what we’re thinking. Although the bee drinks both, you can see why; there are actually some interesting details. Their tongues are fascinating—they extend out like a tube with another tongue inside it. Oh, I think it’s like a tube with something inside it, then we see both of them.

Her self-initiated “bee rescue” practice indicated a proactive and agentic engagement with the natural world. Her interests and compassion for non-human life motivated her to observe and protect the bees, while Juli’s ecological identity was developed in this process. More importantly, her action seemed to attract other children to join in.

“There’s also this little girl who always wants to do whatever I’m doing because

she thinks everyone else is doing it, and that's the way it is, but she's just not allowed to do it. I don't know, like, when I have the bee on my hand, obviously, they don't want a five-year-old to have it on their hand."

Although Juli found the little girl who imitated her behaviour a bit "annoying", this episode highlights Juli's leadership and the role of peer influence in fostering nature connection and a sense of place. From the perspective of the "little girl", she might not fully grasp the value of Juli's bee-rescuing behaviour and might see it merely as a form of outdoor play. However, motivated by Juli, she still learned the knowledge from her about how to rescue bees, potentially developing her cultural understanding of the relationship between herself and nature.

6.9.5 Limited outdoor play time at school

At the end of the interview, I asked Juli about her outdoor play at school, which was the scene she had drawn before the interview. She gave me a brief description of the school grounds and the various facilities on the playground, but she didn't delve into the specific outdoor activities she took part in. Compared with her fun play in the neighbourhood, she did not delve into the activities she engaged on the school's playground, but focused more on the landscape of the area.

"At school, they don't give you much time to play. It's more like a 15-minute break for lunch, then 15 minutes until lunch, and then another 15 minutes after lunch."

Actually, depending on how quickly you eat your lunch, that's basically it, yeah.

Well, outside [the school], you get to stay out until quite late."

Juli's description underscored how limited and fragmented the outdoor playtime was at her school, with only short intervals squeezed into the structured school day. She did not seem to view these brief periods as real opportunities for outdoor play, likely because they were overshadowed by the school's demands of lunchtime routines and timeframes. Instead, her most vivid and meaningful outdoor play memories seemed to be those that took place outside the school setting, where she had the freedom to play without the strict time constraints. In this way, the structured school environment seemed to limit her ability to fully engage in outdoor play.

6.10 Conclusion

This chapter captured children's stories of outdoor play at home and school settings from the narratives of mothers and children, and the children's drawings themselves. These stories show how children explore their identity and navigate transitions across different cultural contexts, and how they interact with nature, people, and themselves through outdoor play in various settings.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This study follows the conceptual framework (Figure 3) and examines the role of outdoor play in supporting the cultural formation and micro-transitions of multicultural children across home and school settings. Drawing on the ethnographic approach, it focuses on how children navigate the complexities of cultural transition through their engagement with people and environments in outdoor play spaces. The study is guided by three key research questions:

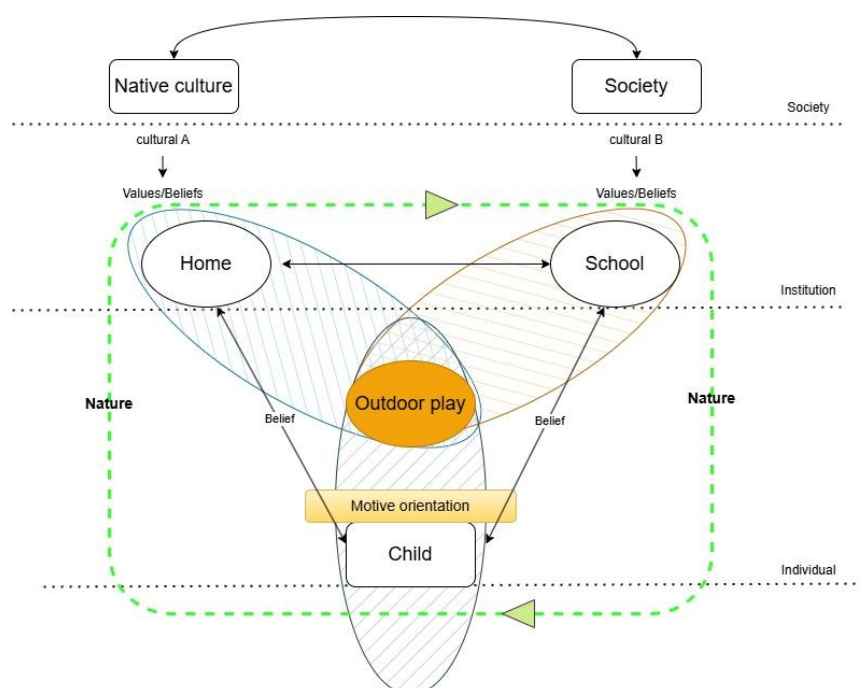
- 4 How do multicultural children engage with outdoor play to negotiate cultural meanings and identities?
- 5 How do parental cultural beliefs about play influence children's outdoor play practices?
- 6 How do outdoor play facilitate children's micro-transitions across home and school settings?

The findings suggest that outdoor play serves as a space for micro-transitions through dynamic social interaction and cultural negotiation, providing children with opportunities to express agency, form peer relationships, and engage in multiple exchanges of cultural knowledge. The data also highlights the evolving beliefs of mothers as they navigate between cultural expectations, and how these beliefs shape

children's experiences and motivations. Notably, beyond the social dimension, the findings underscore the importance of children's interaction with the natural environment itself as a powerful mediator in their cultural transition. This was evident in both school-based natural spaces (see Section 4.3) and community gardens (see Sections 6.3.3, 6.5, and 6.6.2).

Figure 3

Outdoor play as the mediating space for multicultural children's micro-transition



This discussion chapter links the findings to the existing literature. In line with each guiding research question, it is organised into three main sections. The first section discusses societal and institutional levels, focusing on how migrant mothers negotiate the tension between their original cultural beliefs and those encountered in the Scottish context. It examines how these negotiations shape parenting practices

related to outdoor play and influence children's engagement with play across different cultural settings. The second section concentrates on micro-transition moments, exploring how children express agency and navigate their identities through outdoor play, particularly in school playgrounds and their communities. The third section investigates outdoor play as a mediating platform that facilitates children's navigation of the misalignments between school and home cultures. It emphasises how outdoor play helps children make sense of different cultures and supports their cultural transition.

7.2 Mothers' Perspectives and Children's Outdoor Play at Home Settings

At the societal and institutional levels, the mothers in this study come from diverse cultural backgrounds and have varied experiences in the Scottish context, leading to a wide range of beliefs about their children's outdoor play. The interview findings reveal that their own experiences with outdoor play and learning in their home countries differ significantly from those of their children growing up in Scotland. This section discusses how culture in home settings shapes children's understandings and experiences of outdoor play and learning, exploring the tensions that arise when traditional cultural beliefs meet Scottish educational values. It represents the flow of the framework: the institutional values of the home are first shaped by their native culture, and then, dialectically, they impact their children's understanding, as well as the school's culture.

7.2.1 Mothers' social relations in the new cultural context

Neighbourhood belonging and safety concerns. The mothers' narratives showed that much of their outdoor play in childhood was unsupervised and took place in their neighbourhoods, which motivated them to explore their environments creatively. However, mothers from non-white ethnic backgrounds, whose native cultural contexts differ significantly from that of Scotland, experienced conflicts between ensuring their children's safety and supporting children's autonomous engagement in free outdoor play. Beyond environmental factors such as limited access to green spaces and heavy street traffic, their concerns were closely linked to their social integration within the neighbourhood.

Ekib's experience illustrates this tension. Her family had recently moved to the new neighbourhood, and she did not feel the same sense of belonging to the neighbourhood as she had in her home country (Section 5.5.1). The recent relocation and cultural unfamiliarity within the community contributed to limited social interaction with other families in the current neighbourhood. The absence of neighbourhood cohesion meant that Ekib, like other migrant mothers, lacked "eyes on the street" and mistrusted the outdoor environment (Witten et al., 2013). To address this concern, she adopted an alternative strategy: providing her children with opportunities for outdoor play in more structured, perceived-safer settings, such as backyard garden parties with Eshe's friends. Although mothers viewed this as a safe option, these organised and restricted settings limited the children's physical freedom and, over time, could contribute to a feeling of confinement (Veitch et al., 2006;

Solomon-Moore et al., 2018). As her child expressed during the interview, she preferred playing outside the home with friends and without adult supervision.

Neighbourhood outdoor social activities involving families from different ethnic groups offer potential pathways to strengthen social relationships and promote cultural understanding within the community. Such integration may help reduce migrant mothers' concerns about safety in outdoor environments (Cattell et al., 2008; Neal et al., 2015). These activities can support migrant families in exchanging cultural knowledge with their neighbours, thereby reshaping their social situation within the local community through sustained interactions.

For instance, Fiona's narrative offers a contrasting case to Ekib's. Although she was new to her neighbourhood, her family regularly participated in 'neighbourhood walks' after school, organised by the school's parents' community. These community activities allowed both her and her son to interact with their neighbours on a daily basis and build friendships. As a result, she perceived unsupervised play in the neighbourhood as safe and supported her son's growing independence. This parental attitude created opportunities for Frank to frequently play football at the community park with neighbourhood friends of different ages and cultural backgrounds, which further facilitated his transition to the new cultural context.

Experiences of discrimination. Discrimination constitutes another factor leading migrant mothers to restrict their children's unsupervised outdoor play. Experiences of bullying and discrimination can significantly impact outdoor play opportunities for families from ethnic minority backgrounds (Horton & Kraftl, 2018). The migrant

mother's beliefs about free outdoor play may shift towards a more protective stance following discriminatory encounters, as they perceive outdoor spaces as unsafe and threatening. Li reported that both she and her children had encountered discrimination in Scotland (Section 5.5.2). These encounters diminished her confidence in allowing her children to play outdoors without her, which consequently limited both their opportunities for intercultural peer interactions through outdoor play and their autonomy in play.

Li's restriction on her children's unsupervised outdoor play may also reflect her traditional cultural beliefs about parental protection and the tension of living between two cultures. In Chinese culture, parenting often follows a more authoritarian approach, where young children are encouraged to remain dependent on adults and stay physically close to ensure their safety (Ho, 1986; P. Wu et al., 2002). Living in a new cultural context while experiencing episodes of cultural exclusion reinforced Li's attachment to these traditional values of care and protection and resulted in the strict restriction of children's independent outdoor play.

However, this does not suggest that Li was unaffected by Scottish cultural values regarding outdoor play and learning. In the interview, she expressed her appreciation of the Scottish school's play-based educational approach and recognised the importance of outdoor play in promoting children's well-being and mental health. At the same time, her belief in an authoritarian child-rearing approach remained evident, as she placed considerable trust in formal institutions, such as after-school clubs, which she viewed as providing safe, structured environments for her children to play.

From her perspective, these settings were not only trustworthy but also effective in helping children navigate cultural differences and develop positive peer relationships. Although her children were less engaged in unsupervised outdoor play after school, their regular participation in after-school clubs incorporating outdoor activities may have served as a culturally acceptable substitute. This structured exposure to outdoor play could help explain why she did not report difficulties her children faced in adjusting to the Scottish school environment or in forming friendships across cultural backgrounds.

Cultural beliefs about the condition of outdoor play. Mothers' traditional cultural beliefs about playing in wet weather also influence their children's motivational orientation toward outdoor play. Evidence indicates that outdoor play in the UK declines significantly during winter due to cold and rainy conditions, particularly among ethnic minority groups (CABE Space, 2010; Garriga et al., 2021). One reason for this pattern is that some cultural beliefs associate cold and humidity with childhood illness, common among South Asian, Eastern European, and African communities, leading migrant mothers to be hesitant about letting their children play outside in such weather (Cronin de Chavez et al., 2016; Cronin de Chavez et al., 2019). This was reflected in the interview with Gabriela and her daughter, where their negative perceptions of outdoor play in wet weather aligned. Additionally, Gabriela's attitude appeared to influence Gisel's daily play choices, as Gisel initially stated a preference for indoor activities on both sunny and rainy days.

However, Gabriela's strong traditional cultural beliefs may be related to her

family's relatively recent arrival in Scotland and limited exposure to Scottish culture. In contrast, some mothers who previously held similar beliefs but had lived in Scotland for a longer duration reported that their negative attitudes towards outdoor play in wet weather had gradually changed. This transformation was influenced by prolonged exposure to Scottish outdoor traditions, as well as the school's professional practices and arrangements. Even in Gisel's case, although she initially expressed a preference for indoor play, her connection to nature and interest in outdoor activities, such as birdwatching, had grown after moving to Scotland.

The Scottish school's expectations for educators include providing children with outdoor opportunities "all year round in all kinds of weather" (Howe et al., 2021, p.11). As shown in the findings chapter, although migrant mothers were influenced by their culture of origin, they did not express concerns about the school's outdoor practices in wet weather. In this way, the alignment between parental expectations for children's outdoor play and the school's commitment to providing safe outdoor play helps to build a trustworthy relationship between the two institutions. Such a relationship supports children's continued access to outdoor experiences.

7.2.2 Outdoor play and learning

Evolving perception of play's educational values. Although the mothers' childhood experiences of play and learning varied, outdoor play was generally not recognised as a meaningful approach to support children's learning in either their home or school environments during their own childhood. Despite reporting different

levels of restriction on outdoor play and varying degrees of emphasis on academic achievement in their native cultures, all mothers in this study acknowledged the educational value of outdoor play and strongly supported their children's participation in it.

This positive attitude may be partly explained by the fact that most mothers had completed higher education and were either working or studying in the field of education, which provided them with a stronger understanding of the developmental benefits of outdoor play. In addition to their educational backgrounds, many mothers' positive childhood experiences of outdoor play and learning contributed to their belief in its value. Li, for example, who did not hold a university degree but had experienced fewer restrictions in her own outdoor play as a child, also expressed a supportive attitude towards her children's play-based education.

Another explanation is related to the mothers' process of cultural adaptation. The migrant mothers are situated in a Scottish cultural context that places a high value on outdoor activities (Perlman et al., 2020). Although this may be an unfamiliar concept in some mothers' cultures of origin, they trust the school as a powerful institution capable of providing their children with tools and knowledge they themselves had not acquired, but which they recognised as important for their children's social and professional development (Sánchez-Medina et al., 2014). They regard the school as a key site of cultural learning and support that can help their children adapt more effectively to the new environment. Hence, some mothers choose to adjust their beliefs to better align with the school's expectations and practices.

Tensions between cultural beliefs and the Scottish educational approach.

However, misalignments persist between mothers' native cultural beliefs and Scottish social expectations regarding outdoor play and learning. This tension is particularly evident among mothers whose childhood experiences of play and learning differ significantly from those of the United Kingdom. This resonates with the findings from previous research by Yamamoto and Holloway (2010), which suggests that some cultures place great demands and social expectations on children's academic achievements. Beyond their native cultural beliefs, migrant mothers' lived experiences also shaped their attitudes. They have made considerable efforts to secure their immigration status, including, but not limited to, learning a new language, pursuing higher education, and adapting to workplace cultural norms. In their traditional cultures, the concept of learning does not include play but may instead prioritise measurable academic skills, such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Fung & Cheng, 2012). These lived experiences, combined with culturally embedded definitions of learning, may further reinforce their commitment to traditional educational methods and their expectations for greater academic engagement from their children (Auerbach, 2007; Goldsmith & Kurplus, 2018).

Ayla, for example, shared that although she disagreed with the high academic pressure she experienced during her own schooling, she still believed that working hard and achieving academic success were essential for children's future success (Section 5.8). She explained that this belief was shaped by her and her husband's pathway to establishing a stable life in Scotland. As a result, her deeply rooted cultural

values around traditional learning, which were further reinforced by her lived experiences, continued to influence her parenting practices and attitude towards play-based learning at Scottish school.

This tendency towards decreased outdoor play time is also related to the growing academic demands from both home and school as children enter higher grades. Mothers who expressed stronger concerns about academic progress were often those whose children were older when academic expectations became more pronounced in the education system. In Gisel's account of her outdoor play at school, she mentioned that reading was more common during recess in her class, and she was about to enter Primary Six this year (Section 6.5.2). Although Gabriela did not express any additional expectations regarding her daughter's academic progress, Gisel's social situation at school had shifted towards a more academically focused setting. In this way, her outdoor playtime at school had been reduced compared to at home.

Communication gaps between home and school. A lack of effective communication between home and school can intensify existing tensions and reinforce conflicts of different cultural beliefs about play and learning. As Myck-Wayne (2010) argues, aligning differing perspectives on play and its role in learning requires educators to actively engage with families and the wider community to demonstrate the value of play. When communication gaps persist between these two institutional settings, migrant mothers may feel uncertain or confused, which can lead to mistrust of the school's play-based educational approach. For children like Azeri, who were exposed to conflicting messages about the value of play and learning, these

inconsistencies caused confusion and emotional distress. When Azeri observed that his peers were allowed to play after school while he was expected to follow a strict homework schedule, he felt upset and stressed (Section 6.6.3). This experience may further influence his motivational orientation toward learning, especially if he begins to associate learning with pressure and exclusion rather than enjoyment and engagement.

Simultaneously, these gaps raise important questions about whether teachers themselves fully understand and appropriately implement play-based pedagogy. Research by Martlew et al. (2011) in the Scottish context revealed that some teachers viewed play as peripheral rather than central to the learning process, suggesting inconsistencies in how play-based learning is interpreted and applied across educational settings. As this study did not examine school perspectives in depth, further research is needed to investigate how Scottish schools and educators perceive and implement outdoor play and learning.

Digital play and shifting play practices. Migrant mothers commonly proposed digital play and its influence on children's outdoor play and learning. In their own childhoods, outdoor play often involved exploratory, imaginative, and physical activities using self-made artefacts crafted from natural materials. In contrast, their children are now growing up in a context shaped by institutional and societal expectations that promote the use of digital devices in both classroom settings and, at times, in outdoor play environments (McGlynn-Stewart et al., 2020). These evolving expectations have contributed to a shift in children's play habits and their selection of

play artefacts.

Evidence suggests that increasing screen time and engagement with digital play is associated with higher risks of obesity, reduced social development, lower levels of physical activity, and weakened connections to nature (Larson et al., 2019; Sugiyama et al., 2023). This is not to deny the potential benefits of digital play; in fact, migrant mothers acknowledged the educational value of incorporating digital technology into children's play and learning. However, many expressed concerns about the risk that children may become overly reliant on indoor screen-based digital play, which may negatively affect their outdoor time and family interactions. In Devin's case, for instance, her mother noted that screen time could reduce the quality of family engagement (Section 5.4.2).

To address these concerns, most mothers implemented strategies to limit both the duration of screen use and the types of video games their children could access. This approach aligns with findings from broader research on parental mediation in children's digital technology use (Chaudron et al., 2018). For example, Gabriela permitted her children to use electronic tablets for educational games, viewing them as tools to support learning while still maintaining control over digital content (Section 5.4.1).

7.3 Children's Interactions and Negotiations in Outdoor Play

7.3.1 Children's motivation for outdoor play

At the institutional level, the school recognised the importance of outdoor play

for children's overall development and well-being, allocating approximately 45 minutes of outdoor time during lunch breaks, in line with Scotland's Play Strategy (Scottish Government, 2013). The class teachers expressed support for play-based pedagogy and voiced aspirations for a well-designed outdoor playground with more developed outdoor learning practices (see Section 4.8.2). However, they also acknowledged limited familiarity with outdoor play activity settings, as lunch break supervision fell outside their formal teaching duties.

The class teachers linked the opportunities to improve children's outdoor play to the development of the playground's physical features and structured facilities. This perspective, however, risks overlooking the micro-transitions occurring within children's play and the factors that influence children's motivation. Kyttä (2002, 2004) argues that children perceive environments differently from adults, focusing less on physical structures but more on the actions and interactions that spaces can support. This distinction proved significant in the present study

The role of natural environments in motivating play. Observation and interviews revealed that children initiated various forms of play, including constructive play (Section 4.3.1), symbolic play (Section 4.3.2), physical play (Section 6.2.2), and creative play (Section 4.3.3) in the "underdeveloped" playground, which was natural and unstructured. These activities became vehicles for cultural knowledge exchange and social interaction, which, in turn, facilitated children's cultural transition and development. For example, Frank shared in the interview (Section 6.2.2) that his motivation for outdoor play was primarily "meeting up with

his friends". The social interaction generated during outdoor play enabled him not only to build friendships but also to integrate into the local cultural context in Scotland. Notably, the availability of structured play facilities, by contrast, was not his main concern. His usual play area was on the grassland at the green park near his neighbourhood, or at the venue. He and his playgroup did not explicitly seek a dedicated football playground.

When considering children's perspectives on their play, this study found that the natural environment itself emerged as a particularly powerful motivator for children's engagement. This aligns with Kytta's (2004, 2006) affordance theory, which suggests that when children can explore freely, they perceive more possibilities within their environment and demonstrate greater motivation to play. Chawla (2007) similarly emphasises the uniquely motivating characteristic of natural environments for children's outdoor activity. In the drum play and creative box play episodes (Sections 4.3.2 and 4.3.3), children actively and creatively utilised natural elements from the green spaces to create artefacts and engage in diverse forms of play. The natural ground, characterised by biologically dynamic seasonal changes in vegetation, provided children with continually evolving play opportunities.

Through various micro-moments of interaction and negotiation with the natural world and their peers, children observed and explored the possibilities of outdoor play, gradually expanding their understanding of the space's affordances. Vienna's trajectory illustrates this developmental process: initially intimidated by the outdoor play in the natural playground, she remained on the concrete surfaces alone until the

gradual peer encouragement and her emerging interest in collaborative games motivated her to venture into the natural areas (Section 4.7).

Structured and unstructured play environment. The micro-transition moments involving child-led creativity and negotiation were less frequently observed in more structured environments with direct adult involvement. When practitioners introduced manufactured equipment and adopted a more directive approach (Section 4.6.1), children were immediately drawn to the equipment's functional use, such as playing on the hummock. This led to conflicts about ownership of the limited play resource and diminished children's exploration of alternative possibilities offered by natural materials. Although pretend play and exploratory activities remained present, children's play tended to be shaped by the intended function of the objects rather than by their own reinterpretation and recreation.

However, the findings also revealed that some structured outdoor play, such as football, positively influenced children's cultural adaptation and thereby motivated their engagement. Sports play, with established rules and structures, supported children who were having difficulty adapting to the new sociocultural environment at school and in the neighbourhood (Section 6.2.2). The rule-based nature of sports and the intense teamwork foster a stronger sense of belonging among children (Doidge et al., 2020; Flensner et al., 2021), while social interaction around collaborating to win the game naturally occurs during this process. The role of structured sports play in facilitating belonging and cultural adaptation is explored further in Section 7.4.1.

Additionally, most sports play reported by children did not follow strictly formal

match formats but were more flexible, focusing on physical activity and team collaboration with minimal adult direction. This may be because their participation in sports was in unstructured settings, such as a community park, without teachers or parents present. These activities were usually self-initiated and took place outside the school environment. For instance, in the drawings by Hope (Figure 6) and Azeri (Figure 9), the sports scenes were not set in the school playground but in larger, open green areas. Similarly, Devin and Frank shared that their favourite activities were playing football or basketball after school with neighbourhood friends at a nearby park (Section 6.8 and Section 6.2.2). These examples suggest that, from the children's perspective, 'sports' do not necessarily refer to highly structured or adult-led activities, but rather informal, outdoor physical play that offers opportunities for peer interaction and social engagement. This finding suggests that the form of outdoor play, whether structured or unstructured, may not be the primary determining factor for children's motivation. Rather, the role of adults in play and how children perceive adult involvement appear to exert greater influence on their engagement and on the quality of micro-transitions.

The spatial dynamics of adult-child proximity differed markedly between structured and unstructured settings. In structured environments, adults positioned themselves closer to children, who consequently sought adult intervention more readily during peer conflicts. In contrast, the larger, less supervised free-play areas afforded children the opportunity to develop their "secret space" situated beyond adult sight lines (see Section 4.4.1). In this context, children were more inclined to

negotiate conflicts within their peer group first, partly because adults were physically distant and often occupied with managing larger groups (see Section 4.3.1). In more condensed, adult-led environments, however, children perceived adults less as supervisors and more as active participants or leaders in the game. This shift in adult role potentially constrains children's opportunities to navigate and resolve social tensions independently, which were crucial moments and experiences in children's micro-transition.

Sociocultural dimensions of motivation. Children's motivation to engage in outdoor play and the perceived affordance of the play space are fundamentally shaped by their sociocultural experiences, encompassing cultural beliefs and social norms transmitted through home and school settings (Guerra & Luini, 2024). Thus, even when the physical environment remains constant, each child's interpretation of outdoor space is dynamic and negotiable. Children initially draw on cultural understanding and affordance of the space shaped by familiar discourses drawn from past experiences, yet these funds of knowledge remain open to transformation through the exchange of cultural knowledge during outdoor play.

Vienna's story illustrated this cultural dimension (Section 4.7). The cultural knowledge she brought from her home setting did not initially support peer engagement during outdoor play. Consequently, she lacked motivation to participate, and the space held little perceived meaningfulness for her. Through sustained daily interactions with peers and teachers, however, Vienna gradually acquired new cultural knowledge and began engaging more actively in outdoor play. Over time, the

affordances she actualised in the playground were reconstructed and expanded, thereby developing her motivation for outdoor play. These micro moments of perceiving new funds of knowledge, and then reshaping her previous cultural understanding constructed from home, contributed to the final micro-transition of entering the natural playground and playing with peers

Implications for educational practice. The misalignment between children's and teachers' perspectives on the affordance of natural play space reveals a potential gap in educators' understanding of children's daily outdoor play. This disconnect suggests that educators may not be adopting a holistic, sociocultural perspective on children's motivation for outdoor play. Rather than viewing play as embedded in broader social and cultural contexts that include family influences and individual experiences, educators may isolate outdoor play within the school context alone. This observation raises a broader concern about whether children's perspectives are adequately recognised and valued within school environments (Cakan & Acer, 2024; Clark, 2005; Larrea et al., 2019). However, this issue lies beyond the current research's primary focus and warrants further investigation. Future studies might explore how educators work with children's voices and how educators could better gain cultural insights from children's home settings.

7.3.2 Negotiation of power and agency in the playground

Throughout the observation period, children engaged in dynamic negotiations around agency and power relations with both peers and teachers in the school

playground. These negotiations represent a pivotal part of children's identity exploration and expression (Wood, 2014). The ways children exercise agency in play vary considerably, influenced by the sociocultural factors, such as their experience, perceived cultural beliefs and the school's practices (Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018). Whether assuming a leadership role during the "campfire" play (Section 4.3.1), participating in group activities in hidden spaces to avoid teacher supervision (Section 4.4.1), challenging established boundaries in boisterous play, or navigating moments of exclusion (Section 4.4.1), children actively exercise power relations with peers and adults. Through these interactions, they constructed an understanding of peer culture and their own identities.

Children used resistance to perceived societal and institutional demands and expectations in outdoor play as a form of practising agency and exploring identities within an adult-constrained environment. As Henrick (2010) observed regarding the complexity of children's negotiation in play contexts:

"Playful children can be petulant, boisterous, careless with the feelings of others, and downright mean. They are fond of 'showing off' and 'grossing out' one another. They are hungry for the peer-based status that comes from demonstrating their defiance of adult rules." (p.204)

Although the school afforded children considerable freedom in outdoor play, this freedom remains conditional and constrained by both visible and invisible adult-

imposed rules. These constraints included institutional boundaries, such as limited lunch break duration, and spatial demarcations, such as using trees as a line to define the play area. They also reflected cultural beliefs held by adults, such as parental disapproval of playing in wet weather (see Section 5.6), and teacher expectations, as manifested in children's own concerns about getting dirty (see Section 4.4.1).

Henricks (2010) argues that children are aware of the power of external reality and, in response, often seek to exercise agency within play's internal world by testing and pushing against the authorised boundaries. This is not to suggest that children constantly oppose adult involvement. Instead, teachers were frequently invited to join the play during the observation period. However, children's resistance to certain rules imposed by adults reveals their active role in shaping the play environment. They function not merely as passive "perceivers" of their surroundings but as active agents capable of challenging and reforming their social situations to align with their motives and demands emerging from play (Edwards, A. et al., 2019). This explains why the relationship between children's cultural beliefs and their institutions (home and school) is represented as dialectic in the theoretical framework (Figure 3), which is indicated by double arrows to signify the dynamic influences.

7.3.3 Scaffolding in developing the motive orientation to outdoor play

While free play provides opportunities for children to exercise agency and engage with the natural environment, unstructured outdoor play spaces can be intimidating for children with less outdoor play experience or who are new to this

cultural context. As discussed in the findings, children in the playground usually play with their friends; it was relatively uncommon to observe a child playing alone. When a child played alone, older peers invited them to join a group activity. This pattern reflects implicit social expectations to avoid exclusion in play, arising from both institutional norms of inclusivity and children's moral and social values (Wainman et al., 2012).

However, research indicates that children often experience uncertainty or confusion when confronting the complex social relations and power dynamics present during free play in unfamiliar settings (Woods, 2014). When a child is excluded from peer play and cannot find companionship, their motivation for outdoor play tends to decline (Harrist & Bradley, 2003). Indeed, the process through which children negotiate new demands is crucial for their cultural formation and development, as they learn by both responding to existing expectations and creating their own within different institutional contexts (Hedegaard, 2009, 2012; Fleer, 2014).

Nonetheless, adapting to the demands of school-based free play can be challenging, particularly for children whose home environments do not align with these social expectations or scripts. This was evident in Vienna's experiences, where she entered the playground unmotivated to participate in play activities or peer interactions, preferring instead to engage with adults, as this was the familiar social practice in her home-schooled context. Adjusting to the new social demands of the school playground proved particularly difficult for her. Hedegaard (2012, p. 135) describes this situation as a developmental crisis, explaining that: "children's motives

that are oriented to new institutional practices can lead to developmental crises where this new motive orientation and development of new forms of competencies conflict with earlier motives and competencies.”

In Hedegaard’s theory, “a child’s motives are related to what is meaningful and important for them” (p.134). For children who appeared demotivated to explore and understand the meaningful moments in outdoor play and who experienced negative peer interactions, scaffolding from competent individuals remained essential (Acar et al., 2017; Merritt et al., 2012). While personal learning and practice are important, support from more competent individuals can help children construct new knowledge and navigate social play (Wood, 2014). With this scaffolding, children are more likely to engage in interactions that prompt their micro-transitions into outdoor play within the new cultural setting. These individuals may include adults, such as teachers or practitioners, or peers with more experience or knowledge in outdoor play.

Frank’s play in the community garden with older children illustrates peer scaffolding: his mother observed that the play group required no adult assistance, as older children could teach younger ones (Section 6.2). In Vienna’s case, her development in engaging with outdoor play was supported by both adults and peers (Section 4.7.4). The teacher helped her take the first steps by encouraging her to participate in classroom group play. Her peers also recognised her hesitation and actively invited her to join their play. One peer supported her in developing a sensory connection with nature, guiding her through shared experiences in the outdoor environment. Through these interactions and the exchange of new cultural beliefs and

knowledge with these competent individuals in the school context, Vienna's motivational orientation gradually shifted towards a greater willingness to participate in outdoor free play.

However, teachers must be aware of and sensitive to the negative interactions and discrimination children may encounter in the process of meeting new demands. It is important for teachers to play an active role in communicating with parents to better understand and respond to children's diverse cultural beliefs and experiences. This has been discussed in *the communication gaps between home and school* in Section 7.2.2.

7.4 Outdoor Play as the Third Space

The previous two sections explained the flow of cultural formation across societal, institutional, and individual levels, as well as the micro-transition moments during outdoor play interactions. This section examines how outdoor play functions as a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994; Levy, 2008; Yahya & Wood, 2016) within the theoretical framework, supporting children's developing cultural understanding. According to Levy (2008) and Yahya and Wood (2016), third space is understood as a mediating space that allows children to make sense of the different funds of knowledge and discourses between home and school.

This study follows their definition, viewing outdoor play as the third space where multicultural children can utilise to navigate the cultural cohesion between two institutional settings and facilitate a smoother transition into the new cultural environment. This concept is situated in the middle of the dynamic framework, and

aims to represent that in the flow of perceiving, exchanging and inter-influencing process of children's cultural formation, outdoor space can act as a stable but hybrid intellectual space where children can stimulate micro-transitions and understand the diverse, and sometimes messy, cultural knowledges.

7.4.1 Sports as a form of outdoor play for children's social integration

The mediating function of sports. In children's accounts, playing sports was perceived as one of the most significant forms of outdoor play that mediated their transition into a new cultural setting. As argued in Section 7.3.1, children did not necessarily view sports as structured, but rather as flexible, less structured play that enables them to play with peers under certain rules. To examine how sport functions as a third space in children's and their mothers' narratives, this section discusses the characteristics of this special form of outdoor play and the complex interplay between societal and parental expectations, as well as children's motive orientations.

Sports play usually requires children's collaboration, negotiation, and shared objectives, which prompt children to overcome linguistic and cultural differences. Kölbl (2025) observes that school-based sports often focus on skill development while nurturing children's sense of inclusion and self-esteem. In informal settings such as neighbourhoods and communities, the sociocultural aspects of sports, which promote interactions and cultural exchange among participants, become more evident. Although a child may be new to the cultural environment and have different cultural knowledge from their peers, the embodied nature of physical play can help bridge

cultural and linguistic differences that might otherwise present barriers in verbal contexts.

Within sports teams, children construct a shared identity as team members that temporarily substitutes other positionalities, such as their cultural backgrounds and language. This form of outdoor play provides a mediating space for children almost to ignore the differences between individuals and focus on their shared goals and the immediate play experience. As one child participant, Eshe, described in her interview, there exists “one culture” in play that transcends the differences in race, ethnicity and religion. It offers a fertile ground for children to develop a hybrid cultural understanding and belonging through the shared practice rather than focusing on the similarities of cultural experiences.

This sense of belonging and acceptance, which is constructed through the interactions in play, motivates children experiencing cultural transitions to participate more actively in outdoor sports, whether at school or in their communities. Abundant opportunities for social interaction with peers during these activities further foster mutual cultural understanding and support their integration into the dominant culture (Flensner et al., 2021; Kölbl, 2025). The findings from this study suggest that sports, as a form of outdoor play and a mediating space, do not erase cultural differences but create a shared context where these differences meet, fuse, and become less salient within the immediate activity setting.

A safe space. Both mothers and children in this study perceived structured sports organised in school settings as safe spaces for play and interaction. The role of

educators in these environments extends beyond skill training to include creating inclusive spaces that foster relationship building and a sense of belonging (Doidge et al., 2020; Flensner et al., 2021). This scaffolding was particularly important for children in the early stages of cultural transition, who may feel vulnerable or uncertain in less structured peer interactions. For instance, Hope expressed enthusiasm for participating in structured physical education lessons at school and later joined the school football team (Section 6.3.2). Reflecting on her experience, both she and her mother believed that this structured play helped alleviate the pressure she faced during her initial transition to a new school. Through her teachers' scaffolding in sports, Hope felt more empowered and developed a stronger sense of belonging.

This structured nature of school sports was perceived by multicultural families as a safe third space where they were less likely to experience bullying or discrimination due to the adult scaffolding and structured form, while still allowing for cultural negotiation and hybrid identity construction. This was illustrated in Li's explanation of her support for her son's football play at school, as the teacher supervised the team, so she was less concerned about her son's safety. For families who restrict children's access to outdoor play because of safety concerns, this structured form paradoxically enables greater freedom for children to practise with new cultures and develop peer relationships within a framework they fully trust.

The interplay of parental motivations and societal expectations. The findings reveal that parental encouragement and children's engagement of sports among multicultural families reflects a complex negotiation between cultural values, societal

demands and the subjective recognition of sports' positive social influences. For migrant families from cultural backgrounds where sports were not traditionally prioritised or valued as an important means of socialisation, as they often are in Scottish culture. Participation in school or community sports teams was thus regarded as a strategic tool for social integration, providing a crucial daily access to social networks and interactions (Cortis, 2009; Taylor, 2004).

However, this orientation does not indicate that the multicultural families' decision to participate in football is a simple assimilation into Scottish cultural norms. It is also not to deny the influence of dominant culture, yet their adoption of such cultural practice is fundamentally based on mothers' beliefs in the benefits of sports for children. For example, both Hannah and Li noted that, while football was highly popular in Scotland, it was neither commonly played nor culturally significant in their countries of origin. They also felt social pressure at the institutional and societal levels to encourage their children to participate in sports (Section 6.3.2). But their decision to support their children's involvement was not merely compliance with external expectations; it stemmed from their recognition that playing sports was an effective way to establish new friendships and facilitate their children's integration into the local community and school environment. They encouraged their children to join the school's football team.

Children's motivation for sports play was influenced by both the societal expectations of "knowing the sports" and the institutional expectations of integrating into the cultural context. More importantly, their participation in sports seemed to be

more naturally accepted. As active agents in their own social lives, children sometimes engaged in sports simply because they found physical play enjoyable and meaningful. As Smith et al. (2018) argue, although sports as a form of cultural capital are linked with race, ethnicity, and various socio-economic and sociocultural factors, at their core, sports are physical activities that generate positive emotions. Therefore, it would be irrational to dismiss their potential positive influence on migrant children's settlement experiences and social integration outcomes.

7.4.2 Gender equality in sports

Another issue raised in the findings about sports is gender equality; although it was only briefly mentioned by one child, it is worth paying attention to in future's research. In Juli's interview, although she was motivated to play football and received support and encouragement from her school, she questioned why the school organised more football days for boys than for girls (Section 6.9.2). This disparity may be influenced by a range of factors operating at societal, institutional, and individual levels.

At the societal level, certain cultural beliefs discourage girls from participating in outdoor physical activities, which may contribute to lower participation rates in school sports teams (Hextrum et al., 2025; Yahya, 2016). At the institutional level, the school environment may unintentionally reinforce gendered norms by celebrating masculinity through sports, thereby perpetuating stereotypes about girls' involvement in physical activities (Skelton, 2000; Hextrum et al., 2025). At the individual level,

research suggests that boys and girls may have distinct motivations for participating in sports. Boys' participation is more frequently linked to power and competition, whereas girls tend to prioritise the social and cooperative aspects of sport (Soares et al., 2013). However, this thesis argues that these gendered motivation patterns are not innate, but closely connected to broader societal and organisational beliefs and expectations regarding gender roles.

Juli's question highlights the need to critically examine how gender roles are constructed and maintained through school sports practices. Further research is needed to explore the intersection of gender, culture, and institutional practice in shaping children's access to and experiences in sports.

7.4.3 Children and the natural environment of outdoor play

The dialectical relationship between children and nature. The interaction with nature as an important element of the theoretical framework occurred in both the observation and interview findings. Compared with the interaction with peers, the natural environment in outdoor play offers children a sense of stability, freedom and a mediating space (Massey, 1994, 2005; Harju et al., 2021). Children's motivation for outdoor play and the natural environment of the play space itself form a dialectical relationship. Children's interactions with and perceptions of the outdoor environment influence their motivational orientation towards engaging in outdoor play, while, at the same time, neighbourhood green spaces afford them opportunities to explore the natural world and their identity. This reciprocal relationship is significant for children

According to Chawla (2007), humans have an innate interest in the natural environment, and their sense of closeness to nature continually develops through experience. Evidence from both children's interviews and observations in the school playground demonstrated that children from diverse backgrounds showed a strong interest in exploring natural spaces and interacting with living creatures. For example, Hope and Gisel (Sections 6.3.3 and 6.5.4) expressed their affection for various types of birds, and Gisel mentioned that she built a connection to the local natural environment by imitating bird sounds. This embodied sensory engagement with nature did not require verbal language or peer interactions; it existed in children's daily lives and was not limited to the institutional basis. The children in the observed groups creatively constructed their play artefacts using natural materials found in the mixed woods area, transforming wood sticks into drumsticks, swords, and other culturally meaningful artefacts through the play (Section 4.3).

Children's creative use of natural materials and interaction with nature illustrates how the natural environment of outdoor play supports the development of a third space. It provides rich and diverse resources that children can permeate and endow with cultural meanings drawn from the knowledge from home and school and create new interpretations through the knowledge exchange with peers, as Yakta learned how to make a water box with his peer Zahavi (Section 4.3.3). Nature thus offers a creative, flexible and dynamic environment that the manufactured play settings may not provide.

Playing in nature and children's natural affinity for it motivate them to play

outdoors, while green spaces in playgrounds or neighbourhood parks support their various types of play. This dialectical relationship, in which nature draws children to play, and their engagement transforms the outdoor environment into a meaningful space, fosters conditions that promote cultural interactions and negotiations important to children's experience in the third space.

Social mediation of children's relationships with nature. In addition to an affinity for nature, children's interactions with nature are significantly mediated by their sociocultural contexts. Institutional beliefs and practices, parental attitudes and peer influences all play vital roles in shaping children's understanding of and interaction with the natural environment (Bayındır & Çiftçi, 2025; Cho & Lee, 2018). These sociocultural mediations can either facilitate or constrain children's access to nature.

Parental beliefs, shaped by the cultures of their home countries and current cultural settings, influence children's engagement with the natural outdoor environment. Hannah and Gabriela shared positive memories of their own childhood outdoor play experiences and a strong interest in exploring nature (Section 5.7.2). This positive childhood experience with nature contributed to a sense of safety, which further encouraged them to provide their children with greater access to and agency in natural environments (Ernst, 2017). Such a positive orientation towards engaging in outdoor play in natural settings is transmitted across generations; according to the findings, their children, Hope and Gisel, also showed a natural affinity and active interactions with nature (Sections 6.3.3 and 6.5.4).

However, not all families share this positive attitude. In some cultures, children playing in nature can be linked to safety threats and danger (Adams & Savahl, 2015). When misalignments between children's perceived home cultural beliefs and Scottish schools' cultural expectations emerge in outdoor play, as discussed in Section 7.3.3, children can actively reshape their understanding through continuous social interactions and cultural knowledge exchange with peers.

Peer interactions constitute a powerful social influence on children's understanding and experience of outdoor play in natural settings. As an important part of children's social relations, the beliefs and behaviours of children's friends and playmates could positively or negatively influence children's motivation for outdoor play (Barkley et al., 2014; Salvy et al., 2009). Peer influence was evident in children's observations and interviews. For instance, Hope specifically mentioned that she was sometimes motivated by her outdoor friends to go outside, even when she was initially hesitant to participate. Similarly, during school observations with Vienna, her dialogues with peers, which included both body movement, sensory exploration and verbal interactions, supported her in developing new cultural understandings of outdoor play in nature, as well as the knowledge that she had not acquired through her social experiences at home. She was no longer characterising the natural ground as dirty, which was potentially shaped by her parents' attitude; she started recognising the meaningful and playful elements of nature.

Although this research did not directly observe teachers' practices in scaffolding children's outdoor exploration and play, studies suggest that educators' practices and

perceptions of outdoor play and nature can play a pivotal role in shaping children's relationships with the natural world (Fägerstam, 2012; Schlembach et al., 2018).

Further research is needed to explore how educators navigate children's different cultural knowledge on outdoor play in natural settings and scaffolding an inclusive outdoor learning experiences to support their cultural transition process in the third space.

Children as active agents in shaping nature. Children's agency has been discussed in the context of power dynamics in outdoor play (Section 7.3.2). In the relationship between children and nature, children also act as active agents in shaping both the natural environment and their social relations with it. This practice of agency in nature is meaningful for children who may have less freedom or autonomy in other institutional settings.

Through outdoor play, children form bonds with natural spaces through embodied engagement: they climb trees, pick berries, and run across soil and mud. They make choices about what to explore and how to explore it, exercising agency in ways that may not be fully encouraged in adult-structured settings. The natural outdoor play area becomes their territory, a space that allows freedom, where children can explore and create their own ideas with limited adult interruption (Chawla, 2007). This sense of ownership and freedom may be particularly valuable for children experiencing cultural transition and feeling driven by diverse forces beyond their control. For example, Azeri experienced consistent home movement after he came to Scotland with his mother; each move meant a transition to a new cultural setting at

school, and he needed to establish new peer relationships (Section 6.6.2). Escaping and playing in an outdoor natural environment with familiar friends became his way of releasing the anxiousness.

Children's agency in nature also includes their actions of caring and protection that shape the natural environment. Although the actions were individual-based and described as micro-level, they had profound meanings and influence. One day, a child might choose to save a bee by offering it honey, as Juli did during her play. In those moments, she witnessed the immediate effects of her actions, which fosters feelings of competence and empowerment (Section 6.9.4). Her action not only helped the bee survive but also influenced the social dynamics of play: her peers began imitating her and, in turn, attempted to help bees they encountered. Juli's relationship with nature, therefore, is not limited to that of a passive observer or perceiver. Rather, she becomes a participant and co-creator, influencing both the natural environment and the social meanings attached to human-nature interaction.

Natural outdoor space as a source of stability and resilience. The natural outdoor environment offers children experiencing mental distress during transitional periods a sense of resilience and stability that derives from nature's constancy (Harju et al., 2021). As Hordyk et al. (2015, p. 586) argue, "nature is the only 'always present' aspect in many migrant children's lives"; it acts as a constant companion. Natural creatures, such as trees and birds, provide children with experiential continuity even when other aspects of their lives are changing.

This argument resonated with the experiences of children in this study. Azeri,

whose life was marked by frequent changes and uncertainty, described experiencing a feeling of “stability” when spending time in nature. Azeri and children like him often face unstable social relationships in unfamiliar cultural settings. This transition requires them to navigate new beliefs and values, engage with various forms of knowledge, and constantly negotiate their identity within the multicultural context. In this situation, a space that affords shared experiences of interaction, exploration, observation, and negotiation becomes essential.

Nature, with its open, dynamic, and resource-rich characteristics, offers children what Hordyk et al. (2015) describe as a “safe container” in which to process negative emotions. Activities in nature, such as observing the fruits in different seasons and different bird songs, provide a non-judgmental environment where children can focus on interactions with other creatures and make sense of their confusion without encountering cultural conflicts. Additionally, engagement with nature fosters a sense of resilience and helps children feel empowered and competent as they gain knowledge about nature through play supported by natural environments, as Juli gain knowledge from her rescuing bee experience (Chawla et al., 2014). Through interacting with natural elements and living creatures, children can gradually transform distress into emotional energy and strength. In this way, outdoor play in natural settings becomes a shelter where children can process their emotions and relations, temporarily escape the tensions and confusion arising from the demands of home and school, supporting their micro-transition and cultural formation in the third space of outdoor play.

7.4.4. Is language really a barrier?

In the previous two sections, I have discussed how sports, as a special form of outdoor play, and natural environments become elements of the conceptual framework of the third space that supports children's cultural formation and transition. This section challenges the traditional debate about language as a barrier in interactions among children from different linguistic backgrounds. This study argues that outdoor play, as a third space, offers multiple communicative modalities that extend beyond verbal language and blur cultural boundaries.

Beyond verbal communication in outdoor play: multimodal engagement in outdoor play. Many studies have shown that language can be a barrier for children from non-dominant cultural backgrounds in forming friendships and engaging in meaningful dialogue during play (Brooker, 2006; Holmes et al., 2014). English language educators and scholars believe that speech in children's daily interactions forms the basis for knowledge exchange and the development of creativity (Carter, 2004; Holmes, 2012; Holmes et al., 2014). This study supports the importance of speech in children's interactions and cultural formation. However, it suggests that a lack of language proficiency does not necessarily prevent children from different cultural backgrounds from engaging in outdoor play and establishing friendships. Instead, outdoor play spaces afford different modes of communication that can compensate for verbal linguistic competence.

This was illustrated in Zoe's experience. She transferred to a Scottish school

without the ability to communicate in English. Despite this, she was still able to form friendships through the support and scaffolding provided by her teacher and peers during outdoor play. According to her mother, she did not experience any social isolation but rather actively engaged with peers during play. Her favourite spot at school was the outdoor playground, where she took part in physical activities with her peers. She used only simple English words and more body language; however, as her mother explained, they somehow connected. Her English gradually improved through consistent daily interactions with peers and teachers at school, with outdoor play experiences contributing to both her language development and her social integration.

The theoretical understanding of interaction in play should not only examine verbal speech but also recognise the semiotic resources children employ. As Ødegaard (2020) argues, the voice of dialogue emerges as the final result of a complex and dynamic process in which outdoor play unfolds through the body, movement, sensations, artefacts, materiality, symbols, and discourses, and is conditioned by space, place, relationships, and activities. This aligns with the multimodal perspective this study adopts, which views meaning-making in play as occurring through children's body language, creation and utilisation of artefacts, spatial positioning, interaction with the space and the co-construction of play narratives through speech and actions.

This understanding was echoed in Eshe's interview, where she expressed the belief that there existed only one shared culture in play, despite differences in race, ethnicity, and religious beliefs. Although she was aware of cultural differences, such

as identifying her friends' racial differences, she perceived the 'language' of play was universally communicable. For Eshe, and likely for many children, the process of play, from initiating the play, collaborating and negotiating, achieving the shared goal and enjoying the moments, matters more than peers' language proficiency. Even when children lack a shared spoken language, they can create shared memories through bodily movement, sensory exploration, and the construction of play artefacts. As Zoe's case, even though she could not communicate in English, she was able to run and chase her peers, crafting the artefacts with her friends in the outdoor play space. Therefore, children's engagement in outdoor play should be understood holistically, recognising multiple modes of dialogue.

7.4.5 Identity exploration in outdoor play.

Through social interactions, both verbal and non-verbal, and the exchange of cultural knowledge during play, children develop deeper understandings of their cultural identities. This process can sometimes manifest as confusion or questioning about aspects of their racial characteristics, religious beliefs, or traditional norms learned at home. For example, both Devin and Eshe questioned their ethnic differences with peers, such as skin colour and hair texture (Sections 6.8.2 and 6.7.2). Devin also expressed uncertainty about his own religious beliefs by asking why his peers did not attend church on Sundays. These questions emerged from children's lived experience of outdoor play, which gave them space to identify cultural differences.

Their reflections do not necessarily indicate a rejection of their own ethnicity or cultural background; rather, they reflect an ongoing process of understanding other cultures and exploring new aspects of identity. As Brooker and Woodhead (2008, p. 10) observe, “changing cultural and social contexts, and new relationships allow individuals to develop new or modified identities.” The construction of a hybrid identity begins with gaining knowledge of other cultures. Neither Eshe nor Devin strongly retain their identity to their home culture; rather, they tend to view themselves as having a hybrid identity. At the end of the interview, Eshe acknowledged that her hair is different from her peers’ but is beautiful. She claimed her belief in “one culture” indicated she had established a life-based understanding of the hybrid culture and identity. Devin still attended Sunday Church after his mother explained their culture and religion, and he actively engaged in outdoor play with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Perhaps the moment when he made sense of his religious beliefs, which differed from those of his peers, was a cultural micro-transition for him.

Outdoor play, in this context, provides a holistic space where children can identify sociocultural dimensions of their identity, learn knowledge from the home setting, and make sense of cultural differences, constructing hybrid identities through both internal processes and external learning. The internal process, as discussed before, is a natural emotional third space that supports children in calmly discovering ‘how they feel about it’, as evidenced in Yakta’s case (Section 4.3.3) in the playground. External learning comes from children’s social relationships. They learn about their home

culture through their parents' interpretations and about other cultures from peers and teachers in school settings. When different knowledges meet, it could be the moment when children share their traditional food at lunch break or braid each other's hair as a cultural way to meet new friends; in these micro-transitions, new friendships emerge. When these micro-moments of transition accumulate, children will gradually develop their hybrid identities.

7.4.6 Critical considerations: avoiding over-romanticisation.

Some studies argue that researchers and educators should be cautious not to over-idealise children's play or interpret it through a romanticised lens, as play is often shaped and constrained by social and cultural contexts (Adair & Doucet, 2014; Jones, 2002; King et al., 2024). In the research of Adair and Doucet (2014), they find that many teachers adopt a colour-blind stance in the classroom, which potentially allows racialised power dynamics to persist and fails to identify racial inequalities in school settings. This failure to view children from a holistic perspective and acknowledge the race and power dynamic extends to interpretations of children's play. Their study shows that black children's play is more frequently labelled as disruptive or aggressive compared to white children's play, even though the behaviour between the two groups is similar (Adair & Doucet, 2014).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that non-white children often play primarily with children from similar cultural backgrounds, and potentially encounter cultural segregation in play (Brooker, 2006). Although this study did not find cases of cultural

segregation in observations and interviews, the research findings include examples of children's exclusion from the group, which may be due to a gap of funds of knowledge and cultural understandings between home and school settings. Moreover, the study documented experiences of racial discrimination. Both Devin and Li reported incidents of racial discrimination during interviews. As argued earlier, outdoor play spaces bridge the cultural conflicts between institutional settings for children. However, when discrimination and bullying occur during play, it may be challenging to rely solely on children to negotiate and resolve the conflict. It is important that adults provide support and scaffolding in these situations.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined outdoor play as a third space for multicultural children's cultural transitions, connecting the research findings to existing literature. Guided by the research questions and conceptual framework, the discussion progressed systematically from the macro-level analysis of societal cultural values and institutional beliefs to the micro-level of children's individual interactions and lived experiences. It has emphasised the importance of approaching children's cultural formation and transition from a holistic perspective, which acknowledges the complex interplay between institutional cultural influences and individual agency, the individual and the natural outdoor environment and the cultural conflicts between different institutions.

The central contribution of this chapter is following the fluid conceptual

framework, demonstrating how outdoor play functions as a ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994; Levy, 2008; Yahya & Wood, 2016) that supports multicultural children in navigating transitions into new cultural contexts.

At the institutional level (Section 7.2), multicultural mothers negotiate between traditional cultural values and Scottish values regarding outdoor play, shaped by their own experiences, neighbourhood integration, encounters with discrimination, and cultural beliefs about appropriate play conditions. These negotiations and beliefs influence children’s access to outdoor play. For children whose mothers recognise the benefits of outdoor play for learning and development, they can more fully engage in free outdoor play and use it as a space for cultural negotiations. Conversely, those facing parental restrictions have limited opportunities. The study also identified significant home-school misalignments regarding play and learning, requiring educators’ active communication to bridge institutional discontinuities and create coherent environments for children’s cultural formation.

At the level of children’s motivation orientation (Section 7.3), natural, relatively unstructured environments emerged as powerful motivators, affording diverse possibilities for exploration and peer interaction that support cultural knowledge exchange and micro-transitions. The study challenged the structured-versus-unstructured binaries, revealing that the role of participants and power dynamics between adults and children, such as whether activities are adult-directed or child-led, matter more than the structure itself. Children as active agents exercise their agency by resisting institutional rules and boundaries and reshaping their social situations

(Section 7.3.2). However, they also require culturally responsive scaffolding from competent individuals when encountering developmental crises, peer exclusion, or discrimination (Section 7.3.3).

At the micro-level of specific contexts (Section 7.4), sports provide mediating spaces where shared goals and embodied experiences enable children to temporarily focus on oneness rather than cultural differences, offering an effective pathway for social integration (Section 7.4.1). However, gender inequalities may influence children's access to sports (Section 7.4.2). The natural environment offers special affordances through its characteristic stability, material continuity, and openness, functioning as a third space that helps children remain resilient and navigate their negative emotions. Engaging in natural outdoor play is also conducive to children's competence development (Section 7.4.3). It is also argued that language is not a barrier to children forming meaningful relationships in outdoor play, as they can engage in multimodal interactions without linguistic fluency (Section 7.4.4).

The following chapter reflects on the research process, demonstrates this study's contribution to knowledge, acknowledges limitations, and presents recommendations for educational practice and future research building on these findings.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

The final chapter of the thesis highlights this study's contributions to knowledge and shares my reflections on the ethnographic research process and its limitations. Furthermore, it offers suggestions for future research. The concluding section provides a brief overview of the study.

8.2 Contribution to the Knowledge

Theoretically, this study demonstrates the value of the hybrid third space concept for understanding how multicultural children navigate between different cultural contexts in two institutional settings: home and school. It extends third space theory (Bhabha, 1994; Levy, 2008) and integrates it into Hedegaard's (2008) wholeness approach to children's development to explore children's cultural formation process across societal, institutional, and individual dimensions. The existing applications of third space theory in education have primarily focused on literacy practices and classroom discourse (Levy, 2008; Moje et al., 2004); very few studies examine outdoor play contexts and consider children's interactions with nature (Yahya & Woods, 2016). This study's conceptual framework provides a dynamic, fluid, and holistic approach to examining children's cultural formation through outdoor play and to exploring the potential of outdoor play as a third space that facilitates micro-transitions for multicultural children. This study argues that this

process of cultural formation occurs through accumulated micro-transitions, which are small yet meaningful moments in children's exploration and development of their hybrid identity.

One of the most significant theoretical contributions of the current study is the identification and conceptualisation of micro-transitions as fundamental to children's cultural formation. This study argues that children's transitions are not limited to formal institutional shifts (e.g., home-to-school) but also occur at the micro-level when they recognise and respond to misalignments between the motives and expectations of their peers, educators, or families (Birkeland et al., 2021). These moments of negotiation, often subtle and situated within outdoor play, are central to children's cultural development. By foregrounding micro-transitions, this research challenges the traditional understanding of institutional transition, revealing cultural formation as an ongoing and dynamic process embedded in children's daily experiences.

Furthermore, the research sheds light on children's interactions in various outdoor play settings. It recognises the special role that flexible, structured sports play in children's social adaptation and peer interaction. It identifies the active role of the natural environment in children's cultural formation and transition. It presents how multicultural children negotiate their identity, agency, power, and exchanged cultural knowledge with peers and adults across school and home contexts, and how they produce new cultural understanding through these interactions. This study argues that the outdoor setting is not merely a backdrop for play but a relational space that

supports children in responding to cultural conflicts. The rich artefact sources from nature foster children's creativity and exploration, and the stability of nature itself also offers children a sense of security and belonging, which some find difficult to gain from institutions due to cultural dissonance.

This study reveals mothers' perspectives on outdoor play and presents cultural variation in beliefs towards outdoor play and learning. It shows how mothers' beliefs influence their children's access to outdoor play and meaningful peer interactions. More importantly, it finds that, except for children living between two cultures, their mothers also seek a balance between their traditional cultural beliefs and expectations and the demands of the Scottish school.

Through interweaving mothers' and children's narratives, the study illuminates the dialectical relationships that characterise cultural formation. Home and school cultures shape children's beliefs and practices, but children also actively utilise outdoor play as a space to construct new meanings and reshape their social situations. Children's motivations and agency influence their engagement with outdoor environments, which, in turn, are shaped by the affordances those environments offer. These dialectical relationships, represented in the study's conceptual framework by bidirectional arrows, capture the dynamic, mutually influencing nature of cultural formation.

The study also contributes to understanding multimodal communication in children's cultural transitions. It suggests that although language is a vital tool for interactions, it does not determine a child's capacity to participate in play and form

meaningful peer relationships. Outdoor play affords a variety of interaction methods that are not restricted by verbal speech. Semiotic modes such as body language, gestures, creating artefacts and sensory exploration also enable children to create shared meaning. This research challenges the view that language deficits are the primary barrier to children's play and interaction, revealing how outdoor play and children's own interpretations can mitigate language and cultural boundaries.

This study makes two significant methodological contributions to ethnographic research in educational settings. The first is my experience as an overseas PhD student approaching the school's gatekeepers, including challenges in accessing participants and obtaining consent, as well as the researcher's flexibility in this process. These experiences have made a small but meaningful contribution to future ethnographic researchers who need to enter the field in diverse cultural contexts. Secondly, this ethnographic study collected rich observations and diverse narratives from individuals and families of diverse cultural backgrounds. Informed by multimodal perspectives (Kress, 2011), this study integrated the interpretation of children's drawings and various social semiotic modes to gain a deeper insight into how children make meanings beyond speech, and used narrative reports to represent the rich data. This approach contributes to the current debate in education research about how to hear children's voices most effectively.

Taken together, this research challenges the traditional definition of transition in early childhood education and argues that the transition and cultural formation of multicultural children are dynamic, situated, and ongoing processes embedded in their

everyday experiences. These processes are shaped by influences at both the macro level (such as societal norms and institutional practices) and the micro level (including children's individual interactions and agency). Meanwhile, outdoor play is conceptualised as a third space—a fluid and relational setting that helps bridge misalignments between differing cultural beliefs and practices, and that supports children in constructing their own cultural understanding. With these contributions clarified, the discussion now turns to exploring the connections between the existing literature and the key findings of this study.

Future research can examine teachers' perspectives in greater depth on how their beliefs are shaped by school culture and how this, in turn, affects the provision of children's outdoor play at school. It could also include their perspectives and experiences interacting with multicultural families, which could provide further insight into why some mothers struggle to trust the Scottish school's values regarding outdoor play fully. It also suggests conducting ethnographic research with fixed participants and observing their outdoor play in both home and school settings to further explore their micro-transition process.

8.3 Reflection and limitation.

Upon reflecting on my research process, I identified a few areas that I would like to change. First, as I explained in the methodology chapter, I encountered a range of difficulties in accessing schools and parents through the school system. This is, of course, partially related to my positionality as an outsider, and I did not highlight the

potential connections between the research participants and me when approaching them. Another reason would be the school's time frames. At the time I approached schools, it was close to their school holidays, so I may have had more opportunities open to me if I had approached them earlier.

Despite multiple attempts, including sending flyers and contacting them through class teachers, the effort to recruit parent participants from the school was unsuccessful. Part of the reason the parents in the observed group rejected my interview proposal may be rooted in doubt about the research's contribution to their lives and in a lack of interest in their children's outdoor play experiences (O'Karen, 2011). Additionally, according to the class teachers' descriptions, there was a parental engagement issue at this school. Parents showed limited interest and effort in participating in school-organised activities or in the parent committee. If I insisted on interviewing the observed group, even if I eventually gained access, the interview results may not be as deep as I could get from the current group, because they cared about outdoor play and paid attention to their children's experiences in it.

Another possible reason would be related to my positionality, as I did not know any parents in their community, and I am not a mother with children. Such an outsider identity contributed to their distrust and disinterest in participating in the research. If I had spent more time at the school and had opportunities to meet parents in person, this situation might have improved. Alternatively, I would start looking for other participants from the wider communities earlier.

Spending too much time accessing parents at school left me with very little time

after I decided to expand recruitment and reach out to other multicultural families. Although the time spent interviewing each family was extensive, which included informal conversations to develop mutual understandings, it would have been beneficial to spend more time getting to know the family and observing the children's outdoor play on a daily basis. Because I could feel that after informal interactions with mothers and children, including having a cup of tea or following the children's lead to their play space, my positionality became closer to that of an insider in some moments, and participants were more open to my interview questions compared to those without these experiences. This is also a limitation of the study.

The inconsistency of the participant group is one limitation of this study. Ideally, after observing children at school, I would interview their parents to learn more about their home culture and how parents' cultural beliefs influence their motivation for outdoor play. However, these background details were eventually obtained from their class teachers. Although they had provided valuable information and provided a context about children's behaviours, it was only a broad picture rather than details. The later interviews within the broader communities did provide explicit knowledge of diverse cultural beliefs among families living between two cultures, and offered me a significant lens to delve into multicultural children's outdoor play outside school settings. But I acknowledge that the structure would be clearer if the interviews were conducted with the parents from the school.

Another limitation is the minor language barrier between the researcher and participants. When I was in the field, there were situations in which I could not fully

understand the children's specific words, such as the names of their games or some popular phrases among them. These terms are situated in the Scottish school cultural context, which was the knowledge I did not have when I entered the field. Therefore, some children lost interest in interacting with me in this communication process. This impetus led to some of my opportunities in building relationships and observing their interactions closely. Additionally, in the interview with mothers, a similar situation also occurred when the mother attempted to explain some activities but forgot the English words to describe them. In this situation, I used member checking when I analysed the data and made sure the meaning is close to what they expressed. Sometimes, they used a translator for certain words. It is possible that some participants may express themselves more effectively if I have a better understanding of their language or culture.

8.4 Conclusion

My personal experience of engaging in outdoor education within a multicultural context, as well as my involvement in children's outdoor play provision, motivated me to undertake this study. By reviewing the literature, I identified a gap in research on multicultural children's interactions and micro-transitions in outdoor play, particularly in linking the perspectives of children, mothers, and teachers with observations of children's daily interactions and behaviours in outdoor settings. Through a multimodal lens that draws on various sources of data, the findings suggest that children's cultural formation is a dynamic process, and that outdoor play

facilitates their micro-transitions through diverse interactions and activities.

Children's social worlds are dialectically shaped: home and school cultures influence them, yet children also actively create new cultural understandings that can, in turn, influence the cultural beliefs of their friends, families, and even schools. The study also revealed the dilemmas faced by mothers from non-UK cultural backgrounds regarding outdoor play and play-based learning, which were shaped by their differing cultural beliefs.

In closing this study, I reflected on the research process and acknowledged its limitations. I suggest that future research could enhance the consistency of observed groups and incorporate more in-depth perspectives from teachers. This study has made both theoretical and methodological contributions by providing detailed accounts of how children live between two cultures and how outdoor play becomes a third space that supports the emergence of new cultural knowledge through micro-transitions. This doctoral research proposes a holistic framework of "outdoor play as a third space for multicultural children's cultural formation in micro-transitions," which may be applied in future educational studies on children's development.

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Appendix A. PVG scheme record

STRICTLY PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL



00180009437
MS JIANING FU
[REDACTED]
GLASGOW
LANARKSHIRE
[REDACTED]
UNITED KINGDOM

PVG scheme record
Scheme record disclosure issued under section 52 of the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007

A copy of this certificate has been sent to the countersignatory.

Statement of scheme membership

PVG membership number: 2308 3193 8126 1452

Name: JIANING FU

Date of birth: 22 September 1997

Position applied for: PhD researcher working in Schools

Disclosure number: 3000 0000 0247 8597

Date of issue: 31 August 2023

Membership status
The applicant is a PVG scheme member in respect of regulated work with children and therefore not barred from that type of regulated work.

Consideration status
The applicant is not under consideration for listing by Scottish Ministers. This means they're not being considered as unsuitable for work in the workforce(s) to which this disclosure relates.

Vetting information

Convictions and cautions
The applicant has no convictions or cautions for disclosure.

Prescribed court orders and sexual offences notification requirements
The applicant has no prescribed court orders and is not subject to notification requirements under Part 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

Other relevant information
The applicant has no other relevant information.

Page 1 of 1 More details on the back >

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Appendix B. Ethical Approval Letter from the School



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Moray House School of
Education and Sport

Research, Knowledge Exchange and Impact Office
Moray House School of Education and Sport
The University of Edinburgh
Old Moray House
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

D/D +44 (0)131 651 4846
S/B +44 (0)131 650 1000

www.ed.ac.uk

Ref: JFU18072023

Jianing Fu
Moray House School of Education and Sport

Date: 3rd October 2023

Dear Jianing,

Title: The third space and children's outdoor play: exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural context

The School of Education and Sport Ethics Sub-Committee has now considered your request for ethical approval for the studies detailed in the above application.

This is to confirm that the Sub-Committee is happy to approve your application and that the research meets the School Ethics Approval criterion for this particular project. A standard condition of this ethical approval is that should any amendment, or deviation from the original protocol outlined in your application need to be made to carry out or continue your research, please notify the Ethics Sub-Committee at MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk. The Committee also needs to be notified if there are any unexpected results or events once the research is underway that raise questions about the safety of the research.

Should you receive any formal complaints relating to the study you should notify the MHSES Ethics Committee immediately by email to MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of:
Dr Fiona O'Hanlon
Director of Ethics

Appendix C. Ethical Approval Letter from the Glasgow City Council



OFFICIAL

Glasgow City Council Education Services

23.23

Application Reference

Research Access Request Notification

RESEARCHER NAME	Jianing Fu
PROJECT TITLE	The third space and children's outdoor play: exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural context
REQUEST STATUS	<p style="text-align: center;"> Approved <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Refused <input type="checkbox"/> </p>
COMMENTS (IF APPLICABLE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approval has been granted by the Education Services Research Group (ESRG). Although permission for research access has been given by the research group it is still very much up to the Head of Establishment to decide whether they participate and assist you in your research. Schools also reserve the right to withdraw from the project at any time if they are no longer able to participate. A copy of this letter should be forwarded to the establishment when contacting them to request their participation. Opt-in consent must be used in all circumstances. This is in line with GDPR regulations. Any personally identifiable data collected from participants must be done so within GDPR guidelines.

OFFICIAL

If you require any further assistance, please email PPR@education.glasgow.gov.uk

Appendix D. Ethical approval letter from the Edinburgh City Council



Date 20th December 2023

Your ref EPS/13

Our Ref MG/MK

Dear Jaining Fu

I am writing in response to your application requesting permission to undertake research in schools in The City of Edinburgh.

Your request has been considered, and I am pleased to inform you that you have been given permission in principle to undertake your research. I must stress that it is the policy of this Authority to leave the final decision about participation in research projects of this kind to Head Teachers and their staff, so that approval in principle does not oblige any particular establishment to take part.

I request that you forward a copy of your completed findings to me when they become available. In this case an electronic summary of your thesis would be preferred. Your work may be of interest to a number of staff in the Children, Education and Justice Services Department.

I would like to thank you for contacting the Children, Education and Justice Services Department about your work, and wish you every success in the completion of your project.

Yours sincerely

Martin Gemmell

The Educational Psychology Service

Level 1.3 Waverley Court, 4 East Market Street, Edinburgh EH8 8BG

Tel 0131 469 2800



Appendix E. Letters of invitation for headteacher.

Dear Headteacher,

This is Jianing from the University of Edinburgh. I'm currently doing a PhD study about how children from multicultural backgrounds interact with peers and negotiate their identities through outdoor play. I believe Stew has introduced my study to you briefly. I would like to provide more details about how this research will work with schools. Please feel free to ask any questions. If you are interested, we can also arrange an online meeting or meet in person to discuss further in detail. My supervisor would be happy to jump in as well.

1. Participants

Two classes of children from mixed cultural backgrounds and their teacher

2. Data collection

Weekly observations of children playing indoors and outdoors; each observation should take around 40 minutes, depending on the class and their free play time.

One in-depth interview with the teacher, plus 5 children and their parents. Each interview will take around 1 hour.

This study will not focus on the teacher's pedagogy. The focus is on the children and how they socialise through outdoor play, and whether outdoor play can help with cultural transitions and their cultural formation.

I hope to start the research from early January to May. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Jianing

Appendix F. Participant Information Sheet (Teachers)



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (For teacher)

The third space and children's outdoor play: exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural context

Dear: _____, Date: _____.

My name is Jianing Fu, I am a student at the University of Edinburgh and I am currently undertaking Doctor in Education. You are invited to take part in my research: 'The third space and children's outdoor play: exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural context'. The objective of my study is to understand the role of outdoor play in facilitating children's intercultural interaction. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of the study is to investigate how children interact with each other in outdoor play at school. I will observe the types of play that occur in the outdoors and how this helps children to establish good relationships with one another.

THE BENEFITS:

This research can help you understand children's cultural formation process in outdoor play, how to use outdoor play to support children's transition from home to school, and how to assist children who experience discontinuities.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

Participation from you is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and without giving a reason. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet. You will be asked to sign and complete an Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate.

The observation will be taken in school, I will video record the outdoor play course (and will require your consent for this) and children in outdoor play time (e.g. lunch break time). Each observation should take around 1 hour.

The interview will be conducted with you. You will be asked a number of questions regarding your teaching experience of outdoor play with the target group in the school

setting, questions will be provided before the interview. The interviews will take place in a safe and quiet place at school at a time that is convenient to you. The interview will be audio recorded (and will require your consent for this). The interview should take around 45 minutes to complete.

HOW WILL WE USE INFORMATION ABOUT YOU?

All the information we collect during the course of the research will be kept confidential. Your data will be referred to by pseudonym rather than by your real name. If you consent to be audio and video recorded, all recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Your data will be securely stored and only be viewed by me and my supervisors. Once the work has been completed, the data will be retained for five years. At this time, all files will be destroyed.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. You will not be identifiable from any published results. Quotes or key findings will always be made anonymous in any formal outputs. With your consent, your anonymised information may also be kept for future research. A summary of the findings from the study will be made available to participants who indicate they would like to receive this. This summary will be sent to participants by email.

WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?

The study proposal has been reviewed by the Moray House School of Education Ethics Committee.

WHO CAN I CONTACT?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact the lead researcher, Jianing Fu, [REDACTED]

If you would like to discuss this study or make a complaint with someone independent of the study please contact Laura Colucci-Gray, [REDACTED] or Heidi Smith, [REDACTED].

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet, I would really appreciate it if you would assist me in my study. The participation of both you and your child will be greatly appreciated and hopefully contribute to the body of knowledge in the research community.

Appendix G. Participant Consent Form (Teacher)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR TEACHER

Study Title: ...The third space and children's outdoor play: exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural context.....

Researcher's name and contact details...Jianing Fu,
[REDACTED].....

Participant ID: _____

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.
2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my medical care or legal right being affected.
4. I understand that my anonymised data will be retained after this study for five years. At this time, all files will be deleted.
5. I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
6. I agree to my observation being video-recorded
7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of person giving consent

Date

Signature[←]

_____[←]

←

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature[←]

_____[←]

1x original – into Site File; 1x copy – to Participant.[←]

←

Appendix H. Participant Information Sheet (Parents)



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (For child and parents)

Exploring children's outdoor play at school

Dear: _____, Parent of: _____, Date: _____

My name is Jianing Fu. I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, and I am currently studying for the degree of Doctor in Education. You and your child are invited to participate in my research: 'The third space and children's outdoor play: exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural context'. The objective of my study is to understand the role of outdoor play in facilitating children's cultural formation. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The study aims to understand how children interact with each other in outdoor play at school. It provides insights into how parents' and teachers' attitudes, values and expectations influence the child's behaviours in play and how the child forms their own way of communicating in a multicultural context through outdoor play.

THE BENEFITS:

This study will help you understand how your children communicate and play with peers from different cultural backgrounds and the potential challenges they experience in play due to the different cultures between home and school. You will know how outdoor play can contribute to bridging this cultural gap and support children's transition to a multicultural school environment.

WHAT WILL YOUR PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

Participation from you and your child is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. If you decide to participate, please keep this Information Sheet and complete the consent form.

There will be one interview conducted separately with you and your child. The interview will focus on children's experience of outdoor play in school and your views on outdoor play and learning. The interviews

will be audio-recorded and take place at a time and place that is convenient for you and your child. Each interview should take 30–40 minutes to complete. The interview with your child will involve a drawing activity, and the researcher will provide the drawing tools. ↵

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↵

ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?↵

There are no significant risks associated with participation. Please be informed that if either you or your child report sensitive issues that involve the well-being of either of you, such as spousal abuse or bullying, I have the responsibility to inform the relevant authorities and school.↵

↵

WILL MY TAKING PART BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?↵

All the information we collect will be kept confidential. Your and your child's data will be referred to by pseudonyms rather than real names. If you and your child consent to audio and video recording, all recordings will be destroyed once transcribed. Your data will be securely stored and only be viewed by me and my supervisors. Once the work has been completed, the data will be retained for five years. At this time, all files will be destroyed.↵

↵

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?↵

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports, and presentations. You will not be identifiable from any published results. If you want the summary of this study, I am happy to email it to you. ↵

↵

WHO CAN I CONTACT?↵

If you have any further questions about the study or would like additional information to assist you in your decision on your and your child's participation, don't hesitate to contact the lead researcher, Jianing Fu, at

[REDACTED] ↵

↵


Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet. I would be thankful if you could assist me in this study. The participation of both you and your child will be greatly appreciated and will contribute to the body of knowledge in the research community. If you need a copy of this sheet, please email

[REDACTED] ↵

↵

Yours sincerely,↵

Appendix I. Opt-out consent



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The third space and children's outdoor play: exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural context

Parent Opt-Out Consent Form
(To return within 1 week)

Please **only** complete this if you **do not** want your child to take part:

Please initial the boxes below:

I confirm that I have read and understood the Parent Information Sheet. I understand this study fits into the school's usual schedule, and my child will not be identifiable in any publications

I am **not** willing for my child to take part in this research.

Name of child _____


Class _____

Signature of Parent/carer _____

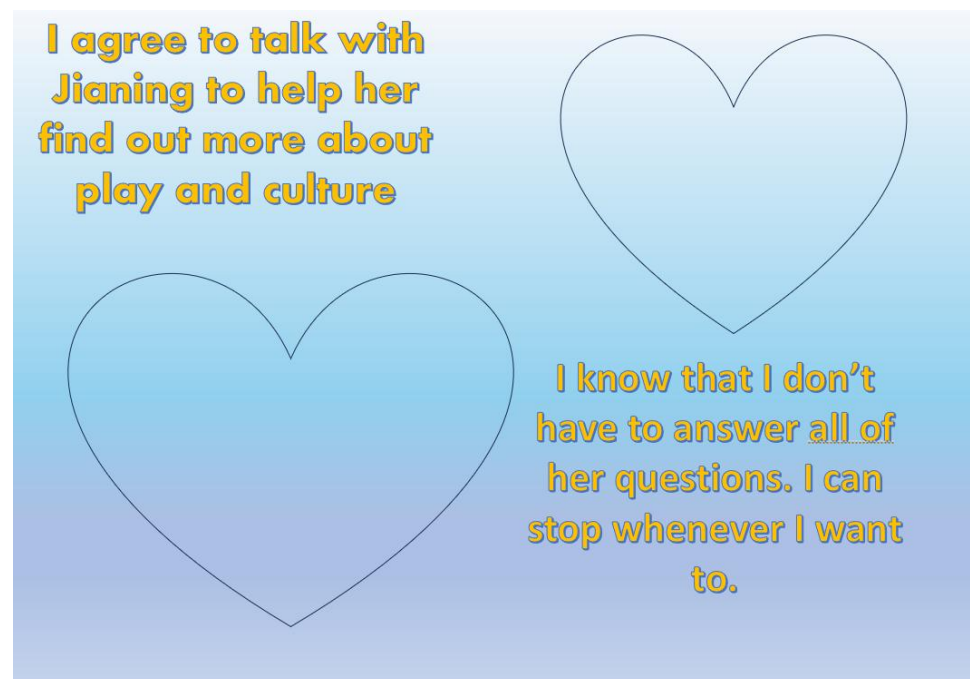
Date _____

Please complete opt-out within 7 days of receiving the information sheet and return it to your child's school.

If you have a question or would like to speak to someone, please get in touch with me:
Jianing Fu,
Moray House School of Education and Sports, University of Edinburgh
Email: [REDACTED]
Phone: ([REDACTED])



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Moray House School of
Education and Sport

Appendix J. Children's consent

Appendix K. Parents' Consent Form (Interviewed)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR PARENT AND CHILD PARTICIPANT

Study Title: ...The third space and children's outdoor play:
exploring the cultural formation of children in a multicultural
context

Researcher's name and contact details...Jianing Fu,
[REDACTED]

Participant ID: _____

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.
2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.
3. I understand that my and my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
4. I understand that both my and my child's responses will be anonymised before analysis. We will not be identifiable in the research or any resulting reports.
5. I consent to the audio recording of both my and my child's interviews.
6. I agree with my child's drawing being used in the research.

7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of the participant (parent)

Date

Signature

Name of the researcher

Date

Signature

1x original – into Site File; 1x copy – to Participant

Appendix L. Flyer to Recruit Interview Participants

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS:

For studying outdoor play
and children's cultural
formation



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Moray House School of
Education and Sport

Are you a parent who moved to the UK,
and your children are getting used to a
new culture?

- I would like to hear your perspectives on your child's outdoor play and how they make friends through play at school, as well as your child's views. So we can understand how outdoor play helps children transition to a multicultural school environment.
- This study requires one interview with you (40mins) and one with your child (30mins).

If you are interested, please get in touch:

Jianing Fu

Email: [REDACTED]

Tel: (+44) [REDACTED]

Appendix M. Observation checklist

Observation checklist↵

Date:↵

↵

↵

Before the observation starts:↵

Spatial arrangement↵

Environmental settings↵

Activity setting (structured or unstructured)↵

Weather↵

Play artefacts settings↵

Number of groups↵

↵

During the observation↵

The role of adults↵

Arrangement of the activity in structured play↵

Adults' positions during play (standing nearby or aside)↵

How involved were the adults in children's play?↵

How did the adults scaffold their play?↵

What did they say?↵

↵

Children's cultural backgrounds↵

Physical racial identification (hair colour, skin colour...)↵

Note the interested children and check with teachers about their cultural backgrounds/home practices about play. ↵

↵

Children's interaction ↵

Facial expression↵

Body language↵

Peer choice (gender, cultural background...)↵

Utilisation of play artefacts↵

Their selection of play artefacts↵

Play types ↵

Gesture ↵

Spatial allocation↵

Verbal languages↵

How did they use different interaction methods?↵

How did they solve the argument (by themselves or rely on adults)?↵

How did they exchange their cultural knowledge?↵

..

Children's motivation and agency

How were they motivated to engage with play?

How were they motivated to shift from one play to another?

How did they negotiate the power (with adults and peers)?

Children's reaction to adults' presence on the playground (staying far away/escaping/asking for support/engaging)

In the end,

How do children react to the ending of play?

Informal interaction and unplanned activities**What does not happen:**

Appendix N. Interview questions

Interview questions for parents.

Parents' experience of outdoor play

1. Could you tell me about your cultural background?
2. Do you have some memories of you playing with other children outside?
3. Where would that be in the main?
4. Was it during the holidays, or were you allowed to play outside every day?
5. Did you get enough chance to play outdoors when you were at school
6. How about home?
7. In your culture, do parents usually encourage children to play outdoors?
8. Are there any similarities and differences between your child's outdoor play and your outdoor play in childhood? (ex. Activities, the way you play, or the school's attitudes).
9. What do you think about the educational practice that combines outdoor play with learning?

Child's play at school

1. When did you move to Scotland with your children? How long have you been in Scotland?
2. Was it hard for your children to make friends when they first came to this school?
3. Do you have a sense of how much time is dedicated to children playing outdoors in school?
4. Do you think outdoor play can help your child's learning? If so, how? If not, why?
5. Do you think outdoor play helps with fostering friendship?
6. Did your child tell you about his/her play at school? Who does he usually play with? Did he share with you why they like playing together? (ethnicity/ religious belief)
7. Did he share with you some different cultural customs or traditions he learned from his friends from other cultures in play? or some stories that he learns different aspects of the UK culture from her friends

Child's outdoor play after school

1. Does your child often play outdoors or indoors after school?
2. Do you often play with your child? Or does he prefer to play alone?
3. Does he have friends to play with after school?
4. What kind of activities does he usually play at home?

Children's interview

Outdoor play at school

1. What is the best thing about school? Do you like outdoor play at school?
2. What do you like the most about playing outside?/ What makes you want to play outdoors? /What is the best thing about your outdoor play time?
3. What kind of play do you like at school?
4. Do you like playing in the classroom more or outdoors more? Why?

5. Is there anything you don't like about playing outdoors?
6. Who do you usually play with? Why do you like playing with her/him?
7. Have you learned any new games or ways of playing from friends who come from different countries or cultures?
8. What's the most interesting thing you've learned from a friend with different customs than you?
9. Have you ever tried any new foods or activities because of your friends? What were they?
10. Do you make more friends after playing?

Outdoor play at home

1. Do you prefer to stay at home or go out to play after school?
2. What do you like to play after school?
3. Where do you usually play?
4. Why do you like playing there?
5. Do you like playing at school or at home more? Why?