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John Pierce

Simon Beames

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# Where's the *E* in *OE*? A critical analysis of Irish outdoor education

John Pierce<sup>1</sup> · Simon Beames<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Very little empirical research has been conducted on Irish outdoor education practice(s). This inquiry aims to critically explore outdoor education practices in public Outdoor Education and Training Centres in the Republic of Ireland. First, an overview of the development of Irish outdoor education from the mid-twentieth century onwards is provided to locate the study within its unique cultural and historical background. Data were generated through document analysis, participant observation, and informal conversation with practitioners and management through multiple field visits. Creative non-fiction was used as a method to organise and present the data in a coherent and anonymised manner. Thematic analysis revealed three principal findings: a lack of engagement with theory, programming by logistics, and ideological dissonance. How these findings affect practice are discussed in terms of a place-based focus to practice as well as a need for more direction for practice to be informed by research and theory.

**Keywords** Outdoor education · Creative non-fiction · Ideological dissonance · Theory · Logistics · Ireland

Since 2000, there has been an increased volume of journal papers, magazine articles, research reports, book chapters, podcasts, and knowledge exchange events,

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✉ John Pierce  
John.pierce@mtu.ie  
  
Simon Beames  
simonbe@nih.no

<sup>1</sup> Department of Health & Leisure Studies, Kerry Sports Academy, Munster Technological University, Kerry Campus, Tralee, Co. Kerry, Ireland

<sup>2</sup> Department of Teacher Education and Outdoor Studies, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway

which have critiqued outdoor education practice. Critics have targeted such themes as gender (Gray, 2016), place (Stewart, 2004), McDonaldisation and standardisation (Loynes, 1998; Pierce & Beames, 2022), character development (Brookes, 2003), and the transfer of learning (Brown, 2010) – to name a handful of examples from the many we could have chosen from. This paper adds to the growing critical tome by presenting findings from a recent Ph.D. study on Irish public Outdoor Education and Training Centres (OETCs) (Pierce, 2020) that aimed to critically examine public outdoor education practice in Ireland. The findings presented here are focused on examining the daily practices within the OETCs and how much they match with their espoused vision for Irish outdoor education, from analyses of their websites and operating procedures.

## Setting the scene: The birth and development of Irish outdoor education

This historical overview of the development of Irish public outdoor education provides the context for this inquiry and this section charts the establishment of outdoor education in Irish education from the mid-1960s through to 2022. Such an historical overview allows the current findings to be interpreted more deeply through a cultural-historic lens. Of particular interest to the paper's discussion is the way in which the innovative policy and experimental programming of early Irish outdoor education morphed into contemporary practices that appear to be neither innovative nor experimental.

By the end of the 1950s, Ireland's economy was faltering with huge national debt and increasing emigration as a result of an international economic downturn (Loxley et al., 2014). The situation became so serious that consideration was given to seeking to re-join the United Kingdom, and in so doing surrender a "hard-won independence" (Kennedy, 2018, p. 604). The weight of public dissatisfaction during this period was great enough to force the government, and the Catholic Church, to leave the comfort of their insular conservatism behind and adopt an "outward orientation" (Barry, 2014, p. 215).

One result of this outward orientation was the establishment of links with the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (Coolahan, 1981). Coolahan notes that the White Paper on Economic Expansion in 1958 was a product of an OECD initiative to improve western education and to catch up to the Russians in the space race, after they launched Sputnik 1 into orbit in 1957. The resulting economic programme for Ireland came with an emphasis on education as an investment rather than as a drain on resources, which was the view prior to this period (Walsh et al., 2014). Coupled with the Investment in Education report of 1965, this White Paper created space for a policy shift in Irish education, which allowed outdoor education to emerge as a potential pedagogical approach within school curricula.

In response to this greater educational freedom, the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee employed Dr. Anton Trant as principal of the Ballyfermot Vocational School in 1966 (O'Flaherty, 1976). Trant (2007), embracing this

“experiment in comprehensive education” (p. 39), instigated a programme incorporating hiking, navigation, hostelling, and field studies into the school’s curriculum in an attempt to create a more engaging and relevant educational process for Dublin’s children (O’Flaherty, 1976). Trant’s (2007) comprehensive programme also included dance, drama, and art. The outdoor education part of this initiative proved quite successful and attracted interest from more Dublin schools in the years that followed. Over a ten-year period, participation in the programme increased from three schools (400 students) to 19 schools (3,771 students) (O’Flaherty, 1983).

The evaluation reports on the programme highlight the success of outdoor education as part of school learning (O’Flaherty, 1976, 1983). This is due, at least in part, to the aims of the project being focused on training teachers in planning and delivering their own programmes, and developing “an outdoor dimension to other areas of the school curriculum by helping schools to plan and carry out structured fieldwork” (O’Flaherty, 1983, p. 1). This approach was quite forward thinking for its time, and resonates with more recent outdoor education research in Sweden, which adopted a similar approach of working with schoolteachers to improve “cross-curricular teaching and learning initiatives more locally” (Mikaels, 2018, p. 3). The local, place-based element was also present in the early Irish context, with the surrounding community seen as a relevant part of student learning (Trant, 2007).

Capturing the benefits for students engaged in this initial Irish outdoor education initiative proved difficult, however. The programme was originally inspired by the philosophy of Outward Bound (Trant, 2007, p. 163), so it was no surprise that the Kurt Hahn-inspired Duke of Edinburgh Award was adopted in 1982 as the benchmark of success for students. Bronze, silver, or gold awards were given to students who completed all sections of the programme (O’Flaherty, 1983). The pre-existing guidelines, regulations, and handbook made it easier to access and participate, for both schools and students, without having a large amount of planning and development work to undertake prior to delivering a programme. This added efficiency and rationalisation (Ritzer, 2019) to outdoor education delivery opened the programme up to more people and allowed for easier tracking, monitoring, and evaluation of participants.

Adopting the Duke of Edinburgh scheme may have unwittingly stifled some of the bespoke and organic hallmarks that characterised early outdoor education practices. Now that there was a universal outcome for all participating students and teachers to aim for, the same depth of planning for each individual lesson was not required. Such a universalist, one size fits most, approach can limit programmes’ abilities to respond to specific outcomes in local places (Beames & Brown, 2016).

While the Duke of Edinburgh scheme was adopted to streamline student learning (O’Flaherty, 1983), a Diploma in Outdoor Education was established in 1980 through the Dublin Institute of Technology (now Dublin Technological University) to develop teacher’s understanding of teaching outdoors. This diploma had a mixed focus of education and the curriculum on one side, and adventure sports and the associated technical skills on the other. Crucially, in relation to this inquiry, over time, the technical skills of adventure sports appear to have developed into the major focus of the diploma with the educational input being diluted (Trant, 2007). The focus on technical ability and qualifications for outdoor

educators, alongside the increasing concentration on teaching adventure sports is similar to that noted by Nicol (2002) in the UK.

Such a change in focus, from curricular integration to adventure sports experiences, can lead to narrowly focused programmes with fewer and fewer educational options for teachers and students (Loynes, 1998). Further, so much control residing with the outdoor practitioner, or indeed with the teacher, conforms to Illich's (1970) illusion "that most learning is the result of teaching" (p. 12); there may be an assumption that because something is being taught, students are learning. It is this element of control that limits the capacity of students to have agency over their learning experience(s). Such a lack of student agency can have a debilitating effect on students' ability to control their learning or engage at their own pace (Beames & Brown, 2016). This pattern resulted in an increase in adventure sport activities becoming an end in themselves, rather than students' broader learning being the central focus of residential educational experiences (Trant, 2007).

From here, a rather ad hoc system of developments – very much dependent on the drive and passion of individual teachers, managers, and organisations – informed the development of outdoor education and adventure centres across Ireland (Hannon, 2018; O'Leary, 2015). For example, one of the interviewees in Hannon's (2015) study stated, "there's no central vision" and "the VEC [now Education and Training Boards (ETB)] didn't particularly set a philosophy, it's up to us to set a philosophy" (p. 56). While having a central vision or philosophy might aim to co-ordinate a national focus, that does not mean that it will succeed in being useful (see previous point regarding the adoption of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme). To make the situation more complex, each ETB is a statutory body with its own functional area, be it a city or county, for example (Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), 2023). They are responsible for their own region and have no national mandate.

Another point of concern is the "triumph of marketplace values ... reflected in the way the language of the marketplace has invaded the world of education" (Trant, 2007, p. 14; see also Walsh et al., 2014), as well as that of outdoor education (Leather, 2018; Loynes, 1998). This capitalist influence can be seen in the Rice report (1997), a review of public outdoor education in Ireland, which predominantly focused on topics such as capital finances, marketing management, investment, inputs and outputs, and safety; there is a four-page chapter, out of 60 pages, focused on education. Somewhat paradoxically, considering the emphasis on finance and marketing in the report, Rice (1997) goes on to state that financial viability is a "secondary consideration" and that, in good marketplace language, "maximising an output of quality [educational] services" (p. 41) is the main focus.

Hannon's (2000) study of the process of adventure education in one publicly funded Irish outdoor centre found, in contrast to Rice's (1997) earlier aspiration, that the programme reflected a recreational approach more than an educational one. Hannon observed a fragmented programme of adventure activity sessions with little consideration for the teacher's hoped-for outcomes of "team building and character development" (Hannon, 2000, p. 192). Hannon's (2000) study also highlighted, as noted by others (O'Flaherty, 1976; Rice, 1997), the need to differentiate between recreation and skills-based courses and the likely longer term personal and social

development, or cross-curricular learning, provided for in education-focused outdoor programmes.

While the Rice report (1997) presented a focus overly influenced by the ideology of neo-liberalism, where public services are driven by market forces, and the associated economic expansion through the adoption of such an “outward orientation” (Barry, 2014, p. 215), a more recent review of public sector outdoor education presents a vision for a more balanced educational focus (Hannon & O’Callaghan, 2020). Identified within this review is the need to act “as a coherent entity with a common purpose and ... coordinated strategic direction” (p. 3). More recently, a strategic plan was published that outlines the “exciting and purposeful contribution” public outdoor education can provide for Irish society (ETBI, 2022, p. 3). This strategy aims to develop the capacity of the OETCs in “becoming beacons of sustainability”, “promoting health and wellbeing”, “fostering inclusion”, and “building skills [and] enhancing learning” in further education and community education through experiential pedagogies (ETBI, 2022, p. 13).

In summary, this developmental overview of Irish public outdoor education from the 1960s to 2022 highlights the pioneering and locally beneficial work of many individuals and organisations in developing the capacity for outdoor education in the Irish curriculum. It also underscores the lack, until recent years, of a coherent vision for Irish public outdoor education. In the absence of a strategic national design, “outdoor education shares with mainstream education a philosophy which is more likely to be a reinforcement of the status quo than a visionary pedagogical endeavour” (Nicol, 2002, p. 90). The above historical account of Irish outdoor education has revealed what appears to be a gradual, unchecked metamorphosis of practice over time. The recent strategic plan for public sector outdoor education in Ireland may mark the beginning of a more co-ordinated national approach across the sector.

## Methodology and Data Analysis

### Research design and sampling

A case study methodology that embraced ethnographic methods was employed to address the research aim of critically examining Irish public outdoor education practice. Such an *ethno-case study* (Parker-Jenkins, 2018) can yield deeper understandings of the social norms and contexts of the cases through ethnographic means (Cohen et al., 2011; Simons, 2009).

Four OETCs participated in this inquiry and each of them represented one case in a *multiple case study* approach (Stake, 2006). The OETCs are owned and operated by local Education and Training Boards and receive an annual financial grant from the Irish government, through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (until 2021 the Department of Education and Skills allocated this funding). This link to the education system made them a relevant sample for addressing the research aims in this inquiry. A purposive sample allowed us to deliberately select explicit cases that best suited the inquiry’s aims (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011) as, in this case, the outdoor

centres are owned and operated by the local Education and Training Boards. We acknowledge that teachers and schools across the country may also engage in outdoor education practices of varying kinds, but the focus of this research inquiry was limited to the OETCs.

Initial contact was made with all 12 of the OETCs through email and by phone thereafter. Seven OETCs were interested in taking part in the research after first contact, and after discussions with each, four OETCs agreed to be involved in the data generation. The mix of centre types (one urban residential, two rural residential, and one urban non-residential), combined with the geographical spread of the centres that agreed to participate, made the sample highly representative of the public OETCs.

### Data Generation and Analysis

Data were generated through participant observation, informal conversation, and website and document analysis. Each OETC's webpages were downloaded and the standard operating procedures manual from each centre was provided by the designated staff contact. All four centres were visited for an average of six days, and observations and conversations were recorded through fieldnotes. Each evening a detailed log of the observations and conversations from that day was written-up from fieldnotes. The "apparent paradox of participant observation" (Gobo, 2008, p. 6), or being able to maintain a level of objectivity that allows the researcher to refrain from over identifying with informants (Delamont, 2016) was a concern throughout the data generation period. This was due to the principal investigator's familiarity with the outdoor education sector in Ireland. To address this, ongoing reflexive accounts of the data generation were included with the typed fieldnotes. This allowed any value-laden assumptions to be made more explicit through a clear distinction between objective observation and more subjective reactions to observations (Coe et al., 2017; Delamont, 2016; Gobo, 2008).

A hermeneutic approach, or the ability to understand human actions through interpretation (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000), both between the researcher and the data, as well as the researcher and research participants, is an important feature of constructivist ethnographies (Gobo, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 2013) and was employed throughout this research. Taking copious field notes of what Geertz (1973) called "transient examples of shaped behavior", permitted author A to arrive at a "thick description" (p. 10) of practice. The ability to generate a more precise understanding of social reality is one of the noted advantages of ethnographic methods, not least because it gives "voices to participants" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 219).

Data, in the form of typed field notes, operating procedure manuals, and text from websites, were uploaded into a data management software package and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis provided a structure for its interrogation. This six-phase analysis process begins with familiarisation with the data generated in phase one and generating initial themes in phase two. Refining and naming themes is the focus of phases three through five, with the final, sixth phase consisting of writing up the report.

Braun and Clarke's (2019) more recent work emphasised that the "researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data" (p. 6) and the chosen analysis process is more important than following rules. We engaged in an iterative process that allowed space for reflexive conversation throughout the analysis process, and permitted themes that are not always obvious to emerge through a more subjective reading of the data (Cohen et al., 2011). This subjective, yet rigorous, reading of the data revealed three data-driven themes.

### **Ethical Considerations and Creative Non-fiction as Method**

After gaining ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh, all participants received a verbal briefing prior to reading an information sheet describing the purpose of this research and the minimal risks it involved. Only observational and conversational data from participants who signed a consent form and understood they had the right to withdraw at any time were recorded and analysed.

The presentation of findings was a key ethical consideration. Any claims of anonymity made by the current study would become "myths", as "anybody who mattered would know" (Malone, 2003, p. 809) in such a small and close-knit community as Irish outdoor education (Hannon, 2018). A guarantee of absolute anonymity was unattainable, even with a high level of alteration of people, places, and events (Cohen et al., 2011).

To address these serious concerns, one fictitious OETC was created from an amalgamation of data from all four of the OETCs used; participants were combined, and locations and activities were merged. The data were thus anonymised to a point from which it would be near impossible to distinguish specific individuals or locations, while preserving vital aspects of the experiences (Sparkes, 2002). There is plenty of precedence here as Klein (1993), for example, presented the fictitious Olympic Gym in his ethnographic study of elite bodybuilders. As with the current study, the Olympic Gym combined all four of his research sites in an effort to "enhance anonymity" (Klein, 1993, p. 281). This technique is known as creative non-fiction (Beames & Pike, 2008; Sparkes, 1997, 2002).

The substance of the story comes directly from the final analysis of the observations, conversation, and document/website analysis; all of the events within the story were observed first-hand by author A. The inquiry's rigour was heightened by the daily fieldnotes being available to be read by any staff member who wanted (and several did). Once the analysis was completed, the full creative non-fiction story was also read by four practitioners involved in the research. Crucially, the practitioners were in complete agreement, every time, that the fieldnotes and findings story were an accurate representation of the practices in which they were engaged in at their respective OETC. This member checking further increased the study's level of trustworthiness (Coe et al., 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).



## Findings

The analysis revealed three principal themes: a lack of engagement with theory, programming by logistics, and ideological dissonance. These themes will be discussed in turn after the following presentation of data, which comes in the form of a creative non-fiction story of a day at 4 Peaks, an Irish Outdoor Education and Training Centre.

*The manager, Katie, started the morning meeting. “Right, how did the activities go last night? Good yeah?” Some staff nodded in agreement. Pat, who had worked with one of the groups last night, commented that he felt the night-line -- an activity where the students are blindfolded and taken on a journey around the grounds of the centre, having to get over, under, and through a number of obstacles along the way -- had not worked and was pointless. Katie, rather defensively, jumped in with “that is probably the best reason for them to do it!” After a brief silence Pat continued, saying that the teachers, after hiding along the maze route to throw water at the students in what they called “teacher’s revenge”, had the group up until 2 o’clock in the morning playing basketball and soccer tournaments. No one was allowed to sleep and the teachers splashed water on sleeping students to wake them. There were mixed feelings amongst staff – some seemed fine with this while others were not so sure it was a good thing.*

*“Right, who’s doing what?”, Jason said, moving swiftly on. “The Transition Year [fourth year of secondary school] school group. Pat and Laura, you are with them. Let me see, what have they not done yet? Oh yes, they have not been surfing yet, so it is off to the beach for the day.”*

*“What’s that?”, Jason asked when he saw Pat and Laura exchange unsure glances. “Well”, Pat started, “we were thinking that we could do something different. Maybe, seeing as they are from a religious school, we could spend the morning visiting local religious sites and then go for a surf in the afternoon. We don’t think that the group would enjoy a beach day in the rain.” Jason, after a brief pause, said “Ok, see what their teachers think. If they are happy enough, do that.”*

*“The rest of you are with the other group. There are 48 of them and, as it is their last morning, each group will be doing whichever activity they have not done yet.” There was a list on the wall for staff to check if needed. “Oh, don’t forget to include everyone, and Challenge by Choice!”*

*Laura saw Pat after he had consulted with the teacher and asked how it went. He said that the teacher was fine with the idea. Laura asked how he sold it to the teacher. Pat looked at Laura, with a look of slight confusion on his face, and said simply “I just told them”. “Oh, that’s great”, Laura said, somewhat relieved. “It would have been hard to keep them entertained all day at the beach”.*

*During lunch, staff sat at their own table, away from the groups. Sarah was happy with the climbing session, as most of the group had “successful attempts” at getting to the top, though she admitted that the group were hard*

to motivate and had to be controlled at times. Pat commented that “I feel like I am cheating today because I’m not delivering adventure sports in the way I – and my colleagues – do every day”, as Katie, the manager, along with both teachers, joined the staff table. One of the teachers made a, somewhat confused and disbelieving, comment that he couldn’t “understand why people do this job, which doesn’t seem to have a purpose beyond showing kids a good time -- though I suppose you get used to it”. Staff were responding to this comment with the benefits they see in taking part in outdoor education programmes when Katie, thinking aloud, responded, “we are a money-making business -- sometimes you forget about the education part of it”. She then asked her staff what they think the students get from outdoor education experiences here. After a silent moment, and some sideways glances, Pat, Sarah, and Seán gave their thoughts.

Seán explained, “It’s their first time away from home, putting on a wetsuit and trying adventure sports in a fun, safe way; getting a little bit (a few minutes) of space from adults. Happiness and fun.”

“Exercise, teamwork and communication”, chimed in Sarah, “The idea of being outside on a damp and stormy day, instead of being inside on an Xbox. The residential experience and how it can help in communication and opening up through walking beside each other or in bunk beds—no eye contact, which makes it easier.”

For Pat, it was about gaining, “a sense of mini-accomplishment. Actually achieving something either small or big from jumping off a big jump or simply getting into the gear and being on time. Wouldn’t it be great to have people remember experiences with me in 30 years? A short-term boost in confidence, overcoming fears and dealing with anxiety. Maybe keeping that feeling with them in future situations.”

“See”, Katie went on, looking at the teachers. “Outdoor education is essential to the mainstream education system and curriculum.”

## Discussion

### A Lack of Engagement with Theory

The first finding, *A lack of engagement with theory* in Irish OETCs, is supported by Beames and colleagues’ (2012) argument that traditional outdoor education “provision has developed in the absence of a substantial and convincing body of evidence to support it” (p. 3). It is our contention here that Irish public outdoor education has developed while ignoring the existing, and growing, global body of knowledge available to inform practice.

One example of this lack of engagement with theory can be seen in the “placelessness” of Irish public outdoor education (Hannon, 2018; Pierce & Telford, 2023). Internationally, place-based education has become an integral aspect of outdoor education literature and associated practice (Beames & Brown, 2016; Beames et al., 2012; Hannon, 2018; O’Malley, 2014; Wattachow & Brown, 2011). We are

not claiming that place-based programming is essential to enlightened outdoor education practices, or that there is substantial empirical evidence to support such a stance. Our argument is that while there is a growing body of contemporary literature that links outdoor education and place-based practices, there was little indication of any elements of programme delivery responding to geographical, historical or cultural place in this study. Technical adventure sports, such as getting to the top of a climb, were the main purpose of the outdoor activities when groups were observed. The religiously-focused place day that is documented in the findings story does appear to be very much in line with the place-based learning literature. However, this only took place due to a last-minute change stemming from it being “hard to keep them [the group] entertained all day at the beach”, as opposed to it being a planned aspect of that group’s educational programme.

At 4 Peaks OETC, the practitioners’ thoughts shared over lunch, as to what they think students get from public outdoor education experiences are also revealing. For the most part, their views revolved around the somewhat basic outcomes of putting on a wetsuit, being away from home, being outside exercising, achieving an end of something like jumping into the water or being on time, or gaining a short-term boost in confidence. These may be worthy focuses in a sense, though there was little mention of the theorised outcomes of outdoor education, such as developing traits like resilience (Neil & Dias, 2001), building students capacities to develop deeper connections with the landscape (O’Malley, 2014), or learning about maths, geography, or science (Beames et al., 2012; Dolan, 2016). This study’s findings suggest that without a firm grounding in the theoretical aspects of outdoor education -- or guidance and direction from management, the respective Education and Training Board, or relevant government departments -- simply “busying” people in the outdoors is all that can be reasonably expected.

As can be seen in Table 1, relevant academic awards account for 12% of qualifications held by practitioners. This equates to a difference of approximately seven to one when comparing technical sports qualifications to academic awards. The recent sectoral review of Irish outdoor education has responded to this situation by stating that all newly hired full-time instructors should hold a relevant degree, and all existing staff should hold one within the next seven years (Hannon & O’Callaghan, 2020).

**Table 1** Overview of Qualifications of OETC staff surveyed

Qualification level <sup>a</sup>	% of awards held by practitioners (n=39)
Basic adventure sports qualifications	43%
Intermediate adventure sports qualifications	32%
Academic qualifications	12%
Specialist/advanced adventure sports qualifications	9%
Other	4%

<sup>a</sup>Adventure sports qualifications are aligned with the Sport Ireland (n.d.) Adventure Sports Framework for instructor/leader awards.

There were examples in the story of a questionable understanding of how teachers use outdoor education as part of their student's learning. The idea of a "teacher's revenge", where the teachers hid along the night-line route to throw water at students, before forcing them to play football and basketball until 2am on their first night at the centre, demonstrates little grasp of the ethos and philosophy behind fostering a safe and supportive space for learning and growth. Indeed, this could be seen as the anti-thesis to the positive psychology approach championed by Davis-Berman and Berman (2002). Brookes' (2003) critique of neo-Hahnian outdoor adventure education offers one explanation of how uncritically accepting that outdoor education works in a certain established manner, combined with a lack of engagement with contemporary literature, could allow military-like approaches and exhaustion tactics -- that might not be desirable or defensible -- to be perpetuated over time.

Upon hearing of this teacher's revenge, some practitioners were fine with this idea, while others seemed a little unsure. There is a hint here that some of the outdoor education practitioners were not fully happy with this sort of behaviour, although no one was sure enough, or courageous enough, to speak out against established programme rituals. Perhaps a greater understanding of widely accepted principles of outdoor education, as detailed in the plethora of literature available (e.g., textbooks such as Martin et al.'s (2006) *Outdoor Leadership: Theory and Practice*), would allow for critical conversations about what are the most appropriate activities and associated ways of delivering them, so that programme aims and student goals are achieved.

This disconnection between theory and practice was further confirmed by the teacher's confusion at lunchtime of not understanding why anyone would work in outdoor education. Part of this may be a result of a lack of engagement with outdoor education literature and curricular learning in the teacher education programmes in Ireland; indeed, the data shows that many teachers do not appear to know that there is potential to focus more on curricular learning, for example, within outdoor education experiences. Thomas et al. (2019) distinguish between outdoor leaders, educators, and teachers, with one key difference being their level of understanding and application of 'threshold concepts' (such as 'understanding experiential education') at a vocational, undergraduate, and graduate level. Such distinctions may be beneficial in Irish outdoor education as well.

A search of the modules from the five primary teacher education programmes in Ireland (Dublin City University, Hibernia College, Marino Institute of Education, Mary Immaculate College, and Maynooth University) reveals that only Dublin City University's (n.d.) programme has a module focused on outdoor education. It appears that the majority of Irish teachers do not receive any formal training in outdoor education as part of their initial teacher education. Such a lack of appropriate training, for both outdoor practitioners and teachers, makes the goal of outdoor education cited in the recent strategic framework for Irish public OETCs, being a "catalyst and medium for learning, personal and interpersonal development and fostering an awareness, respect and action for the environment" (ETBI, 2022, p. 5), very difficult to achieve.

## Programming by Logistics

The second findings theme, *programming by logistics*, refers to the prevalence of logistical issues, such as the activities available, weather conditions, a rigid timetable, and the skills of practitioners working that day, driving the programme, rather than a given group's specific educational aims and objectives. Significant evidence of programming by logistics can be seen in the morning briefing when Jason, the senior instructor, is assigning staff to the two groups and the associated sessions. Both groups had been at the centre for a few days, with no linking of the programmes to curricular or any other learning objectives. Instead, Jason consulted the list of activities to see "what have they not done yet?" One group had not done the beach/surf day and the other group had yet to complete the final session on the rotation of activities set for them. In this instance, no real cognisance of the desired needs or objectives of the student groups is demonstrated and it is the available activities that dictate what happens when, where, and with whom (Estes, 2004).

Similarly, when Pat and Laura proposed changing the beach day, Jason was fine with the idea as long as the teachers agreed with this. Pat simply told the teachers what had been decided for them. Programming decisions of this scale being made by practitioners and communicated to the teachers may not allow students any agency to shape their experience (see Beames & Brown, 2016). Further, the chosen activities were largely "place ambivalent" (Mannion et al., 2011) and ignored the many affordances of the local landscape and could have taken place in what Baker (2005) called "Anywoods".

To the students, the arguably more focused and bespoke day was just another experience, the same as the previous few days, as they had no agency and responsibility for their own learning. Programming by logistics can lead to experiences lacking meaningful connections to people, place, and educational outcomes. The examples cited here show some thought has gone into the programme, though the last-minute changes do not suggest that there is any logical progression from one session to the next. Thus, it appears that a once laudable educational rationale has been replaced with brief adventure sports "taster" sessions. More focused and specific planning for outdoor education programmes could go some way to addressing issues arising from programming by logistics.

This disproportionate dominance of logistics as the top priority for an OETC's programming links back to the theme of a lack of engagement with theory, where teachers are normally far removed from the practical sessions on a public outdoor education trip, and how unusual it is for a teacher to have a genuine interest to take part. Without the teachers' input, in terms of the educational and developmental objectives that would best serve their students, practitioners have free reign to focus more on what they know best: how to deliver adventure sports experiences. Such a logistics-based approach, during a one-off visit to an OETC, appears to offer, at best, limited learning opportunities for students, as outdoor education is "most successful when it [is] an integral element of long-term curriculum planning and closely linked to classroom activities" (Ofsted, 2008, p. 5). Indeed, Beames and colleagues (2012), writing for teachers about Learning Outside the Classroom, note the "rarely

progressive” (p. 4) nature of such logistics based, and adventure sports focused, experiences.

## Ideological Dissonance

The third and final findings theme is *ideological dissonance*, which refers to the divide, or contradiction, between symbolic principles and operational principles of practice (Dusso, 2017); it is the inconsistency between beliefs and actions. Such ideological dissonance can occur if a person, or group, are obliged “to hold two conflicting cognitions or to do what is against their beliefs” (Zhou, 2000, p. 604).

At 4 Peaks OETC, the practitioners at the lunch table gave their thoughts on what students gain from outdoor education experiences at this centre. Several outcomes were stated, ranging from fun, happiness, teamwork and exercise, to being able to open-up and communicate more effectively. Small accomplishments, such as jumping into the lake, being on time for sessions, overcoming fears, and managing anxiety were also mentioned. The idea of students remembering their outdoor education experiences in the decades to come was one point that the whole group of practitioners agreed on. The outdoor practitioners’ views demonstrate a clear sense of wanting to assist students in their learning through facilitating the personal, social, curricular, and environmental education of students, through adventure sports-based programmes.

Practitioners also appear to have a different viewpoint concerning outcomes and purpose to the one painted by management and the official documents that were reviewed and analysed. Practitioner thoughts centred on personal development (with a hint of social development), whereas management claimed that the essential nature of their outdoor education centres was curricular learning. This highlights an inconsistency between the claimed ideology of the centre management and the practitioners working on the centre’s programmes.

The actual practice at the centre shows a different perspective again. First, there is no explicit reference to any broader educational aims beyond the technical skills required to partake in the various activity sessions, curricular or otherwise. The staff meetings observed seemed not to address educational or developmental goals, nor did practitioners mention any such type of possible outcomes to students. The one experience that had some potential links to the student cohort’s programme – the day away from the centre spent learning about the local saint and going surfing – was considered cheating by practitioners, as the day was not focused on adventure sports, as usual. Place and group responsive practices are also notable by their absence in previous research into outdoor education in Ireland (Hannon, 2018).

There are links here, in explaining this dissonance between what centre managers and practitioners say, do, and think, to the lack of engagement with theory already discussed above. Developing a critical approach to theory and ideology could lead to the development of a more coherent ideology of practice for Irish public outdoor education. Conversely, the lack of theoretical understanding from practitioners may have led to an absence of wonder regarding the processes in which they are engaged. Gruenewald (2003) notes that “[p]edagogically, the kind of attention

that we cultivate has significant consequences” (p. 645). It is arguable that the lack of attention being paid to the claims of practice and how well they cohere with the actual outcomes of public outdoor education in Ireland is no different.

## Conclusion

The findings story highlights two systemic problems at Irish OETCs. First, practice did not have a grounding in relevant literature or empirical evidence, and was standardised and repetitive in nature. For example, the explicit goals of the OETCs refer to engagement with place and environment, though in practice this was quite clearly not the case. Second, programme design, while responding to learning needs and relevance in some ways, was found to be more logistically focused than outcome focused. These findings are likely due to, at least in part, the lack of knowledge and understanding of key contemporary concepts amongst Irish public outdoor education teachers and practitioners.

Ultimately, the official aims and purpose of Irish public outdoor education are at odds with the actual practices observed. Claims of the high value of outdoor education to the broader education system and curriculum were made, yet the data suggests that most Irish students may not learn outdoors for most of their 14 years of schooling. Practitioners at the centres had a much less problematical take on the personal success and development students may achieve during public outdoor education experiences, though these are still not aligned with the available Irish definitions. Add to this the lack of understanding from teachers as to the usefulness of outdoor education, and the widespread dissonance between claims and practice becomes clearer.

This dissonance may be explained, at least somewhat, by the lack of qualified educators involved in designing and delivering outdoor education programmes through the centres. Perhaps if programmes were designed and delivered in line with contemporary (outdoor) educational models and theories, then some of the issues raised above would be dealt with. This, of course, is not to ignore the numerous other factors involved in such cultural change, notably the self-financing model and the lack of a policy integrating outdoor learning experiences into the larger curriculum (for a related critique of environmental education in the Irish primary curriculum, see O'Malley & Pierce, 2023).

Evidence exists, globally, showing that outdoor education programmes “can promote students ... social, academic, physical and psychological” success (Becker et al., 2017, p. 1; see also Fiennes et al., 2015; Rickinson et al., 2004). Dismore and Bailey's (2005) paper also shows the positive benefits accrued in terms of students' academic success through outdoor and adventurous activities. While outdoor education has been associated with student learning in Ireland for over six decades, there is little evidence to show that it works, or how it works beyond leading students and accompanying teachers through an adventure sport experience. The lack of theoretical underpinning (and associated philosophical/ideological debate) within the Irish public outdoor education sector has resulted in OETC management and staff delivering what they feel is achievable within the self-financing model and limited

scope of practice they operate in; the OETCs are not free to be guided by national educational policy and outdoor education research and literature, but must operate within a constrained system (Beames et al., 2023). Developing a coherent approach to teaching and learning outdoors, which is based on the best available, critically appraised, evidence of global practice, as well as aligning public outdoor education in Ireland with the educational objectives contained in Irish education policies, might begin to address the issues arising from this study.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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**John Pierce** Is a lecturer in outdoor learning at the Department of Health & Leisure Studies at Munster Technological University in the southwest of Ireland. He has spent a lot of his career facilitating learning outdoors, and his research interests include building the evidence-base for outdoor education practice(s).

**Simon Kennedy Beames** Is Professor of Friluftsliv at the Norwegian School of Sports Science. He is co-author of the books *Adventurous Learning*, *Adventure & Society*, and *Outdoor Learning across the Curriculum*, and co-editor of the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Mobile Technology, Social Media and the Outdoors*.