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# A pedagogy of outdoor learning in the primary school – Insights from outdoor educators in Ireland

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite extensive research on outdoor learning during formal schooling, there remains a lack of clarity about outdoor learning as a pedagogy, and consequently ambiguity regarding its contribution to education policy and curriculum enactment. The aim of this qualitative study was to synthesise the views of experienced outdoor learning educators in Ireland regarding the pedagogy of outdoor learning and to consider the possibilities offered by outdoor learning towards enacting the policy vision for primary education. Thematic analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews identified five interlinked components of outdoor learning pedagogy. These include experiential learning, learner agency, equity, relationality beyond-the-human and inclusive. Four conditions to implement this pedagogy were also identified, as follows: leadership, professional learning, explicit policy support and teacher agency. Findings highlighted how enacting outdoor learning pedagogy and making the outdoors a normative learning environment is a challenging and complex task, requiring systemic change.

## Introduction

In Ireland, the recently published primary (elementary) curriculum framework (Department of Education, 2023) sets out a vision of flourishing school communities predicated upon progressive relational pedagogy and democratic, inclusive, playful learning environments, both indoors and outside. The framework envisions our primary schools as places that support children and school communities to thrive in a rapidly changing and endangered world. Seven interlinked competencies are set out with the purpose of empowering children to be agentic citizens, towards creating a more socially just and sustainable world, where flourishing and being well are a reality for all (Department of Education, 2023).

This is a public policy vision shared by other western education systems yet full enactment in Ireland, and elsewhere, remains problematic (Coolahan et al., 2017). Finding pedagogies, which can support school communities as they seek to enact this vision in their daily work is a crucial task, given that enactment is the '*ultimate testing ground*' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment NCCA, 2022, p. 7) of successful curriculum reform. We suggest that outdoor learning pedagogy offers a novel and appropriate pedagogy for consideration in this regard.

The aim of this paper is to explore the relevance of outdoor learning pedagogy to enacting the curriculum and policy vision for primary education, following a synthesis of the views of experienced outdoor learning educators on the pedagogy of outdoor learning. While this study was conducted in the Irish context, it offers insights that are relevant more widely.

The terms outdoor learning, outdoor learning pedagogy and pedagogy of outdoor learning are used interchangeably in this paper. Pedagogy broadly describes the values, knowledge, ideas and practices that shape experiences of teaching and learning. Volante (2018) described effective pedagogy as the '*instructional techniques and strategies that enable 21*$^{st}$ *century learning such as creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and digital literacy to take place*' (p.1). These skills intersect with the '*core values and philosophies … such as democracy, equity, inclusion, child -agency and active participation*' *(*Volante, 2018, p. 1). Drawing from recent definitions of outdoor learning (Institute of Outdoor Learning, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Smith, 2021), outdoor learning pedagogy is defined as a broad range of regular, purposeful planned learning experiences outdoors, ideally in natural places, during formal education, which promote experiential learning and agency for all, enable learning about and connection to the natural world, towards building relationships between people and places. This definition is intrinsically linked to values about the purpose of education and aligns with the competencies and vision of the Irish framework set out in the opening paragraph.

## The place of outdoor learning in formal schooling

There is conclusive international evidence that outdoor learning offers substantive and wide-ranging learning benefits across multiple domains during formal schooling (Chawla et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2019; Malone & Waite, 2016; Prince & Diggory, 2023; Rickinson et al., 2004; Sobel, 2014; Waite et al., 2023; Waite, Passy, et al., 2016). While the early evidence to support cognitive gains was unclear (Rickinson et al., 2004), more recently research has pointed to ways in which progressive outdoor learning can impact academic and cognitive gains through promoting engagement and agency (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Holm Jørring et al., 2020; Kahriman- Pamuk & Ahi, 2019; Marchant et al., 2019; McCree et al., 2018; Oberle et al., 2021; Patchen et al., 2022; Vella Broderick & Gilowska, 2022; Williams & Wainwright, 2016). Furthermore, outdoor learning during the school day offers an equitable and inclusive access to nature (Kelly et al., 2022; Patchen et al., 2022; Rickinson et al., 2004; Williams & Wainwright, 2016) although as Patchen et al. (2022) point out, this is nuanced. Specific barriers in particular settings may have an impact on equitable implementation for students with disabilities (Patchen et al., 2022). Waite et al. (2023) explored how young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority communities experience '*marked inequalities*' (p. 1) in terms of access to nature outside of school hours, associated with cultural barriers and the absence of the voices of children and young people articulating their preferences. Considering children in general spends less time in nature than their parents' generation both in Ireland (Fanning, 2010) and internationally (Patchen et al., 2022), access to outdoor learning during school becomes even more crucial.

Despite this, outdoor learning remains side-lined among the high stakes testing and outcomes focused environments within western formal education (Neville et al., 2023; Prince & Diggory, 2023; Waite, 2010, 2011) even though many curriculum frameworks describe a more holistic vision of the purpose and the underpinning values of public-school systems. A key challenge towards realising this policy vision is to remove the primacy of the indoor classroom and the cultural weight it carries (Stickney & Bonnett, 2020; Waite, 2013; Waite & Pratt, 2017) towards a view of schools comprising a broad set of physical sites of learning of equal value, indoor and outdoor. This is a transformative vision which changes our definition of school (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010; Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020, 2021; Jickling & Blenkinsop, 2020; Jickling & The Crex Crew Collective, 2018; Lynch & Mannion, 2021). Somewhat paradoxically, that transformational vision is present in the policy framework (Department of Education, 2023) described in the opening paragraph. However, as other studies

have highlighted (Aoki, 1993, 1999; Itin, 1999) such a transformation becomes diminished and often lost in its translation into curriculum-as-lived.

Implementing outdoor learning pedagogy more widely in our schools is further impacted by different understandings of what we mean when we talk about outdoor learning. Gaps in the underlying philosophical and pedagogical basis for outdoor learning (Leather, 2018; Waite, Bølling, et al., 2016; Williams & Wainwright, 2016) can undermine the importance of pedagogical principles in outdoor learning (Dillon et al., 2005) and impact on how children and teachers experience outdoor learning (MacKinder, 2017; Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018; Wilhelmsson et al., 2012). Practical challenges include teacher confidence associated with gaps in initial teacher education and continuing professional learning, health and safety fears, time and curriculum constraints (Barrable & Lakin, 2020; Moffett, 2022; Nundy et al., 2009; Rickinson et al., 2004; Waite, 2020; Waite, Passy, et al., 2016) and inspection and regulatory priorities (Prince & Diggory, 2023). Waite (2020) acknowledges that these factors vary and interact differently depending on local circumstances. All these interconnected challenges must be addressed to support teachers to plan and to facilitate immersive outdoor experiences that promote learning (Blenkinsop et al., 2016; Neville et al., 2023; Patchen et al., 2022; Quay, 2016; Waite, Passy, et al., 2016). However, this is a complex task, given the different combinations of factors and how they interact to impact the possibilities offered by outdoor learning for different settings. The next section will contextualise this study within the Irish education context.

## Outdoor learning pedagogy and Irish primary schools

The modernising 1971 primary curriculum (Department of Education, 1971) predicated on a child-centred, discovery-based integrated approach to teaching and learning and heralded a new dawn in Irish primary schools. Subsequently, the Primary Curriculum of 1999 (Department of Education and Science/NCCA, 1999) continued this progressive trajectory. The 1999 primary curriculum emphasised the active exploration of the local area and cross-curricular integrated teaching and learning as key tenets of curriculum delivery. To facilitate this approach, Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) was introduced for all classes. Environmental Awareness and Care was introduced as a cross-curricular strand across SESE and a new Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. The Physical Education (PE) curriculum introduced Outdoor and Adventure Activities as one of its six strands, with one strand unit focused on understanding and appreciation of outdoor and adventure activities. However, the implementation issues that dogged the 1971 curriculum persisted following the introduction of the 1999 curriculum (Carroll et al., 2023; Darmody et al., 2010; Madden, 2019; Murphy et al., 2011; NCCA, 2005, 2008; Usher, 2022; Woods et al., 2010). The ongoing dominance of more didactic approaches to teaching and learning, as well as other challenges including curriculum overload, subject demarcations and mandated time allocations, remains an impediment to making progressive outdoor learning more widely available in our primary schools.

There are initiatives to promote curriculum delivery in Irish primary schools through outdoor learning pedagogy although there are no compulsory or prescribed outdoor lessons. Short visits to local outdoor or environmental centres led by external organisations, and school gardening and wildlife gardens on school grounds are popular (Waite, 2020). There is a tradition of an annual 'school tour' in the summer term when classes go off site for a day or overnight; often this involves an outdoor component. The NCCA has provided a series of webinars to support teachers in delivering curriculum outdoors and national funded programmes, such as Green Schools, Heritage in Schools and Active Schools Flag, offer supports to schools to promote outdoor learning. Outdoor learning is included as a condition of small grant funding available from the Department of Education and Skills as part of its Sustainable Development policy (Government of Ireland, 2022). However, participation in all these initiatives is optional and so opportunities to participate in outdoor learning vary from school to school and indeed from class to class within schools.

Moving learning beyond the indoor classroom is proving to be resistant to change in Ireland and in 2024, outdoor learning plays a minimal role in most Irish children's primary education.

This is despite children's support for more agency in their school experience through playful, hands-on, activity-based pedagogy, both indoors and outside (Devine et al., 2023); and more time for play, for socialising and for more innovative use of the outdoor space in and around their schools and early childhood care and education (ECEC) settings (Darmody & Smyth, 2012; Darmody et al., 2010; Kernan, 2007, 2015; Kiely et al., 2022; Ó'Néill, 2020). The natural environment was described as '*notably absent*' from the statutory framework governing primary education in Ireland (Kilkelly et al., 2016, p. 14), leading Kilkelly et al. (2016) to conclude: '*here is a deeper value system at play that says the outdoors is not viewed as important for learning*' (p. 31). Indeed, O'Malley and Pierce (2023), in their review of the position of environmental education in the Irish primary curriculum in Ireland over the last 150 years, recognise the peripheral role of environmental education despite featuring in all five curricula. They also acknowledge this is not unique to Ireland despite broader influences at play in Irish education. A recent study of elementary teachers in Canada (Oberle et al., 2021) regarding the barriers and support factors for outdoor learning found that the dominant theme inhibiting outdoor learning pedagogy was systemic factors within the education system to do with leadership support, time, curriculum, policy and resourcing.

Like the international picture, recent Irish research, though limited, suggests that barriers to outdoor learning are associated with lack of practical support, attitudes and limited understanding of the pedagogical components and value of outdoor learning (Abbott & Flynn, 2022; Fahy et al., 2020; Pierce & Beames, 2022). A feature of Irish outdoor learning has been its '*haphazard and accidental*' development, '*devoid of strategic interventions by policymakers or institutions*' (Hannon, 2018, p. 204), leading Pierce and Beames (2022) to a pessimistic conclusion regarding the pedagogical value of outdoor learning in Ireland as overly focussed on pre-planned teacher-led instruction. One exception is the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, which Pierce and Beames (2022) suggest '*has arguably the most developed structural support for outdoor education*' (p.2). This is associated with the Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009), for all children from birth to 6 years in all settings other than primary and special schools. Prince and Diggory (2023) reported a similar picture in England, where outdoor provision is a statutory requirement for the early years cohort. It may also be that this sector carries less 'cultural weight' (Waite, 2013) than the primary school setting. One emergent outdoor learning approach which is attracting increasing interest in Irish primary schools is Forest School (Whelan, 2022; Whelan & Kelly, 2023).

## Methodology

This study presents a synthesis of the views of experienced outdoor learning educators in Ireland on the pedagogy of outdoor learning to explore the relevance of outdoor learning pedagogy to enacting the curriculum and public policy vision for primary education. This qualitative study is situated within philosophical pragmatism (D. Morgan, 2007, 2014). This is a paradigm which acknowledges that in social science research, there are multiple ways of knowing the world and the researcher too brings their values to the research. Ethical approval was granted by Dublin City University and university protocols regarding data storage, transcription, compliance with General Data Protection regulations and confidentiality were followed.

### *Participants*

Purposive sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2016) was deemed the most appropriate approach to participant selection. The population of interest was experienced Irish outdoor learning educators, known to the research team, with wide knowledge of outdoor learning in the Irish education context. A list of potential interviewees was drawn up, representative of gender, geographical location, sector and role. Initial contact was made by email. Once the initial agreement to participate was forthcoming, a follow-up email with details of the research and a consent form was sent. Interviewees

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

| Pseudonym | Gender | Ed Sector | Role |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ed | M | Third Level | Outdoor Learning Educator |
| Tom | M | Third Level | Teacher Educator |
| Pat | M | All | Manager (retired) OL centre |
| Sean | M | Third Level | Outdoor Learning Educator |
| Eva | F | Primary | Teacher |
| John | M | Primary | Principal |
| Laura | F | All | Owner, OL provider |
| Jean | F | Early Years | Manager |
| Julie | F | Third Level | Teacher Educator |

were advised that individual names and affiliations would not be used to safeguard anonymity. However, given the relatively small population engaged in outdoor learning in Ireland, they were also advised that complete anonymity could not be guaranteed. Table 1 provides information about the interviewees.

Each interviewee took part in a semi-structured interview between December 2022 and February 2023. One member of the research team conducted all 10 interviews. Nine interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom software; one interview was conducted in-person and recorded using a Samsung Galaxy A32 5 G smartphone. Each interview lasted between 45 min and 1 h. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. The interviews explored the interviewee's professional qualifications; how they became interested in outdoor learning; their understanding of outdoor learning; the challenges and the impacts of outdoor learning. Interviewees were asked to share examples of outdoor learning from their own practice and to describe ways to support schools with this kind of work.

### Data analysis

Data analysis comprised thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2016) of the interview transcripts. The pre-coding process of anonymising and editing the transcripts was carried out by the researchers who conducted the interviews. First cycle coding involved each member of the research team independently coding a portion of the transcripts using systematic holistic coding (capturing an overall 'sense' of the dataset); descriptive coding (describing patterns in the dataset) and in vivo coding (capturing actual voices in the dataset). A broadly deductive approach was used during this phase; codes were assigned to provisional thematic headings based on the interview schedule. Each coder was encouraged to independently identify additional themes during this phase. Eclectic coding (Saldana, 2016), an intermediate stage between first and second cycle coding followed. This comprised each researcher independently reviewing the complete phase one coding document. The research team subsequently met and agreed a list of deductive coding categories/initial themes to guide the next phase of the analysis. Second cycle coding is an iterative process of data reduction, making links between different elements of the data set and iteratively moving towards an interpretive stance (Miles et al., 2014). This comprises refining, categorising and naming each set of codes, i.e. identifying themes and sub-themes, a process carried out independently and then followed by the research team working together.

Trustworthiness was established using a process of inter-coder reliability. Each researcher worked independently on each phase of the coding. Following each phase of coding, the three researchers met together in person to discuss that phase of the analysis. Prior to each of these meetings, a member of the team examined the coding document patterns of each of the three researchers. Where codes were included by one or two researchers, these codes were highlighted and reviewed by all three researchers at a subsequent meeting and included or discarded in the final coding document. The team were satisfied that there

was a sufficient level of agreement between the coders to ensure the process was reliable and valid. As part of this process, the number of interviewees' voices coded during each phase and represented in each theme in the latter stages was recorded. Each theme is presented in turn in the findings section. A synthesis of the implications of these findings is provided in the discussion.

## Findings

Nine interconnected themes were identified from the interview transcripts. These were grouped into two categories. The first category sets out the components of outdoor learning pedagogy in its enactment and comprises five themes: experiential, agentic learners, equitable, relational beyond-the-human and inclusive. The second category addresses the conditions required to implement outdoor learning and comprises four themes: leadership, curriculum and policy, professional learning and the agentic teacher. While all the themes were mentioned by all the interviewees, the emphasis differed across the interviewees. These categories and themes are interconnected and cross-cutting. They cannot be considered independent of each other. Together they comprise a pedagogy of outdoor learning. See Figure 1. Each theme will now be discussed in turn.

### *Components of outdoor learning*

The components of outdoor learning describe the characteristics of outdoor learning pedagogy in its enactment for these interviewees. Five interlinked themes are discussed in turn. For these
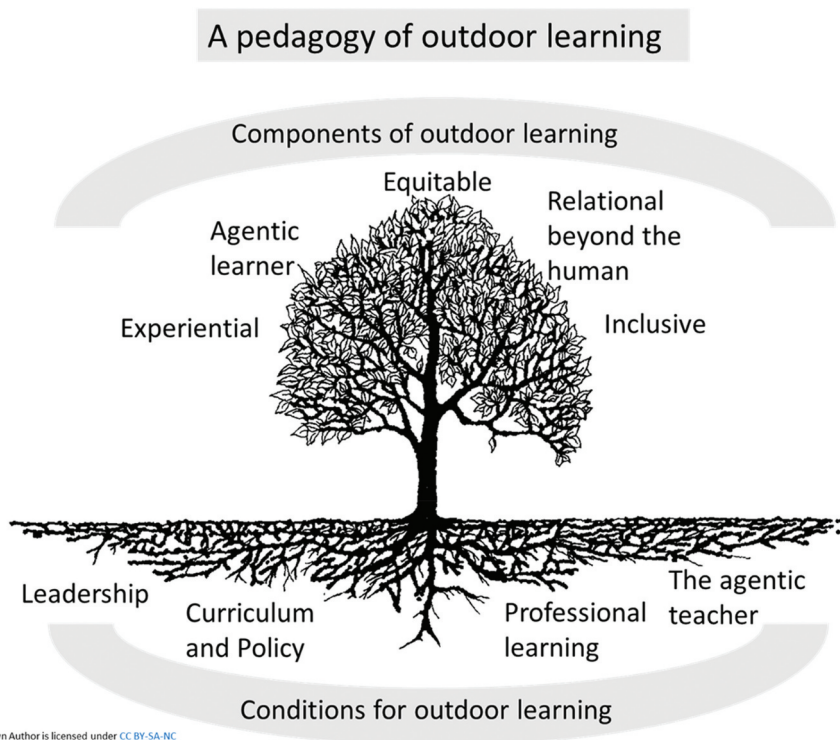
**Figure 1.** A pedagogy of outdoor learning.

interviewees, outdoor learning pedagogy is experiential, promotes agentic learners, is equitable, relational beyond- the-human and inclusive.

### Experiential

All the interviewees described outdoor learning as experiential pedagogy. They talked about outdoor learning as being about physicality and movement and used terms like embodied, immersive, sensory and firsthand experiences. For example, Ann described outdoor learning as offering the learners' freedom, '*to scream, shout, move their bodies the way they want to move their bodies, jump, land, all while talking to their friends at the same time'*. Julie described telling her students, 'We're *going outside, no matter what the weather, we're going to get stuck in, we're going to get messy, mucky, dirty*'. This emphasis prioritises nature as a resource, as something to be 'used' by humans for human benefit, and potentially maximises the disturbance humans can impose on nature through their physicality 'on' nature. However, when it is considered alongside the theme of r*elational beyond-the-human*, a more nuanced understanding emerges. The fundamental part experiential learning played in outdoor learning was predicated on a belief in the importance of concrete first-hand experience. Tom said, '*so much learning comes through your fingertips rather than through your brain I think. We don't emphasise enough the learning in your fingertips, and what I mean by that is your senses all over*'. Similarly, John described outdoor learning as, '*hands-on, concrete experience, that has benefits that second-hand doesn't'*.

### Agentic learners

The agentic nature of this kind of learning for the learners was described by the interviewees using terms, such as discovery-based learning; inquiry-based learning; playfulness; child-led; creativity; curiosity; adventurous; risk; autonomy. Eva described how outdoor learning enabled children to '*guide the learning far more. There's a discovery there'.* Ann described her realisation that a child was able to risk assess. When the child dropped a large rock from a height, Ann responded by asking the child, '*was that a good idea, should you have done that?'*. The child responded, '*but sure there was no one there'*. This response caused Ann to reflect,

> I had to take a step back and I'm like, oh my god, he did a little risk assessment himself before carrying out that action, there was no one there, it was totally fine to drop the rock there . . . I suppose that made me think that, okay, these children are able to risk assess themselves.

For these interviewees outdoor learning offered children, '[the possibility to] *be the learner that they want to be (Ann)'*. Ed drew on the work of Beames and Brown (2016) to support his opinions, ' . . . *quality outdoor learning experiences, have the opportunity for people to be self-determined, to make choices, to . . . back to Beames and Brown, to build agency'*. Outdoor learning enabled these adults too to experience agency in their teaching, as this comment from Sean demonstrates, ' . . .

> I'd be very much into this idea of you're going to a space with a broad intention but then allowing both the student and circumstance have a role, so yeah, discovery driven learning [has] got to be very important to me'.

Teacher agency is also discussed in the second category, conditions for outdoor learning.

### Equitable

For all these interviewees, outdoor learning promoted a different kind of relationship between the learner and the teacher. This new relationship was, as Laura described, a more equitable one,

> The teacher becomes more on the same level as the children and more a learner too . . . They're also outside and in that sort of uncomfortable space. They're all mushed together instead of they're at the top and they're in the classroom.

Sean explained it as being to do with the '*authority' that resides in the built environment of schools* (Waite, 2013),

> … I think that's something to do with the building and its associations with authority or formality with everybody, myself included but once we leave it, even as we walk out the door, I find the relationship changes between me and the students.

For Sean, this feeling promoted a sense of authenticity beyond the physical, ' … *kind of a feeling of, it has a guttural truth about it as well, yeah just that it feels like it is true as well*. Ann talked about her surprise at realising how the children saw her as a '*different teacher*' during outdoor learning and how this impacted positively on her relationship with the learners in the indoor classroom as well.

### Relational beyond-the-human

The experiential nature of outdoor learning with its attendant possibilities for overuse of the resources of the natural world is counterbalanced by the priority these interviewees assign to the unique pedagogical opportunities outdoor learning provides for school communities to develop a relationship with the more-than-human (Abram, 2017). Nevertheless, there is an ongoing tension, which highlights the interconnectedness of these components of outdoor learning. Pat described the importance of nature connection for him:

> … a connection with the outdoors for humanity is essential, the problems we have in terms of climate, in terms of loss of biodiversity all go back to the fundamentals of education, we're on the back foot and unless people have an affiliation with the outdoors, a connection with the outdoors, if it doesn't happen in the families, the school is the only place, and scouting are probably the only places where it can happen.

Text was coded to this theme when interviewees talked about nature connection, nature as agentic, relationships with nature and place-based learning. As Jean said, 'We can … you know, we can *play* with nature, you know?' There was a sense of nature sharing her particular capabilities with humans, not as a resource to be exploited, but rather as part of the affordance (Gibson, 1979) of the natural environment. Ann described it thus,

> the physical environment of the outdoors is much more adventurous, even if you put it down to the simplest of things, like how flat and hard the ground is in the classroom, versus the undulating floor of the forest'. Jean described the impact of rain on the new outdoor shelter, we had all these new children outside in the rain, and there wasn't a sound, because the pitter-patter of the rain on the plastic roof of the shelter created such a calming environment.

Ann described fire enabling, '*really deep, meaningful conversations*.

Others emphasised building a connection to nature through place-based learning, which was described by Sean as, ' … *just being a little bit open and susceptible to allowing a place get involved in the learning*'. For some interviewees, nature as a co-teacher promoted a sense of awe and wonder to do with our being in the world: Sean for example, talked about his own journey in this regard:

> when I started in the outdoors, it was as an adventurer … but now I think it is crucially important that we can impact on our perceptions of nature through being in nature … exploring our interdependence on nature … I suppose it's playing around with the idea of transformative educational experiences that dip into the idea of values and stuff like that …

Tom talked about, '*sitting under that tree wondering what it's all about. And if a leaf falls down, wondering why it fell and what will happen to it*'. They wanted these kinds of experiences for the children and young people they taught as Laura said, '*They're going to learn so much in their felt sense of communicating with nature, with taking care of other things, and that they're part of a bigger world*. Different ideas for enabling this kind of relationship building with the natural world were used by the interviewees. For example, Eva described how,

> we stop at this oak tree outside every time we go to the park … , a very simple kind of thing but the kids are invested in it and … talk about the oak tree in this way that they have this connection with it.

Learning to care about and care for nature and developing an appreciation of how nature cares for us was important to these interviewees.

### Inclusive

These interviewees saw outdoor learning as an inclusive pedagogy. Some were critical of the absence of outdoor learning from current policy frameworks regarding inclusion for children with additional learning needs. For example, Jean described the Department of Education:

> pumping loads of money into ASD classrooms, and gross motor rooms, and sensory rooms, okay? And if they put even a quarter of that money into quality outdoor spaces, our children who have autism will have much better outcomes, because we send children who are really well regulated … like really well regulated through the outdoors, into the primary school system, and they fall off the wagon, because their needs, their sensory needs, are not being supported in the way that the outdoor environment can support them.

For others, inclusion was about equitable access to the outdoors and to nature, as Laura said:

> Like it's a huge potential to make this accessible to every child. And like, there's a huge disparity between who has outdoor space and who doesn't. We're losing our green spaces at a huge level, so kids are going to have less opportunity as things go on if it's not in school and I don't want to just be talking to parents who can afford it all the time.

Jean echoed this when she described *working with, 'a huge amount of children currently living in hotel accommodation and living in apartments, who do not get daily access to the outdoors—only what we give them'.* More generally, for these interviewees, they saw schools as needing to embrace a more inclusive and open relationship with the communities they serve, away from the, *'close the school gates on a Friday afternoon approach', (Ed)* and '*the huge big metal fence around it as if it was a prison and I would like to see a free flow' (Sean).* As before, these themes must be considered in relation to each other to avoid simplistic conclusions. Not all outdoor spaces, or indeed indoor classrooms, are equal in terms of the opportunities or benefits they are able to provide, or the amount of impact that they are able to withstand (A. Morgan, 2018). Furthermore, the pedagogy employed during outdoor learning is an additional consideration in this regard.

### Conditions for outdoor learning

Four themes are set out under this category which addresses the interlinked conditions required to implement outdoor learning pedagogy for these interviewees. The four themes are leadership, curriculum and policy, professional learning and the agentic teacher.

### Leadership

These interviewees called for acknowledgement from school leaders and policy-makers that enabling outdoor learning requires a different approach. The interviewees linked leadership support for this different way of doing things to building teacher confidence in enacting outdoor learning both in terms of pedagogical skills and in terms of asserting the value of outdoor learning pedagogy. Laura expressed worry that Department of Education inspectors, for example, might react unfavourably to outdoor learning pedagogy. Ed described working with teachers, '*who were quite nervous that without four walls around them that the children were going to literally run away and never be seen again'.*These interviewees acknowledged the primacy of the indoor classroom as the default learning environment. Eva described how, '*classrooms feel safe to us, they feel this is what we know, this is what we're trained to teach in. So teaching outside is hard. It is. I mean it's challenging and it's demanding'.* This support from school leaders included a different approach to planning. Eva talked about planning for outdoor learning as '*challenging and it's demanding and you have to be very, very well prepared and so well prepared that actually you can let your lesson go and go with something else that happens'.*

### Professional learning

Professional learning in both Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and ongoing professional learning after qualifying emerged as a significant theme for these interviewees. Effective outdoor learning in primary schools means that teachers must experience this kind of pedagogy in ITE and be able to avail of professional learning to develop their outdoor learning pedagogical practice. As Jean said, '*you can't imagine it unless you see the practice*', particularly given the likely lack of exposure to outdoor learning in their own educational experience. This was echoed by others. While this is also associated with school culture and is relevant to the leadership theme (see above) it highlights the importance of professional learning for all members of the school community. Ann, a recently qualified primary teacher with a lifelong interest in outdoor learning, found that when she qualified for the culture of the primary school she worked in did not support outdoor learning, '*you qualify, you get into a classroom, and that's the only space that the learning happens*'. Ed highlighted that even for those teachers who want to explore outdoor learning in their pedagogy, '*they then go out to the schools and hit the wall of occupational socialisation and 'This is the way we do things around here' and they comply (Ed)*. He went on to describe the positive impact of participation in professional learning in one school that he worked with, '*that whole school, have now taken on board the idea of outdoor learning . . . and they're sending me pictures of 'Look . . . we're doing it on our own now'*. The dearth of professional learning was lamented by John, '*people like myself are just scrabbling around individually, looking at videos on YouTube and nailing pallets together, and this kind of stuff. There's no coherent plan, there's no structured support*'. Some of these interviewees raised the importance of continuous professional learning to enable teachers to articulate their values about the purpose of education; as Sean said, '*addressing the values of primary school teachers in a positive way, through transformative immersive experiences in nature, not as a once-off . . . but as a continual progressive and valued part of the curriculum.*

### Curriculum and policy

There was a welcome for the new Irish primary curriculum as a step towards making outdoor learning a reality for more Irish children during their schooling. At the same time, there was agreement that policy and curriculum frameworks need to be much more explicit in how outdoor learning pedagogy is promoted and supported in daily practice in schools. Sean noted, '*there's a policy framework, an allowance, and encouragement to go outside but it isn't happening*'. Others, like Tom, were more critical; he described the absence of any, '*policy on developing nature friendly school grounds*' [to facilitate the kind of integrated approach to curriculum delivery envisioned in the curriculum and integral to outdoor learning]. However, others, particularly those working in the ECEC sector were more positive; for example, Jean described the Irish early years curriculum as making '*a huge difference on playful learning [outdoors]*'

### The agentic teacher

For these interviewees, outdoor learning provided a way to disrupt what they saw as the increasing quantification and individualisation of formal education more generally, something Sean described as creating a '*crisis*' for communities and our future. He saw outdoor learning as a '*counterweight to formal education*,' as a pedagogy which, '*makes up for the deficits in formal education . . . harness[es] its benefits without I suppose destroying what's unique*'. Similarly, John talked about:

> the outdoors curricularly is much more of an intangible, and education has become very quantified and very quantitative, and play and outdoor learning experiences are not easy to quantify, and they suffer as a result in my mind.

For him outdoor learning provided a, '*flatter kind of environment in terms of learning*', which he welcomed as a move away from what he described as '*the academic and hierarchical environment*' of the indoor classroom. Most were critical of the limited time spent in nature as part of

Western schooling and indeed more generally in society. They felt current approaches did not enable society to appreciate how the lack of connection to nature impacts our attitudes to the existential nature of the ongoing climate crisis and biodiversity loss. This was problematic because much school-based learning did not enable a link to be made between *learning* in school, for example and ecology. Pat described his frustration that young people did not know,

> why the leaves were falling off the trees in the autumn' despite learning science 'they didn't often make the connection between their science . . . their biology . . . it was a copybook exercise, it was academic exercise, it was for their points or for their exam and they didn't realise that it's actually a reflection of what's happening all around us and how we impact on that and how we can shape it and influence by our behaviours or actions.

This was a view shared by all these interviewees. John also lamented the loss of what he called, '*connectedness to the land in general'.* He went on to say,

> We're a much more urban society, and also smaller and more fragmented family structures, so those traditions and that knowledge that would have been handed down about the natural environment. [is absent]

To mitigate this problem, John said that it was imperative for children to, '*understand where they come from, and also what their environment looks like, and are able to map that out cognitively',* something he felt outdoor learning supported. Similarly, Jean was very critical of the lack of time the children spent outdoors in the primary school beside her early years' service,

> There's a playground here . . . and the children in the school don't get to use it. It's used as a treat at the end of term occasionally. That's appalling, you know'. She went on to say, 'I think we're in an age now . . . unless we get children outside, showing them what our environment is, how are they going to mind it?

Exercising agency to introduce outdoor learning takes time. John described the slow and difficult process to bring parents on board when he mooted introducing hens to the school. However, it was a route he was prepared to travel and ultimately, he was successful in this endeavour. Now, he says, in relation to his promotion of outdoor learning in the school, things have turned around to the point where *'they think it is acceptable and they're probably proud that infant children are going out with outdoor gear on them every day, but that wasn't the way for a long time'.* Jean also described how the parents in her service felt that the staff, *'won't let them inside. They just have them out all day' . . . So there's a lot of attitudinal change that has to happen, particularly regarding how children learn through play'.*

## Discussion

The aim of this qualitative study was to synthesise the views of experienced outdoor learning educators in Ireland in order to set out a pedagogy of outdoor learning, in order to consider the relevance of outdoor learning pedagogy to the wider policy vision for public primary education. While this study draws upon the Irish context, it provides insights and has relevance to school systems more widely. For these interviewees, outdoor learning is an experiential, agentic, relational and inclusive pedagogy which values the more-than-human as a co-teacher. This is a pedagogy which challenges current norms in our school communities to do with eco-social values, community, inclusion and teacher education. The interviewees collectively drew on nature as a partner, a resource and as a source of pedagogical inspiration. The lived experience of these experienced outdoor learning educators, across different sectors of Irish education, indicates that enacting this pedagogy of outdoor learning is an achievable goal. They identify key conditions to do with leadership, curriculum and policy, the continuum of professional learning and crucially, agency, to support implementation of outdoor learning pedagogy as they understand it. These interviewees acted in line with their personal beliefs about the purpose of education and exercised that through their commitment to outdoor learning pedagogy.

These findings suggest that we have moved on somewhat from the conclusions reached by Hannon (2015, cited in Pierce & Telford, 2023) regarding the absence of place and a sense of connection with natural environments in the teaching practice of the outdoor learning practitioners he interviewed—although this is not a view shared by Pierce and Beames (2022), who maintain that certainly in some sectors, 'McDonaldized' practices remain fore. These findings move us away from outdoor learning as simply being outdoors, although this is indeed a starting point for many school communities. For example, Moffett (2022) explored mathematics teaching outdoors with ITE students and reported positive results regarding teacher confidence and a move away from the perception that completing a worksheet outdoors was sufficient to be called an outdoor learning pedagogy for her students. Those interviewed for the current study demonstrate a greater sense of both place and a priority for environmental considerations in their own practice and in their vision for outdoor learning pedagogy.

One striking aspect of these findings is the absence of mention of practical issues to do with resources as impacting on the access/provision of outdoor learning. However, it is noteworthy that Waite (2020) in her international survey described as '*encouraging*' her key finding that the main challenge was to do with changing '*mindsets*' rather than funding per se (Waite, 2020, p. 20), something that can be changed through ongoing professional learning. As these interviews demonstrated leadership exercised at the school level and activated through professional learning opportunities can make a difference.

### *A different kind of adventure*

The current findings set out the challenges involved in changing pedagogical practice and how this is a long-term process that requires '*pedagogical development based on experience'* (Marchant et al., 2019, p. 17). These interviewees welcome the unexpected and the intuitive in their outdoor learning pedagogy, ideas explored by Blenkinsop et al. (2016) who highlighted the importance of allowing uncertainty and trust to enter the learning process, to '*build on pedagogically fecund moments'* (p. 353). This kind of pedagogy is playful, moving learning away from an over-reliance on analytical skills and understandings towards agency, emergent engagement with the curriculum and a sense of enabling us to become more aware of our place in the world (Bonnett, 2007, 2013). This is what the Irish curriculum framework is calling for in schools. When the site of learning is extended in this way, there are fundamental changes to the structure of the pedagogical encounter, towards a sense of pausing to *dwell in places and landscapes 'face to face'* (Stickney & Bonnett, 2020, p. 1094). This kind of pedagogical practice is clearly evident in the findings of this paper.

Where schools have engaged with outdoor learning, they generally want to continue and expand this kind of pedagogy (Barfod, 2018; Glackin, 2018; Waite, Passy, et al., 2016). Even in schools where there is dissonance between the pedagogy of outdoor learning described here and their practice that dissonance can, in its way, promote changed practice towards the kind of pedagogy described in these findings. This is particularly the case if there are individual 'champions' who see things differently, as these interviewees illustrate. Encouraging school communities to articulate why they do, what they do, the way they do, may over time lead to a more transformative engagement with outdoor learning. Curriculum and policy are a starting point, not an end. However, teachers need to be supported to imagine themselves as part of innovative pedagogy (Blenkinsop et al., 2019; Coolahan et al., 2017). The greatest challenge to making more opportunities available in schools to practice outdoor learning may come not from explicit policy, but from the layers of '*implicit*' policy (Blenkinsop et al., 2019, p. 492), the idea that it has always been this way so why change now?

These findings explicitly set out the challenges for teacher education and ongoing professional learning in supporting schools and teachers to engage with outdoor learning pedagogy, echoing international research. Barrable and Lakin (2020) found that initial teacher education (ITE) was not preparing teachers; they found building nature-relatedness in student teachers improved their competence and motivation to teach outdoors; they suggest that this may be an access point into

nurturing teacher passion for outdoor learning. The move outside to the less culturally dense (Waite, 2013; Waite & Pratt, 2017) natural setting can help teachers explore their own pedagogical practices and beliefs in a way that is not supported in the indoor classroom. Opportunities to participate fully in outdoor learning in ITE and early years education and as part of ongoing professional learning for all educators are essential. Neville et al. (2023) in the Australian secondary school context promote cross-disciplinary teaching with a focus on the environment, the learner and the educator to support in-school outdoor learning that contributes to learning and curriculum enactment. They highlight the importance of access for teachers to applied examples to support the integration of outdoor learning in their pedagogical repertoire. MacQuarrie (2018) has researched this in the primary school context, concluding that linking theory and practice within a cross-disciplinary approach to curriculum delivery was associated with successful outdoor learning during the school day. One innovative contemporary approach is the use of social media to promote teacher discussion and reflection on outdoor pedagogical practice (Mart & Campbell-Barr, 2021).

Exemplar outdoor learning sites on college and university grounds can serve as teaching sites, research sites and sites of best practice for ITE. This provision should also offer professional learning on how to care for local natural places and outdoor learning sites and prioritise maintenance and care for the site, something often sidelined (A. Morgan, 2018). Exemplar sites can also be used to provide professional learning for educators across the teaching career as envisioned by The Irish Teaching Council in their Cosán Framework (The Teaching Council, 2016). Knight (2016) highlights the work of the School of Education in Cardiff Metropolitan University, which supports an outdoor learning hub and Forest School, a progressive outdoor learning approach, locally. Forest School training is provided for local teachers and the communities they serve, and all teacher education and early years student educators receive introductory Forest School modules as part of their undergraduate studies. The findings reported in this paper identified the early childhood education and care sector in Ireland as leading the way, findings that are echoed internationally. It seems that 'the stick' – in the form of statutory requirements and explicit curriculum statements does work (Oberle et al., 2021; Prince & Diggory, 2023). At the same time, Oberle et al. (2021) suggests we must focus on a strength-based way of how outdoor learning pedagogy is linked to our beliefs about the purpose of education. They highlight personal values and experience as key factors alongside professional learning and leadership support, citing Dring et al. (2020) as key drivers of outdoor learning provision. This aligns with our findings. There are exemplars to support this perspective. In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence in Outdoor Learning (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010) framework sets out how the curriculum can be delivered through Outdoor Education. Outdoor learning is also a key pedagogical pillar of the Scottish Learning for Sustainability policy (Scottish Government, 2012). The model used by Natural England (Waite, Passy, et al., 2016) of providing funding for training, providing central mentoring and support, carrying out standardised monitoring and evaluation towards long term and sustainable outdoor learning provision may be one to explore further. A key aspect of the success of this project was an emphasis on local flexibility, to support schools to embed outdoor learning across the curriculum (Waite, Passy, et al., 2016). Beames et al. (2017) highlight how such projects promote authentic learning, agency and interdisciplinarity as key drivers of successful whole-school outdoor learning provision.

### Systemic change

These findings suggest change is needed right across the system to enable more schools to access the kind of outdoor learning pedagogy described in this paper. In turn, this means that more schools will be able to enact the elusive curriculum vision set out in public policy in Ireland and elsewhere. Greater attention needs to be paid to whole school approaches and systemic changes across the components and conditions described in this paper to embed outdoor learning pedagogy in both individual schools and school systems (Assaraf & Orion, 2010; Karaarslan Semiz & Teksöz, 2020; Patchen et al., 2022). Oberle et al. (2021) highlight what they call a socio-ecological model of outdoor

learning implementation in schools, by which they mean implementation is influenced by a complex interplay of different factors across school culture, structure, environment and teacher characteristics. In the case of outdoor learning pedagogy, this must include an affective dimension (Beames et al., 2012). Patchen et al. (2022) in the US also promote systemic change based on the multiplicity of barriers that varied across contexts, which they found in their study. They concluded that it is a nuanced picture, with barriers similar to, and different from, previous studies. Identifying specific issues in particular situations can lead to solutions, extending the Oberle et al. (2021) study to '*focus on the interactions between components in a specific context*' (p. 16). These draw parallels with the findings of the current study. There is no one size fits all solutions, as Patchen et al. (2022) point out. However, understanding and setting out the components and conditions, as we have in this paper, is helpful to school communities locally and school systems more generally to explore their particular context and make systemic changes that enable more outdoor learning to happen, locally and across primary education. What is critical, however is, as these findings suggest, more outdoor learning pedagogy will ultimately mean the enactment of the policy vision for curriculum enactment across *all* curriculum areas, as described in the opening sections of this paper.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the limited Irish research on the pedagogy of outdoor learning. The findings provide support for a wider adoption of outdoor learning in our primary schools towards implementing curriculum and policy. They also provide a comparative perspective for international readers. The findings support Grey and Martin (2012) in their call for a mandate for every child as part of their formal schooling to '*experience the natural world, based not on a scientific or sociological study, but on direct, visceral and personal engagement with nature*' (p. 46). Yet, as Waite (2020) points out, despite the rich research, policy-makers and school communities still remain to be convinced of the pedagogical value of outdoor learning in our schools. The freedom to engage with the possibilities of learning outdoors is not realised for many, even in the early years context (Mart & Waite, 2023) associated with national policies, cultural values and the pedagogical values of teachers. This is a challenging task that requires teachers to plan differently and more responsively. It raises concerns for teachers about their competence to offer this kind of pedagogy and questions as to where it fits in terms of meeting curriculum outcomes. It is not an exaggeration to say it involves a whole-new teaching style. Outdoor learning pedagogy needs to '*disrupt the curriculum in parallel with reforming it*' (McAdoo, 2024) as these findings illustrate. In Ireland, the NCCA (2022) acknowledges the universally '*challenging*' but '*enticing*' goal of aligning policy, practice and research towards '*collaborative enactment*' that is agentic and inclusive for all (p. 27). We suggest that outdoor learning pedagogy offers a pedagogical path forward on this journey.

## Disclosure statement

## Funding

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