

Article

Preparing Innovative ECEC Educators: A Self-Study of Outdoor Pedagogy in Higher Education

Tomás Aylward ^{1,2,*}, Maura Coulter ² and Tom Farrelly ¹

¹ Faculty School of Health & Social Sciences, Munster Technological University, V92 HD4V Kerry, Ireland; tom.farrelly@mtu.ie

² Institute of Education, School of Arts Education and Movement, Dublin City University, D09 RV10 Dublin, Ireland; maura.coulter@dcu.ie

* Correspondence: tomas.aylward@mtu.ie

Abstract

This research reports on the challenges of curriculum change in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland, and how changes have highlighted the opportunities for innovative pedagogical practices in the university programmes for ECEC educators. We employed a self-study of practice (S-SP) methodology to better understand the outdoor learning (OL) practice of one university lecturer teaching an undergraduate ECEC degree. The 2024 revisions to the Irish national early childhood curriculum framework (*Aistear*) created both challenges and opportunities. The framework identifies the merits of learning outdoors for creating greater recognition of the outdoors as an important site for learning with children aged zero to six years. The focus of the study was the lecturer's pedagogical approach to meeting that challenge and creating opportunities to build students' competence to deliver the *Aistear's* curricular aims through OL. In this qualitative S-SP study, the researchers used reflective journals, critical friendship dialogues, and group interviews with students to interrogate the lecturer's pedagogical strategies and their impact. Using reflexive thematic analysis, five themes developed, concerning pedagogical strategies, student learning dispositions, new knowledge for practice, student gains and experiences, and key aspects of the lecturer's practice. Findings show that purposeful experiential teaching methods fostered student agency and confidence to facilitate OL with young children. Although based upon one cohort, this research illustrates how self-study can act as an effective method to illuminate the complexities of teaching using outdoor pedagogies in HE, and can contribute to the preparation of agentic and innovative ECEC educators.

Keywords: outdoor learning; early childhood education; self-study research; agentic educator



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1. Introduction

If we were to review most education settings in the twenty-first century, it is possible to imagine learning indoors to be the norm. However, the outdoors has been the traditional venue for children's learning throughout the majority of human history ([Mann et al., 2021](#)). Children are not born with socialized norms to learn indoors; they are naturally biophilic and drawn towards play and learning outdoors ([Storli & Hagen, 2010](#)). Therefore, the 2024 revisions to the early childhood curriculum framework in Ireland (*Aistear*) were both welcome and significant regarding the prominence with which learning in the outdoors was placed ([Government of Ireland \[GoI\], 2024](#)). This latest iteration of the framework also presented the early years sector, and those involved in professional formation programmes

for educators, with a revised concept of the early childhood educator as an agentic educator (Siraj, 2025). This concept embraced the idea of an educator familiar with the curriculum framework and trusted to choose which elements to teach, enabling the facilitation of learning of young children.

Teaching and learning in the outdoors have been central to my professional practice as a lecturer in higher education (HE) over the past 25 years. This study is focused on my work teaching an outdoor learning (OL) module on an undergraduate early childhood education and care (ECEC) degree with pre-service educators in their second year of study. The research aimed to explore my practice by identifying the key elements of that practice, how it prepares educators for teaching young children outdoors, and ways to improve it. Mernagh (1987) postulates that the position of OL in relation to mainstream education was similar to that of ‘fringe theatre’ in the context of mainstream performing arts. He noted that ‘the fringe’ was often where the most eclectic, relevant, and ground-breaking initiatives were born. My HE teaching practice has always been on the fringes. Whether teaching about the outdoors on degree programmes in sports science, ECEC, or physical education, my practice has been centred on different content and founded on different pedagogies to my colleagues. I endeavour to be place-responsive in my teaching (Mannion & Lynch, 2015) but also to be responsive to the socio-ecological and cultural contexts in which my students live (Wattchow et al., 2014). However, my life on the fringes has changed in one area of my teaching; that of ECEC. The latest iteration of *Aistear*, the curricular framework for early years education in Ireland, now highlights the outdoors as a location for inclusive learning and connecting with nature (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024). This change has meant that my practice now intersects centrally with national curricular priorities. This paper illustrates how I have sought to explore and improve my practice and respond to my students’ curricular needs as they prepare for their future career taking ECEC outdoors as well as indoors. Although set in the context of Irish HE, the challenges of preparing educators to teach outdoors within ECEC are universal. The methods employed in this research and the pedagogical approach described may be equally applicable in many HE settings internationally as ECEC teacher educators endeavour to facilitate the education of digitally adept twenty-first-century undergraduate students.

ECEC provision has changed over time, with an increasing focus on education and child development rather than care alone (McKenzie, 2023; Murphy, 2015). In Ireland, the first early childhood curricular framework (*Aistear*) was launched in 2009 and built upon the (2006) publication of the *Siolta* quality framework for early childhood education (Daly & Forster, 2009). Since 2018, universal provision by the state of free ECEC has been extended to two years prior to entering primary education and in 2022, a Whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children, and their families was launched (DCEDIY, 2022). One element of this latter plan is the linking of future funding of ECEC centres to the professional awards held by EY educators, with the aspiration of achieving a graduate-led service by 2028. Moloney (2021, p. 103) noted that the state’s vision of an ECEC graduate involved ‘a profile which included academic attributes, professional practice attributes and professional personal attributes’. The changing emphasis on education within ECEC policy can also be seen in the more recent revisions to *Aistear* (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024). In particular, the concepts of the *agentic educator* and the affordances of learning outdoors are both more prominent in the curricular framework. The curricular framework identifies a vision for the role of ECEC educators in this regard as “agentic, competent, confident and reflective” (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024, p. 11). In this context, the role of professional preparation programmes, and those people (like me) teaching on these programmes, bears some examination. Internationally, early childhood education involves professionals holding various titles: preschool teachers, practitioners, and educators. The

singular term early years educator has been adopted in Ireland to refer to all those in professional practice in ECEC settings (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024). My teaching is focused on preparing students to develop this capacity in relation to ECEC outdoors.

Three researchers participated in this study. We use the first-person plural tense to convey our collective stance and describe activities involving all authors. The third-person singular (Tomás, Maura, Tom) is used when referring to individual actions or perspectives. Because the research is rooted in Tomás' practice, first-person singular (I, my) appears where necessary to highlight their central role. This approach ensures clarity in voice and authorship throughout the manuscript.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Aistear Framework

The word *Aistear*, given to the curricular framework in Ireland, comes from the Irish language meaning 'journey'. Just as in the English language, a journey can represent the act of going from point A to point B or a more metaphorical journey, and *Aistear* translates as a more meaningful journey. This curricular framework for babies, toddlers, and children aged up to 6 years is focused on play-based learning and is built upon four broad themes (Figure 1). These themes are: the well-being of young children; building a sense of identity and belonging; communicating with young children and building their capacity for communication; and engaging in activities that stimulate children to explore and think. Underpinning these themes are nine principles: nurturing children as agentic global citizens; acknowledging and celebrating diversity, equity and inclusion; recognizing quality relationships and interactions; the importance of family and community; the role of agentic educators; the transitions which occur in learning spaces and contexts; holistic learning and development; play and hands-on experiences; and the importance of varied, quality learning environments (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024). The preparation of the 2024 framework was informed by research which examined the changes in practice internationally as well as in Irish society since the first framework was launched in 2009 (French & McKenna, 2022). Consultations with the sector's stakeholders were also undertaken, including dialogue with early years educators, teacher educators, and the owners and operators of ECEC settings (NCCA, 2024). While the framework has transformed ECEC practice in Ireland since its first introduction, it does not have a legislative mandate. The statutory early years inspection service uses the structure and language of the framework, but there continues to be disconnects between the state's desire to define universal ECEC and to manage the realities of a sector which is substantially delivered by the private sector (Walshe, 2025).

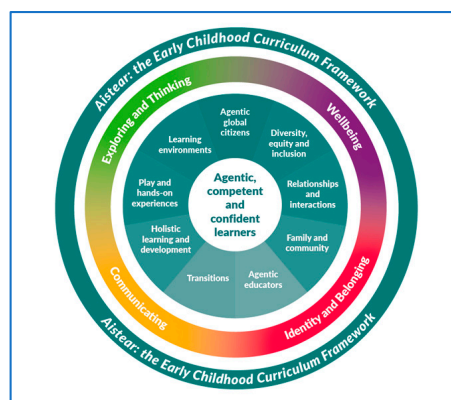


Figure 1. The components of Aistear (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024). Reproduced in accordance with CC-BY 4.0 licence.

2.2. The Agentic Early Childhood Educator

The *Aistear* framework states multiple times that early years' educators are mandated to act as agentic educators both indoors and outdoors at their setting ([Government of Ireland \[GoI\], 2024](#)). The babies, toddlers, and children aged up to 6 years in 2025 will grow up and live on a planet substantially impacted by human-induced climate change and a world threatened by increasingly uncertain geopolitics. There is an onus on ECEC educators to prepare children to be agentic learners and global citizens in their own future ([von Braun, 2017](#)). To respond to the uncertainties of such a future, educators will need professional competencies which are rooted in their professional socialization as student teachers or pre-service educators ([Vaisburg, 2015](#)).

Agency is not simply about the educator giving choices to the learner; it is about the child/learner enacting their own agency. Agentic learning has contexts, including how one can imagine alternative ways of being and doing ([Emirbayer & Mische, 1998](#)). The concept of an agentic teacher has been explored in the literature over the past twenty years, and is concurrent with that of the agentic learner ([Charteris & Smith, 2017](#)). However, the concept of an agentic educator is less common in the literature and less well defined. In describing the profile of an agentic educator in ECEC settings, [Siraj \(2025, p. 13\)](#) noted that they have "both the power and the skills to offer support and build on children's play learning". However, *Aistear* goes one step further by mandating educators to take their agentic practice outdoors and become role models who influence through their actions and their attitudes ([Björge & Svendsen, 2015](#)).

2.3. Being and Learning Outdoors

Being outdoors affords young children the opportunity to be active and learn ([Fjørtoft & Sageie, 2000](#)), but it also derives other specific benefits. Increased motor competence and rich social interactions were identified by [Taylor et al. \(2025\)](#) as effects of time spent in outdoor play in ECEC, while [Storli and Sandseter \(2019\)](#) found that time spent outdoors improved children's physical and psychosocial health. The health benefits for children spending time outdoors are not confined to socially observed or self-declared findings; [Roslund et al. \(2020\)](#), in their study of Finnish daycare centres, found that the skin, gut microbiota, and overall immune system of young children showed measurable enhancement by increasing playtime spent in biodiverse outdoor spaces. Developing a connection with the more-than-human world is becoming increasingly important in society, and today's children not only need to be agentic learners but agents of change for sustainability ([Boileau & O'Donoghue, 2025](#)). While OL is learner-centred, it is not purely about the learner being in the outdoors; outdoor pedagogy is increasingly noted in the literature as a different form of teaching in which educators apply place-responsive, experiential, and creative pedagogies, as well as working with nature to facilitate learning ([Jickling & Blenkinsop, 2020](#); [Aylward et al., 2025](#); [North et al., 2023](#)). However, learning in the outdoors is not just for children—the affordances of multi-sensory embodied learning experiences in the outdoors are equally valid for adult learners ([Gray & Pigott, 2018](#); [Humberstone, 2019](#); [Leather et al., 2021](#)). Outdoor-learning-related research has increasingly examined the professional development and pedagogical content knowledge of educators, highlighting the varied competencies developed for effective teaching through OL fieldwork ([Backman, 2015](#); [North & Dymont, 2021](#)). Because the nature of OL is both theoretical and applied, lecturers must balance direct skills instruction with the careful framing of conceptual understanding. [Crimmel \(2003\)](#) emphasized the challenges of taking teaching outdoors in HE, while [Thomas et al. \(2021\)](#) advanced a socially critical approach that highlighted environmental and social concerns in outdoor pedagogy.

2.4. Challenges to Taking ECEC Practice Outdoors

In a sector founded on care for young children, the management of safety and risk is ever-present in the work of educators. When that provision is taken outdoors, the focus on safety and the management of risk should be the same. However, this safety focus has contributed to some educators being risk-averse in their practices (Harper & Obee, 2021; Sandseter et al., 2020). Kvalnes and Sandseter (2023) noted that the ethical and practical responsibilities of ECEC professionals regarding the outdoors and risk were double-edged. They stated that educators have ‘an ethical responsibility to ensure that children have sufficient scope to engage in meaningful and adventurous play, but also [the responsibility] for the consequences of the activities they opt for’ (Kvalnes & Sandseter, 2023, p. 2). The term *risky play* has been adopted in several global regions to encapsulate the essence of child-led agentic activities, which are supported by adults. It is a purposeful way to help children to learn while engaging in play, which includes uncertainty and some risk of physical injury (Sandseter et al., 2020). Risky play in outdoor settings involves not only managing risk but also balancing risk with the learning afforded by the play activities chosen and undertaken by children. Brussoni et al. (2017) explored this concept in their research on how risky play outdoors can actually contribute to injury prevention in children. Their work on agency and building decision-making around risk illustrated how children had an improved physical capacity to engage with risks, as well as how they coped when things did not go to plan. They were clear that ECEC settings should be ‘keeping children *as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible*’ (Brussoni et al., 2017, p. 3142, emphasis in the original).

2.5. Professional Preparation and Practice

Low confidence in leading ECEC outdoors is not just a phenomenon in Ireland (Abbott & Flynn, 2022), but in many European countries outside of Fenno-Scandinavia (Sandseter et al., 2020). ECEC educators from many countries have reported a lack of self-efficacy in facilitating outdoor play and their desire for increased outdoor play for children (Kiviranta et al., 2024; McClintic & Petty, 2015). In Ireland, as in other European countries, ECEC educators can access a professional formation programme through degree courses at universities and vocational training (Oke et al., 2021). The proliferation of degree programmes reflects government policies aimed at moving the sector toward graduate-led practice (Moloney, 2021). These programmes facilitate the formation and assessment of knowledge, skills, and competence through a combination of lectures, skills workshops, research activities, and multiple work placements (Mikuska et al., 2025). The state’s guidelines for degree programmes for initial professional education for ECEC describe many aspects of program design, including components such as work placements (DES, 2019). However, guidelines on different learning environments are sparse, and no mention is made of the outdoors as a learning environment either for children in ECEC settings or for pre-service educators and students. Therefore, it became discretionary on the part of the universities as to whether students studied aspects of outdoor pedagogy for ECEC settings. While HE programmes in Fenno-Scandinavia have long incorporated learning outdoors, programmes in the rest of Europe and the Global North have only embedded OL more recently (Boileau & O’Donoghue, 2025). The benefits of embedding teaching related to outdoor learning and play in undergraduate ECEC include improved appreciation of the connections to educational philosophy (Layen & Hattingh, 2020); the significance of embodied, OL experiences (Boileau & O’Donoghue, 2025); inspiration for future teaching practices outdoors (Cetken-Aktas et al., 2025); and confidence in teaching outdoors (Wineberg, 2023).

As we can see from the literature, there is a strong theoretical and evidence base for professional formation programmes related to ECEC in the outdoors. This, in addition to the guidance from the curricular framework, directs my teaching and how I have sought to

explore and improve my practice as I support my students in their preparation for their future practice in ECEC.

3. Methods

This research applied a self-study methodology (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2020) focusing on the breadth of my practice, from reflection to education philosophy and to my pedagogical role teaching at a university. Self-study is a systematic, evidence-based, collaborative form of inquiry (Pithouse-Morgan, 2022). It is self-initiated and focused; it is improvement-aimed; it is interactive and community-engaged; it includes multiple, mainly qualitative, methods; it is guided by theory, and it defines validity as a process built through the trustworthiness of the research and the transparency of the methods undertaken. To interrogate and interpret my practice, we employed multiple interactive, qualitative methods (LaBoskey, 2004). The self-reflexive methods used were balanced by incorporating the perspectives of others, thus contributing to the reliability of the data (Berry & Kitchen, 2023).

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The framework underpinning this research was founded on three compatible theories. The first of these is social constructivism (Petrová, 2013). In this paradigm, the peer relationships between learners and between the educator and the learner are seen as critical in meaning-making. Learners are influenced by their observed experiences of other learners (vicarious learning) and by their confidence to take on challenges in the physical presence of their tutor/lecturer—a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1980). The second theory shaping this research is Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1980). In this approach, power and the relative positions of power between learners and teachers are central to understanding student–teacher relationships and their effect on the learning dynamic. The last component was the Adventurous Learning Model by Beames and Brown (2016). The core elements of their model of outdoor learning include agency, authenticity, uncertainty, and opportunities for the child to appraise their own mastery in the outdoors. Each theory influenced how we interpreted the data as we generated initial codes, defined and named themes, and shaped the eventual findings. As was noted by Braun and Clarke (2019), the thematic analysis of qualitative data is not a precisely linear process.

3.2. Research Setting

This research was centred on the delivery of an OL module over twelve weeks. The module consisted of lectures indoors combined with practical or fieldwork sessions outdoors (2.5 h) each week. A variety of teaching modes were adopted during the module. The weekly outdoor practical class involved a variety of strategies to apply the theory identified in the lecture classes. In the initial weeks, the focus outdoors was placed upon habituating the students to simply '*being outdoors*'. Simple tasks which involved '*noticing*' things in the environment and engaging each of their senses were starting points. Activities involved seeking out different colours, textures, and shapes, and learning and sharing their experiences with each other (Vygotsky, 1980). Once the students were relaxed being outdoors, we then began to focus on '*doing outdoors*'; engaging in creative, risky, and nature-based play activities. Experiential learning tasks were presented as a challenge for individuals or in pairs in terms of getting to know the place in which we were learning. Some teaching involved demonstrating skills which had a purpose, such as preparing a fire, tying a knot to hang a hammock or a tarpaulin, leaf-printing, or whittling. Play and reflection were structures I used regularly with the students. Each practical had predictable elements of which the students were aware of in advance. Each session would involve

being active, being playful, being creative, being skilful, being sociable, and being reflective. While the students knew that the sessions would involve these elements, the uncertainty, authenticity, and agency (Beames & Brown, 2016) came from the variety of tasks chosen to engage in, which depended on the weather and the changes in the season over the course of twelve weeks. Being sociable usually involved sharing food and eating together around a campfire, which the students took turns to create each week. This was often an opportunity for me to model reflection activities (Layen & Hattingh, 2020). I would openly share my reflections, and used the vulnerability of the situation to model the importance of openness in reflective practice (Stevens & Thompson, 2022). Students would then either share their own reflections or disperse into the woods to capture their reflections with voice notes on their mobile phones. I applied a Nordic approach to the *joy of learning or being outdoors*, as articulated by Hvenegaard and Asfeldt (2007). They identified the joy of discovering a place, the joy of knowing a place, the joy of feeling at home in a place, and the joy of returning to a place. The *outdoor classroom* on campus was set in a small woodland and had many of the features of an outdoor kindergarten: a covered area, movable seating, a firepit, tarpaulins for creating temporary shelter, and an extensive supply of natural materials to explore from the floor of the woodland. The students were *living the curriculum* (Oslin et al., 2001); engaging in learning activities which mirrored the realities of an outdoor kindergarten, and developing their pedagogical content knowledge to facilitate such learning with children (Wolf et al., 2022).

3.3. Participants and Ethical Considerations

Six undergraduate students ($n = 6$) accepted an invitation to help me (Tomás) better understand and improve my teaching practice. These participants were from an entirely female class group of 34 students; 98% of ECEC educators in Ireland are female (Pobal, 2022). A fellow academic teaching on the same degree programme was invited to act as a critical friend. As a lecturer engaging with my students for research, it was a priority that the students were not placed in a vulnerable position.

They were invited to participate by their head of department and written informed consent was obtained. To reduce potential influence from the primary researcher and promote authentic dialogue, all group interviews included an independent observer—a lecturer familiar to participants though not teaching on their degree. Clearly, a dual ethic of care was required of the research team to both guard the integrity of the research and to safeguard the well-being of participants in a dependent relationship with their lecturer (Ferguson et al., 2004). The identities of all participants were pseudonymised at the point of transcription. Ethical approval was granted by Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, reference No.: HREC-MR-23-038.

3.4. Data Gathering

Three data gathering methods were employed: reflective journals, critical friendship dialogue, and group interviews with students (Table 1). Tomás' bi-weekly reflections were shared with his critical friend and informed the critical friendship (CF) dialogue. These CF dialogues provided collaborative yet challenging conversations through supportive feedback and provocative questioning (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2020). The conversations were generally conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded for transcription. Finally, three semi-structured group interviews with the students explored their attitudes, perceptions, and thoughts on the teaching of their OL module. These semi-structured interviews explored the students' experience of teaching and learning on the module and specifically, their interpretation of my role in their learning and understanding. The interviews took place before their commencement of the programme, at the midpoint, and after the module

had been completed. This research generated eleven pseudonymised data files which formed three sets: Tomás’ reflective journal entries (RJ 1–5), critical friendship dialogues (CF 1–3), and group interviews with students (GI 1–3). Recordings of the CF dialogues and group interviews were transcribed verbatim by Tomás.

Table 1. Description of data collection methods.

Data Type	Description	When/How Often	Participant/s
Lecturer’s Reflective Journal	These reflections were informed by field notes and followed a model (Rolfé et al., 2001) to format reflections. This variation on Rolfe’s original model involved 16 subquestions derived from the original <i>What? So What? And Now What?</i>	Completed bi-weekly after week 2, week 4, week 6, week 8, week 10, and week 12 ($n = 5$)	Author One
Critical Friendship Dialogue	The lecturer’s reflective journals were shared in advance with the critical friend (CF). An agreed agenda of standing items for discussion was augmented with issues from the reflective journals (Martin & Russell, 2018). Face-to-face dialogues lasted an average of 31 min. Feedback and further questions were provided by the CF.	Completed after week 4, after week 8, and after week 12 ($n = 3$)	Critical friend and Author One
Group interviews	These semi-structured interviews focused on how students perceived, experienced, and evaluated the teaching and learning structures provided by the lecturer on the ECEC Outdoors module, and their opinions on how the teaching shaped their confidence and future practice needs as educators. Two interviews were held in the woodlands at the outdoor classroom, and one indoors (after the module was completed). The interviews lasted an average of 27 min.	3 semi-structured interviews pre-module, at the mid-point of the module, and post-module ($n = 3$)	Students ($n = 6$)

3.5. Analysis

We employed NVivo (Vers. 15) to store and manage the data and to facilitate the process of coding. We systematically applied the six phases of reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, writing up the findings. We imagined a continuum of analysis which generated meaning from the data through its relationship to our theoretical framework. This approach differs from a dichotomous view of inductive or deductive interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The initial 663 codes generated were refined and developed through each phase of analysis. As we analyzed the data, we three researchers engaged in regular dialogue so that the final five themes represented our shared interpretation. The themes are not representative of the quantum of codes or frequency of their occurrence, but rather their representation of the meaning and symbolism we interpreted.

3.6. Trustworthiness

In this self-study, I was both the researcher and the researched. The tensions involved in “managing [my] competing selves” (Farrant, 2019, p. 75) enhanced the trustworthiness

of this study by prompting careful, systematic documentation of the research process, including data generation, analysis, and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In line with Pithouse-Morgan's (2022, p. 3) contention that "self-study research processes must be meticulous and transparent", the explicit integration of insights from both the relevant literature and the primary data underpins our confidence in the trustworthiness of this work. Maher (2025) proposes that rigour in interpretive qualitative research such as this work can be located in the coherence and consistency of the researcher's philosophical, theoretical, and methodological stance. While this is a small-scale and singular study, the transferability of the findings can be assessed by the individual reader in relation to their own contexts, and judged based upon their appraisal of its richness, coherence, and transparency.

4. Findings and Discussion

In qualitative research, findings and discussion are often intertwined rather than presented separately, allowing interpretation to occur alongside data presentation and supporting a more integrated and meaningful analysis, as the reporting of qualitative results typically combines elements of both "study" and interpretive "story" (Cristancho et al., 2016). Five broad themes were developed from the data and are presented in the following sequence: pedagogical strategies and inputs; students' learning dispositions; new knowledge for my practice; what students gain, learn, or experience; and key aspects of the practice. The connection between the themes developed, the referenced quotations from the data, and their original sources are illustrated in a graphic representation in Appendix A.

4.1. Pedagogical Strategies and Inputs

This theme represents the assemblage of approaches adopted by Tomás to teach and facilitate learning with his ECEC students. Evidence of experiential learning, outdoor pedagogy, and social constructivism in Tomás' pedagogical practice was visible across all the data, indicating consistency between Tomás' philosophy and pedagogical practice.

By facilitating embodied learning experiences, I enabled the students to explore the interplay between their new theoretical knowledge from the module and their lived experiences from practical classes (Satina & Hultgren, 2001). Including embodied outdoor experiences for students is a distinctive aspect of my practice. By facilitating this within the module, I believe I have strengthened my pedagogical approach, particularly through a focus on sustainability and by modelling the role of an agentic educator (Boileau & O'Donoghue, 2025). I did receive some affirmation from the responses of the students themselves: 'I think it's really, really nice to just get hands on and to do the rest yourself', *Student Áine—Group interview #GI2*; '...and the lived experience helps you to remember', *Student Aileen—Group interview #GI2*. The practical sessions in the outdoors I created were not just experiential; they were social. The teaching facilitated a connection to Vygotsky's (1980) social constructivism as evidenced by the manifestation of a ZPD and the promotion of vicarious learning. Students confirmed this alignment during group interviews:

I thought more so, you were there almost as like a floating teacher; because you would tell us what you would like us to do. . . you would direct us towards what the goal was, and you let us go off [so that] we do it; but you were there still if we didn't know what to do, or if you saw us doing something that was maybe not the best way to do it, *Student Aoife—Group interview #GI3*.

Many aspects of my approach to teaching and just *being outdoors* appeared new to my students, as was witnessed in my own reflective writing: 'We had a new element in terms of natural materials with which to create art and to play. The students seemed intrigued; from initially being resistant to doing anything outdoors because the weather was cold,

they were now cautiously engaged’—*Lecturer’s reflection #RJ1*. The novel aspect of ‘learning outdoors’ and of outdoor pedagogy was identified by Becker (2008) and North et al. (2023); they pointed to the catalytic effect of socially constructed learning experiences in nature. Novelty here is linked to unfamiliarity, not necessarily uncertainty. Davis-Berman and Berman (2002) noted that a human is not in their optimal state for learning if they do not feel safe, and so my construction of learning experiences for my students is focused on piquing their interest and creating sufficient uncertainty (Beames & Brown, 2016), rather than bringing them to such a point of physical or psychological discomfort that their learning is inhibited. This theme also captured aspects of *Outdoor Pedagogy* (Boileau & O’Donoghue, 2025; Aylward et al., 2025), which I applied with the students. This was confirmed by references in the data from CF dialogue, group interviews, and my reflections at various points across the semester: ‘in our first session outdoors, I encourage the students to explore the environment, and to find elements in nature, with which they can play, and we organised a form of loose parts play in the outdoors’—*Lecturer’s reflection #RJ1*.

4.2. The Learning Disposition of the Students

While this study focused on developing a deeper understanding of my own pedagogical practice, this theme specifically explored students’ engagement with the learning process and the subsequent adaptation of teaching strategies to better meet their needs.

Two prominent components of their learning dispositions were ‘student confidence issues’ and ‘learner passivity’. While some research has examined the professional identities of ECEC educators (Hanhikoski & Sevón, 2024), there is a lack of research focused on the antecedent experiences and attitudes that contribute to their acculturation to this profession. Similar research with pre-service physical education (PE) teachers suggests that antecedent attitudes greatly influence their approach to practice (Curtner-Smith, 2016). The findings suggest that the students’ lack of confidence was linked to limited experiences of learning outdoors. The improved confidence of the students following their experiences outdoors was captured in the data. This was noted in my reflective journals and in the CF dialogues: ‘it was interesting to observe the students and to see that some of the students were reticent and holding back; waiting for others to step up’—*Lecturer’s reflection #RJ4*.

Another aspect of this theme was that of ‘learner passivity’. The literature has identified elements of passivity in some HE students where learning experiences are focused around the transmission of information/knowledge from the lecturer to the students (Frost & Connolly, 2015). North’s (2020) extensive work on initial teacher education (ITE) and OE found that he had to flex his teaching approach, motivating his students to overcome the passivity developed through their prior experiences, including post-primary school and other university modules. He noted changing the situation firstly required ‘that the learner consents to learn and then applies himself/herself to the experience in a way which exposes her/him to risks and requires his/her effort’ (North, 2020). I could see this in my classes outdoors, and this was captured in both my reflections and in dialogues with the CF, as can be seen here: ‘They were probably used to sitting back and letting things happen, and then at a certain point [they thought] I’m going to have to engage. Whereas I think what we were expecting of them, [sic] is that they would engage from day one. And I think that was probably a big awakening call for many of them’—*CF Dialogue #CF3*. While remaining in the background observing the play/learning of young children, the role of an ECEC educator is often reflective, but it is not passive. I recognised that the implications for my practice were similar to North’s (2020); focusing on creating authentic learning experiences. The approach I applied here supported the students to engage in activities that linked to the theory of OL and a vision for their future work practice. My written reflections captured this approach: ‘One of them [the students] talked about the

authenticity of the task and the fact that each of the elements that we did, preparing the wood. lighting the fire, [sic] where they had the skills and competence to put it all together. And [for] each of them, this is their own fire’—Lecturer’s reflection #R/2. Although this theme pertains to a smaller quantum of data in the study, it holds significance in affirming this element of Tomás’ pedagogical practice.

4.3. New Knowledge for My Practice

One of the objectives of this study was to improve my practice. This third theme reflects new understandings which will inform my practice going forward and guide its improvement. Its components included identifying challenges to my practice, acknowledging frustration and dilemmas, envisaging alternatives and improvements I could make, and exploring proposals for change. A key aspect of this theme was the central role played by CF dialogue in achieving that greater understanding. The catalytic effect of the CF dialogue was captured in the data: ‘...somebody’s coming in with the provocative questions or queries and making you think, okay, so you might change the next time. And then we come together, you can have the overall discussion. And I thought, there are lots of different ways of doing this. . .’—Tomás in CF Dialogue #CF1. I was very aware of the kind of willingness needed to interrogate one’s practice and the vulnerability it creates. This was also identified by [Stevens and Thompson \(2022\)](#), where they recognized it as a key aspect of ‘coming to know’ one’s practice through self-study.

4.4. What My Students Gain/Learn/Experience

The fourth theme found in this study relates to *what my students gain/learn/experience*. Our research intent was not to measure or quantify student achievement. Instead, this theme captured how my teaching affected their student identity, the shaping of attitudes, their application of theory-in-practice ([Cetken-Aktas et al., 2025](#)), and their reflective learning. The data provided some affirmation of practices I believed were effective in my teaching and highlighted others I needed to question. *Aistear* has identified that being a reflective ECEC educator is a key role in the future of these students ([Government of Ireland \[GoI\], 2024](#)). Therefore, as their university lecturer, I need to work to foster this competence. The group interviews evidenced this developmental process among the students:

we’re on to a third [reflection]. But I think, if you get the chance to actually do the reflection yourself and take an experience and put it into the formatted structure, that helps bring it more together. So, I just know from like, the theory, parts of it actually; practically applying them would be good. Even great. *Student Ailbhe—Group interview #GI3*.

The work of [Hanhikoski and Sevón \(2024\)](#) demonstrated how the context of their daily work influenced the construction of professional identities among ECEC educators in Finland. Several participants noted how their ECEC higher education experience was ‘an eye-opening period that changed their thinking and constructed their professional identity’ (p. 65). In this study, we have found evidence that an indoor vision of ECEC by some students has been altered, with a new perception of what their practice could look like. Pedagogical decisions made by Tomás focused on shaping students’ attitudes towards sustainability and learning outdoors; two elements emphasized by *Aistear* ([Government of Ireland \[GoI\], 2024](#)) as priorities for ECEC educators. The group interviews were particularly informative about the influence of Tomás’ teaching outdoors:

The days that it was kind of drizzling or raining and we kind of went. naah!, whereas now I’m a bit like, we can be outside, you know? Kids don’t get sick. You want them to be outside and to explore and to see things and play with trees

and grass and worms and mud. [sic] so I think I have a different approach now to how I would do it in my next placement.—*Student Aoife, Group interview #GI2.*

The outcomes-based approach to knowledge, which is predominant in the university sector, tends to focus on the cognitive and psychomotor domains rather than the affective. This contrasts with elements of my outdoor pedagogy (Aylward et al., 2025) in which the affective domain and the formation of attitudes are more prevalent. The focused discussion and reflection on my practice from this research have drawn my attention to aspects of my outdoor pedagogy. The group interviews captured changes in my students' attitudes toward the outdoors as a teaching and learning environment for young children. The data identified this through a variety of sources, as can be seen in these quotations from a group interview and from my reflective journal: 'I found myself going outside to read the readings'—*Student Áine, Group interview #GI3*; '... So it was wonderful to hear students, unprompted by me, using words like "building self-efficacy" among the learners; "giving agency to the learners" outdoors'—*Lecturer's reflection #RJ4.*

4.5. Key Aspects of the Practice

This theme gave us insights into one of our central objectives: better understanding of the enactment of my practice. This theme encompasses several elements of my theoretical and practical approach to facilitating the students' learning. Agency and autonomy, critical pedagogy, modelling agentic teaching, and inclusion were all aspects included here. Close connections to my personal philosophy of education were identified and referenced in 8 of the 11 data sets. The congruence between my philosophy and teaching practice, as demonstrated here, has been the focus of previous research (Aylward, 2022); however, the focus in this research is to appraise my responsiveness to concepts highlighted in the latest iteration of *Aistear* (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2024).

The associated concepts of an agentic learner and agentic educator in ECEC (Siraj, 2025) are central to this curriculum framework, and so it is appropriate that creating agency and autonomy were prominent in my teaching practice outdoors. This Concept is evidenced by a quote from a student interview: 'Oh, like, I think I'd say 80% was us, and then 20% was you, like, [sic] you allowed us to learn, you allowed us to explore and give us that agency'—*Student Ailbhe, Group interview #GI3.* Agency is something which is enacted by learners, and we used the phrase *living the curriculum* (Oslin et al., 2001) to describe the immersion of students in their OL module and its content. For me to elucidate the concept of being an agentic educator in ECEC settings, I must be an agentic educator of ECEC students in HE. The importance of modelling behaviours and attitudes by ECEC educators was highlighted by Bjørgen and Svendsen (2015), and modelling behaviours and attitudes for work with children outdoors is a key aspect of my practice and a responsibility which sat squarely on my shoulders.

5. Conclusions and Implications for Practice

This research set out to explore and improve Tomás' practice and to respond to the students' needs, learning to work within the *Aistear* curricular framework, outdoors. Whilst the curriculum referred to in this research is specific to Ireland, the challenges of linking outdoor ECEC pre-service education to the demands of a curriculum and to the realities of practice are experienced in many countries. The context of increasingly risk-averse societies (Sandseter et al., 2020) and children spending less time outdoors than in the past (Brussoni et al., 2017) are more universal. This research has illuminated the complexities and possibilities of teaching OL within HE, specifically in preparing pre-service ECEC educators to become agentic, reflective practitioners. We can now say that we know more about Tomás' practice, its component parts, and its close link to his teaching philosophy.

While the small-scale nature of self-study limits generalizability, it offers valuable insights into the pedagogical approaches in HE (Hug & Möller, 2005; Stevens & Thompson, 2022), and in this case, into OL and to the evolving discourse on sustainability, agency, and reflective practice in ECEC (Siraj, 2025). Through a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), the study identified five interrelated themes that collectively demonstrate the enactment of an outdoor pedagogy commensurate with the principles of *Aistear*, which facilitate the learning of young children both *indoors and outdoors*. I also know that there are tensions in my practice which I must continue to address. Central to this work is the need to redistribute power within the teaching context, enabling ECEC students to build their confidence and enact their own agency as educators in the future (Freire, 1980). The student passivity observed by North (2020) and found in this research may relate to an aspect of critical pedagogy identified by Hooks (1994). She noted that some students were so acculturated to not having power in their learning environments that they struggled to engage their own agency when they were afforded such opportunities in more progressive educational settings. To improve my practice, addressing learner passivity remains a priority, necessitating sustained experimentation and engagement in dialogue with my students. The findings affirm that modelling agentic and critical pedagogies can directly influence the development of similar dispositions in future educators (Siraj, 2025). Although this study is grounded in *Aistear*, the principles underpinning the framework are not unique to the Irish context. Similar emphases on child agency, play-based learning, relationships, and holistic development can be found across a range of international early childhood curricula. This suggests that *Aistear* reflects a broader, shared set of concerns within global ECEC practice, and therefore the lessons and insights arising from this study have relevance and applicability beyond the immediate context. Consequently, these findings can raise questions and pose discussion points for those working in ECEC HE in any country. In approaching this research, I had a sense of being on the periphery; ‘the fringes’ of ECEC-related HE. I am now more assured that there is a congruence between *Aistear* and my practice regarding agentic teaching and utilising the affordances of OL. As Ireland moves towards a graduate-led, inclusive, and sustainability-focused ECEC sector (Moloney, 2021), embedding outdoor pedagogies in ECEC educator preparation programmes seems both timely and practical. Hug and Möller’s (2005) study from the USA provided an exemplar of how self-study of HE teaching practice could be enacted in the context of ECEC, but little self-study research has focused on OL within ECEC until the publication of this study. There are further opportunities to research how we learn from and with our students through reflection and critical friendship interactions to improve our teaching practice at the nexus of ECEC and OL.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Themes and referenced quotations.

Theme	Quotation	Person (Or Pseudonym)	Data Source
Pedagogical strategies and inputs	‘I think it’s really, really nice to just get hands on and to do the rest yourself’	Student Áine	2nd Group interview #GI2
	‘and the lived experience helps you to remember’	Student Áine	2nd Group interview #GI2
	‘I thought more so, you were there almost as like a floating teacher; because you would tell us what you would like us to do. . . you would direct us towards what the goal was, and you let us go off [so that] we do it; but you were there still if we didn’t know what to do, or if you saw us doing something that was maybe not the best way to do it’	Student Aoife	3rd Group interview #GI3
	‘We had a new element in terms of natural materials with which to create art and to play. The students seemed intrigued; from initially being resistant to doing anything outdoors because the weather was cold, they were now cautiously engaged’	Author One	Lecturer’s 1st reflection #RJ1
	‘in our first session outdoors, I encourage the students to explore the environment, and to find elements in nature, with which they can play, and we organised a form of loose parts play in the outdoors’	Author One	Lecturer’s 1st reflection #RJ1
The learning disposition of the students	‘it was interesting to observe the students and to see that some of the students were reticent and holding back; waiting for others to step up’	Author One	Lecturer’s 4th reflection #RJ4
	‘They were probably used to sitting back and letting things happen, and then at a certain point [they thought] I’m going to have to engage. Whereas I think what we were expecting of them, [sic] is that they would engage from day one. And I think that was probably a big awakening call for many of them’	Critical friend	3rd CF Dialogue #CF3
	‘One of them [the students] talked about the authenticity of the task and the fact that each of the elements that we did, preparing the wood. lighting the fire, [sic] where they had the skills and competence to put it all together. And [for] each of them, this is their own fire’	Author One	Lecturer’s 2nd reflection #RJ2
New knowledge for my practice	‘. . . somebody’s coming in with the provocative questions or queries and making you think, okay, so you might change the next time. And then we come together, you can have the overall discussion. And I thought, there are lots of different ways of doing this. . .’	Author One	1st CF Dialogue #CF1

Table A1. Cont.

Theme	Quotation	Person (Or Pseudonym)	Data Source
What my students gain/learn/ experience	‘We’re on to a third [reflection]. But I think, if you get the chance to actually do the reflection yourself and take an experience and put it into the formatted structure, that helps bring it more together. So, I just know from like, the theory, parts of it actually; practically applying them would be good. Even great.’	Student Ailbhe	3rd Group interview #GI3
	‘The days that it was kind of drizzling or raining and we kind of went. naah!, whereas now I’m a bit like, we can be outside, you know? Kids don’t get sick. You want them to be outside and to explore and to see things and play with trees and grass and worms and mud. [sic] so I think I have a different approach now to how I would do it in my next placement.’	Student Aoife	2nd Group interview #GI2
	‘I found myself going outside to read the readings’	Student Áine	3rd Group interview #GI3
	‘...So it was wonderful to hear students, unprompted by me, using words like “building self-efficacy” among the learners; “giving agency to the learners” outdoors’	Author One	Lecturer’s 4th reflection #RJ4
Key aspects of the practice	‘Oh, like, I think I’d say 80% was us, and then 20% was you, like, [sic] you allowed us to learn, you allowed us to explore and give us that agency’	Student Ailbhe	Group interview #GI3

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