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# Where's the *E* in OE? The McDonaldization of Irish outdoor education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents key findings from a study that aimed to critically examine the practice of outdoor education in the Republic of Ireland. It consisted of 10 months of fieldwork across four public Outdoor Education and Training Centres (OETCs). Data were generated through participant observation, informal conversation, as well as centre websites. Findings from the thematic analysis are presented in the form of a creative non-fiction story—principally to protect the identities and centres involved. The findings were then interpreted through the theoretical lens of McDonaldization. Considering the dearth of outdoor education research in Ireland, McDonaldization provided a lens through which it was possible to more deeply understand how rationalisation has affected Irish public outdoor education practices. The discussion explores practices inconsistent with the stated Irish definitions of public outdoor education and the paper concludes with suggestions as to how the McDonaldization of outdoor education may be countered.

## KEYWORDS


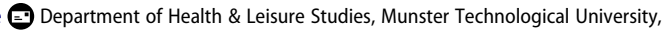
Outdoor education;  
McDonaldization;  
rationalisation

## Introduction

This paper explores the extent to which public outdoor education in the Republic of Ireland (referred to as Ireland from here on) has been affected by rationalisation processes, and presents key findings from a recent Ph.D. study into the public provision of outdoor education sector in Ireland (Pierce, 2020). The aim of the inquiry was to critically examine the practices of public outdoor education in Ireland and to situate this examination in the context of contemporary societal influences.

From an Irish perspective, limited outdoor education research has been completed since Mernagh (1987) noted, almost 35 years ago, the absence of research specific to Irish outdoor education and the need to rely solely on practitioner opinions and anecdotes for 'inspiration, models, methodology and research' (p. 4). As the outdoor sector in Ireland has grown, there has not been a coinciding increase in research activity. While there have been a number of master's degrees completed in the last decade, very little outdoor education literature has been published beyond Hannon's (2018) chapter, a sectoral review (Hannon & O'Callaghan, 2020), and a strategic plan for public outdoor education (ETBI, 2022).

As in the UK, 'insights from various champions of outdoor adventure' (Barrett & Greenaway, 1995, p. 30) and other anecdotal sources have been relied upon to justify learning experiences outside the classroom. One recent piece of Irish research considered the lack of critical awareness in Irish outdoor education with regard to whether practice 'has developed in sympathy with [an Irish] geographical

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and sociocultural context' (Hannon, 2018, p. 197) or has simply been accepted as a colonial import (see Brookes, 2002; Lugg, 2004; for examples from an Australian context).

## Outdoor education in Ireland

As outdoor education is a disparate, varied, heterogeneous, and conflicted sphere of thought and practice, a single definition, covering all areas of practice, is limiting at best (Gilbert & Chase, 1988; Nicol, 2002; Priest, 1986; Quay & Seaman, 2013; Roberts, 2012). Even so, there have been several attempts to define Irish outdoor education. When taken together, these definitions focus on the use of adventure activities, in natural environments, to promote curricular learning, environmental awareness, and personal and social development (CDET B Curriculum Development Unit, 2015; Chief Executive Officers Association, 1990; Outdoor Education Ireland, 2005; Rice, 1997).

Ambiguous definitions of what outdoor education is, and what it is expected to achieve, can contribute to poor outcomes, and ultimately to the marginalisation of outdoor education practice within society and/or education (Dyment, Morse, Shaw, & Smith, 2014; Mernagh, 1987). Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the representative body for the sixteen ETBs, defines outdoor education in a public context, as '[t]he use of adventure activities and the outdoors as a catalyst and medium for learning, personal and interpersonal development and fostering an awareness, respect and action for the environment' (ETBI, 2022, p. 5). This definition comes from the current ETBI strategic framework document that outlines the future direction of the OETCs with a focus that sees the OETCs as 'beacons for sustainability,' 'promoting health and wellbeing,' 'fostering inclusion,' and 'building skills [and] enhancing learning' (ETBI, 2022, p. 13), in further education and community education through experiential pedagogies. This strategic plan is timely, as Hannon (2018) previously noted that Irish outdoor education 'has been haphazard and accidental in its development [with no] strategic interventions by policymakers or institutions' (p. 204).

Outdoor education is a part of many aspects of the formal and informal education sectors in Ireland. The formal education system consists of early childhood education, primary, secondary, further,<sup>1</sup> and higher education. In the formal sector, early childhood education has arguably the most developed structural support for outdoor education. Aistear (*journey* in the Irish language), the early childhood curriculum framework, advocates for a mix of indoor and outdoor experiences in early childhood education (NCCA, 2009).

Although some schools and teachers bring their students outside to learn as part of primary and secondary schooling, there is limited explicit mention of the term *outdoor education* in Irish education curricula. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2022) does have a section on their website dedicated specifically to outdoor learning, which hosts a number of webinars encouraging teachers to bring learning outside. Outdoor and adventure activities, namely walking, orienteering, outdoor challenges, water-based activities, and appreciation of the outdoors, appear as component parts of the physical education (PE) curriculum at both primary and secondary levels (Department Of Education and Science, 2003; NCCA, 1999, 2016). Also, an adventure education framework, focused on experiential learning and featuring challenge, risk, and skill development, is part of the relevant non-examination PE content in the last two years of secondary school (NCCA, 2016).

There are other implicit references to outdoor education across the curriculum. For example, there are integration links in the primary maths curriculum to outdoor and adventure activities within primary PE, in terms of 2-D shapes and spatial awareness (Department Of Education and Science, 1999). The geography curriculum for the junior cycle (first three years) of secondary school includes elements of place-based and sustainability education (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), which resonates somewhat with the definition of outdoor education above. These examples, along with practical field-work in subjects, such as biology (Department Of Education and Science, 2001), point to some acknowledgement of the use of outdoor education within the Irish school curriculum.

While the presence of adventure activities and education in the curriculum is welcome, it seems that implicit inclusion in the curriculum does not mean that it has been part of every student's school experience. One study highlighted that 89% of primary school students had no exposure to the outdoor and adventure activities strand of the PE curriculum (Woods, Tannehill, Moyna, & Walsh, 2010). Likewise, Varley, Murphy, and Veale (2008) found low levels of engagement with the outdoors in Irish primary school science classes, with only 5% of students' depictions of learning being outdoors. Although these reports are now dated, it would seem there is still 'resistance in Ireland to spending time outdoors during the school day' (O'Neill, 2020, para 14).

The informal sector includes a variety of professional and volunteer organisations that use the outdoors for learning and development beyond the school curriculum. Both public and private outdoor centres and providers are included in this sector. These providers range from large residential centres to small, one-person operations and deliver adventure sports training, environmental education programmes, curricular field trips, and outdoor education programmes. There are 12 public Outdoor Education and Training Centres (OETCs) across Ireland and one outdoor education support service (serving Dublin), which are operated under the aegis of their respective Education and Training Boards (ETB). The OETCs are part-funded through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science,<sup>2</sup> but are mainly self-financing. One of these centres has recently moved to become a Further Education Centre rather than an OETC. The remaining 12 centres/services have a shared goal of providing 'memorable learning experiences in an enjoyable environment' (Outdoor Education Ireland, 2016, para 3).

While the above section contextualising the state of Irish outdoor education may seem somewhat lengthy, it serves to highlight ambitious educational policy related to the outdoors, alongside the dearth of published literature and complete absence of empirical research conducted within the sector. This broad inquiry thus aims to critically examine public outdoor education practices in Ireland—what they do and how they do it—and to situate this examination within the context of contemporary societal influences. Due to limited space, this paper is focused on findings related to McDonaldization. A forthcoming publication presents further findings from this inquiry.

## Methodology

### *Philosophical paradigm and research design*

A case study methodology that embraced ethnographic methods was employed in this research inquiry. Also called an ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018), this approach draws on ethnographic methods to study a bounded case or cases, while striving to understand the culture and context of the case(s) (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Simons, 2009). This methodology allowed for the use of ethnographic methods across the defined cases of the four Outdoor Education and Training Centres (OETCs).

Haraway (1988), describing situated forms of knowledge, such as the Irish public outdoor education data generated from this inquiry, urges for 'location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims' (p. 589). From this epistemological stance, one could not explore the practices and processes of any sector or field without a high level of criticality towards the perspective of both the researcher and the researched (Wigglesworth, 2018) that embraces, rather than ignores, the inherent subjectivity of the knowledge created. The relationships between the researcher and the participants need to be authentic and equitable if the data generation is to be accurate and produce meaningful findings. Such an interactive relationship between the researcher and participants leads to overlap between ontology and epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 1992), in the sense that what can be known and how it comes to be known are 'inextricably linked' (Waring, 2017, p. 18).

Adopting a stance based on the belief that data can be generated through our interpretation of experiences means it is vitally important to create knowledge through concordance among all

stakeholders, rather than relying on one interpretation. How the research design considered the purpose of the research of developing an understanding of practice within the OETCs, while embracing the perspectives of practitioners, is of vital importance.

### **Sampling**

The OETCs were the most relevant sample for addressing the research aims, as they have a direct link to the education sector; they are owned and operated by local government and receive an annual financial grant from the Irish government, through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science. In terms of this research, the four OETCs involved were a purposive sample of the public sector of OETCs. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to intentionally select specific cases that best suit the inquiry's aims (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Silverman, 2014). This sampling of the OETCs was representative of the larger public sector, in that it included a geographical spread across the nation, as well as a mix of all three types of centre: one urban, two rural residential, and one urban non-residential.

All 12 of the OETCs were contacted initially through email and by phone soon after. The thirteenth, the City of Dublin ETB Outdoor Education Service was not contacted as, at the time, we were not aware that this service was a recognised public provider. Seven OETCs were interested in taking part in the research after first contact, and after discussions with each, four OETCs agreed to be involved in the data generation. It is worth noting here that this study was focused on the day-to-day practices of a public outdoor education centre. This limitation excluded some of the more political and administrative elements of practice, such as funding and governance.

### **Data generation**

Addressing the aims of this inquiry involved working with the management and practitioners of the OETCs to generate an understanding of outdoor education practice—both in terms of what centres intend to achieve and what actually happens. An ethno-case study allows for ethnographic methods to be used over a shorter timeframe than that expected of a traditional ethnography (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). Giving 'voices to participants' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 219) and the participants' interpretations of practice, allowed for a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973, p. 10) of events, as seen in the findings story below. One of the noted advantages of ethnographic methods is the potential to gain a more precise understanding of social reality or social practices (Hammersley, 2002). An ethno-case study approach permitted the documentation of the multiple perspectives across and within each case.

Participant observation, informal conversation, and website text and OETC documentation were the three forms of data. An average of six days of observations were recorded at each of the four centres. Field notes were taken on an ongoing basis and written-up every evening. An average of 1,500 words were written per day, with more than 36,000 words of data being generated from fieldnotes, apart from the document and website analysis. One of the main difficulties with participant observation is that of looking past the assumptions embedded in a familiar culture, while also maintaining a level of objectivity that allows the researcher to refrain from over-identifying with informants (Delamont, 2016; Gobo, 2008). Gobo refers to this as the 'apparent paradox of participant observation' (2008, p. 6), where one must engage fully in the observations while remaining sufficiently detached, in order to be able to record reliable data. To address this issue, an ongoing reflexive account, from the point of view of the researcher, was included in the typed fieldnotes to make any value-laden assumptions explicit and more obvious (Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017; Delamont, 2016; Gobo, 2008).

These fieldnotes also recorded any informal conversations, initiated by practitioners or management, that naturally occurred during the time in the field. Each centre also provided their standard operating procedures manual during these visits, and we downloaded the text content from participating centre websites for analysis.

## **Data analysis**

All data were uploaded into a data management software package as a whole and analysed in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. This involved six phases of analysis, starting with familiarisation with the data generated in phase one and generating initial codes in phase two. Refining and naming themes was the focus of phases three through five, with the sixth, and final, phase consisting of writing up the report.

We are mindful of recent work by Braun and Clarke (e.g. 2019), where they re-labelled their approach to reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasises researcher subjectivity through identifying and interrogating the assumptions about practice. Guba and Lincoln (1981) highlight the role of the self in the research process, where the investigators themselves are instruments of the inquiry in 'challenging each other's construction of knowledge' (Cowan & Taylor, 2016, p. 508). This ethos aligns with our own attempts to bring as much rigour as possible to the analytical process through endless discussions of the data and possible interpretations of it. Four final themes emerged from the analysis process: daily practice, learning, technical skills focus, and teaching strategy. The findings presented below are an amalgam of all four final themes, though daily practice and learning are more heavily drawn upon, as they were especially dominant.

## **Ethical Considerations**

All research participants were verbally briefed prior to receiving written material regarding the purpose of this research, which included detailed information about the minimal risks involved in partaking in this research. Observational and conversational data were only generated in partnership with participants who agreed to sign a consent form and understood that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Observations took place while practitioners were working with groups. As the focus of the study was the practitioners it was deemed appropriate to not require written consent from each group. Any group interactions were recorded from the practitioners' point of view. Ethical approval was granted for this research by the University of Edinburgh.

A key ethical consideration was how to present the findings. The outdoor sector in Ireland is a small and close-knit community (Hannon, 2018), where claims of anonymity made by the current study would become 'myths,' as 'anybody who mattered would know' (Malone, 2003, p. 809). A guarantee of absolute anonymity was unattainable, even with a high level of alteration (Cohen et al., 2011; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Combining participants and merging locations and activities, addresses this concern well, whilst preserving vital contexts of the experience (Sparkes, 2002). In an effort to anonymise the findings to a point from which it would be near impossible to distinguish specific individuals or locations, we present the findings as taking place at one OETC from an amalgamation of data from all four of the OETCs visited. Klein, in his ethnographic study of elite bodybuilders, similarly combined all four of his research sites into the fictitious Olympic Gym in a similar effort to 'enhance anonymity' (1993, p. 281). This technique is known as ethnographic fiction, or creative non-fiction (Beames & Pike, 2008; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 1997, 2002).

To be clear, every aspect of the findings story either was observed during observations, or read in the operating manuals and websites of the four OETCs involved. None of the content of the story was fabricated. The fictitious nature of the presentation of findings is purely to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants and centres. It is worth emphasising that, while the stories are quite detailed with regard to practice, the specific examples cited give a fair and illustrative representation of recurring practices across the centres visited, and should be read with this in mind—the examples in the story are specifics representing generalised practice(s).

Lastly, the data's trustworthiness was increased through member checking (Coe et al., 2017; Mertens, 2015). The daily fieldnotes were read by practitioners on several occasions (practitioners asked to see them), and a summary of the findings was also read by four practitioners involved in the

research. In each instance, the practitioners were in complete agreement that the fieldnotes and findings were an accurate representation of their work practices.

### Theoretical lens

Through the process of crafting the story through the data and the findings they generated, it became very apparent to us that patterns emerged that spoke directly to the predictability and inflexibility of the outdoor centre. Research has highlighted the susceptibility of both outdoor education and recreation to fall into processes of *rationalisation* (Beames & Brown, 2014, 2016; Beedie, 2016; Loynes, 1998, 2002; Roberts, 2005, 2012), where 'learning becomes secondary or incidental' (Cooper, 2016, p. 399) to delivering a 'rationalized, repeatable package' (Varley, 2013, p. 41).

Almost 40 years ago, American sociologist George Ritzer (1983) drew on the rationalisation and bureaucratisation theories of the great German sociologist, Max Weber, to explain how American society was being increasingly influenced by what he called *McDonaldization*. This thesis was later turned into a book that is now on its 10<sup>th</sup> edition and has been employed to interpret organisations of all kinds around the world. McDonaldization is 'the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world' (Ritzer, 2021, p. 2). It focuses on efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, as well as a fifth element, called the irrationality of rationality'. Rather than explain each of these terms at this point, the concepts within Ritzer's framework will be explicated through the discussion of findings that are presented through the story. Although McDonaldization is not a new concept in outdoor education literature, to the best of our knowledge this theory has not been employed to interpret empirical data in the field of outdoor education before this study.

### Experts, eggs, and rugby: Life at an OETC

*Centre Background.* The outdoor centre's website talks about how it has been administered by the local Education and Training Board for over 25 years, and is approved by the (Irish) Department of Education and Skills, as well as by the relevant National Governing Bodies for adventure sports. In addition, comments about how outdoor education practitioners are highly qualified, experienced, professional, expert, friendly, dedicated, and enthusiastic, are peppered across most pages within the website.

*Staff Meeting.* 'Are we going to start the meeting?' Sarah asked Jason (the senior instructor). 'Yes, at 09:10.' Jason responded. All staff looked at each other, slightly confused. It was 09:06, and everyone was there, waiting. While waiting, staff could not help but look out the window at the cold, heavy rain filling the puddles in the car park. Such a change from the warm and sunny weather earlier in the week.

Once the clock turned to 09:10 Jason began. 'Right, Carol, Pat, and Seán, you guys are with the Glen primary school this morning. It's their first day so go through the usual briefings [centre layout, daily routine, dorms, activities, and recycling]; you know where the briefing notes are. After this, go do the team games, as an ice breaker, for the rest of the morning. The theme for today is friendship. Cool?'

'Oh yeah, Pat and Carol, you are surfing with them in the afternoon.'

The rest of you are with the other group. There are 48 of them and as it is their last morning, each group will be doing whichever activity they have not done yet.' There was a list of activity rotation on the wall for staff to check if needed (see sample in table 2, below).

**Table 1.** Sample activity programme.

	Monday (pm)	Tuesday (am)	Tuesday (pm)	Wednesday (am)
A	Caving (12)	Orienteer (12)	Climbing (12)	Kayak (12)
B	Kayak (12)	Caving (12)	Orienteer (12)	Climbing (12)
C	Climbing (12)	Kayak (12)	Caving (12)	Orienteer (12)
D	Orienteer (12)	Climbing (12)	Kayak (12)	Caving (12)

The meeting finished up soon after this. Staff left to get organised for the day.

Group Briefing. 'OK, is everyone listening?' Carol stood at the top of the room, beside a flipchart easel, ready to go through *The Rules* with the primary school children that had just arrived this morning. She turned the page on the flipchart to reveal a page showing a list of six pre-written rules with the date from three weeks previous scribbled out in red marker. The rules were:

- (1) No littering
- (2) No cursing
- (3) Respect each other and staff
- (4) Nobody near water without staff
- (5) No chewing gum
- (6) Be on time

These rules were elaborated on next.

'If we say don't run, just don't run, simple, there might be rocks, and you could fall and cut your hands'.

'Never, ever, go near the water without an instructor!'

Once this was finished, the students were split into three more manageable groups and Carol, along with Seán and Pat, facilitated discussions about activities and groupings for the two days. Some of the students, having been to the centre a number of times before, seemed to know what answers the staff were looking for.

Team Games. With the briefing done it was time for some fun and games outside! One example of a team game was *Stepping Stones*. This game involved the team moving from one place to another without standing on the ground. Each team was given several stepping-stones (wooden blocks) to stand on – one less than the number of students in the group. A set time was allocated for each game. One group tried their own idea to complete the stepping-stones game. Seán seemed surprised at this idea, while Carol commented, with a positive tone, that it would waste time. Sometimes slipping off a step was ignored, other times the group were told to restart the game. At one point a student took out her phone. This was against the rules, so the phone was taken from her. She complained and stormed off. Carol turned to Pat and Seán and said, 'she has no interest, so feck her'. Once the teams completed the game, Pat showed them the way to figure out the game, according to the centre.

Another game involved the group linking arms in a circle and, facing inwards, bending over to form a round table. Seán started to throw eggs into the air over the group. If they moved, they were considered 'chicken' (scared or nervous). When nobody moved he smashed an egg over one student on purpose. It could have been random, but the student that Seán picked out had been late arriving for the session. Carol and Pat later questioned this game, wondering why you would throw eggs at students. Seán's reply was that 'that was the whole point!'

They completed all of the planned games ahead of time and, to keep the group busy up until lunch time, a few more games were thrown in the mix. The morning was finished off with a game of tag rugby. This lasted over 30 minutes and ended with a fractured and divided group of students. As the rugby had to finish for lunch, Carol announced that the team that scored the next goal would win and the team that was winning 6-2 lost. Through the discontented discussions that ensued, Pat managed to ask if it was fun even before the rugby. 'NO!!' was the resounding response. The session fizzled-out from here. Seán brought the group back inside whilst Carol and Pat tidied up.

Once at the beach, after lunch, with surf of an average of six inches (15cm) rolling in, Pat began his well-practised routine of getting the group into wetsuits and explaining how to surf. "Has anyone surfed before? Hands up. Oh, most of you have. Well, I am just going to go through the basics for everyone". 20 bored surfers stood and watched as Pat described and demonstrated how to carry the board, put on the leash, lie on the board and catch a wave before being allowed into the waves.

End of the day. The day's sessions were over and most staff were waiting for dinner. Sarah, Seán, Carol, and Pat were having a chat about how their day went. Pat was somewhat relieved, as he reminded his colleagues of how he felt that by not delivering the usual adventure sports sessions he had been cheating [not working] yesterday while on a bespoke day with a secondary school group.



## Discussion

The above findings, drawn directly from the data and presented in the form of a creative non-fiction story, show clear indicators of McDonaldization in public outdoor education in Ireland. This following section discusses areas in the story where Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis is particularly evident, and locates these within germane literature. One point to note here is that while McDonaldization has become synonymous with standardisation, this research has focused on the broader theory, moving beyond identifying standardisation to explore the effects of overly standardised practice.

### *McDonaldization—calculability and predictability*

Calculability refers to the emphasis placed on quantifying operations (Ritzer, 1983, 2019), and this is 'reflected by valuing quantity over quality or longevity' (Beames & Brown, 2017, p. 861). The strongest example of calculability comes when practitioners and students are organised into groups and seen as numbers to be assigned (see Table 1). This approach reflects an instructional view of providing activities (or goods) for students, rather than them 'sharing in its production' (Loynes, 1998, p. 38).

This calculated form of what we label *programming by logistics*, was evident in all centres studied, through the amount of the time spent at each activity, the number of practitioners and students involved, as well as the learning objectives to be covered by those students and practitioners in that time. While such logistical concerns are essential for safe and effective delivery, *programming by logistics* implies that these concerns have superseded educational matters in terms of importance. This *modus operandi* is so ingrained in practitioners that they felt like they were not engaged in legitimate work when instructing on a customised day that was designed to meet the needs of a particular group; Pat felt like he had been cheating because he had not been part of the McDonaldized norms of practice that characterised his workplace.

The second of Ritzer's (2019) features of McDonaldization is predictability, which involves controlling as many variables as possible in order to minimize disruptions to production. An example of predictability manifests in the morning staff meeting, where Carol, Pat, and Seán are assigned to the Glen primary school on the group's first day at the centre. They are instructed to go through the typical briefings with the group before getting them to do the usual, prescribed team games. These games are highly predictable and are reproduced for each new group of students, irrespective of their background, age, ability, or learning requirements. The lack of differentiation within activity delivery, while ignoring place, students, and/or desired outcomes, leaves little room for unique and impactful learning (Beames & Brown, 2016).

Drasdo (1973), wary of the future of outdoor education in the UK, noted that 'an unimaginative pressure of standardisation . . . has exercised a repressive influence upon [outdoor education]' (p. 30). The empirical data shown through the creative non-fiction story demonstrate how this efficient and predictable standardisation is as strong in Ireland now, almost half a century after Drasdo's observation. Indeed, it can be argued that the minimal pedagogical training of practitioners has allowed for irrational practices to take hold and become normalised.

### *McDonaldization—efficiency and control*

Ritzer's concept of efficiency can be seen in the student briefing session, where scripts containing all relevant information are used so as not to miss any important points and to speed-up the initial briefing process. Efficiency has to do with arriving at an intended outcome with the least cost. The centre's student briefing session has some logic to it in the sense that there is a lot of information to convey to the student group on arrival, and streamlining such aspects of practice may be useful for both student and practitioner. There is an efficiency in another sense, however, from the point of view of the practitioner at least, through the answers given by students during the small group

discussions at the end of this briefing. Staff appeared to be waiting to be told the answers they needed to hear so that they could move on to the team games section of the morning as quickly and effortlessly as possible.

Another example of efficiency is through the surprise shown by staff when the group decide to try their own solution for tackling one of the team tasks. Even when the group completed the task, Pat felt he needed to show the group *the right way* to complete the task.

The uncritical acceptance of such repeatable programmes, in terms of efficiency as well as calculability and predictability, 'misunderstands the human education process as a technical industrial production process in which standardised and economically viable procedures guarantee the production of always identical products' (Becker, 2016, p. 20). Loynes (2018) is also cognisant of the pressure to deliver financially viable programmes, and he questions whether such activities can justly be called educative. He argues that they are missing the 'more organic, person-centred, complex, open-ended and longer-term encounter' (p. 34) that enables students to flourish. McDonaldized outdoor education can focus on balancing budgetary risk more so than learning risk, as uncertainty is leached out of practice in the name of efficiency (Varley, 2013). Such practices, which effect the mainstream education sector, do not align with the aforementioned definitions of outdoor education. These shifts in education more broadly are likely symptomatic of globalised and neo-liberal tendencies within society (Beames & Brown, 2016; Gleeson, 2021).

Ritzer's (2019) fourth concept within McDonaldization is control, where the organisation exerts influence over the actions of its employees and customers. There may be certain expectations placed on how employees and customers are expected to dress, act and speak; crucially, their ability to exercise judgment is very limited. An example of this feature is the absence of control that the students have on their own learning. In such instances, practitioners could be 'mistaking the thrill of taking risks with learning' (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 39), as they are overly focused on what the group is going to do (and how this suits the instructors and the organisation) and not what they are going to learn from the experiences. The risks we refer to here include the physical risk inherent in some adventure activities, as well as the social and emotional risks involved through learning in a novel environments and social settings.

It is possible that students will appear to develop, or change, personal traits during such experiences, though when 'participants are placed in situations with little perceived control and high perceived risk, they may change some behaviors in order to cope and better conform, but these changes will probably not be internalized very well' (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005, p. 20). While the sample experiences in the findings story may not be overtly risky in the sense of more traditional adventure sports and activities, students have minimal control and this lack of control was apparent across experiences at the four centres studied.

Berman and Davis-Berman's conclusion that little, if any, learning can occur in such controlled conditions is supported by Brookes (2022) call for more acknowledgement of the situated and subjective nature of learning experiences for students. What can seem like learning, or behaviour change, may actually be a coping mechanism used to manage a perceived lack of control. Thus, any behaviour changes will likely be seen as learning, yet are contextual and ephemeral in nature (see Brookes, 2003a).

### ***The irrationality of rationality***

The more rationalised, or McDonaldized, practice becomes, there comes a point where the changes no longer deliver a benefit or improvement of services or products. Ritzer (2019) calls this the 'irrationality of rationality' and sees it as important enough to call it the 'fifth dimension' (p. 6) of McDonaldization. In its simplest form, the irrationality of rationality can be seen as the negative consequences of the processes of rationalisation when they are taken too far.

Ritzer argues that an overly rationalised system unavoidably produces irrationalities; what may initially seem a good idea to make a system work more easily can develop to a point where applying this, originally useful, concept may now be counter-productive to reaching the end goal. One example would be that while it may be more efficient to design repeatable programmes, if this is taken to the extreme, it will likely be impossible for educators to facilitate activities that respond directly to learners' needs. The irrationality that results from such high levels of McDonaldization can lead to disenchantment in both consumers and employees (Ritzer, 2019), or in this case, students and practitioners. Examples in the findings story include the unnecessary wait to start the staff meeting, when everyone was ready to start but the unnecessary wait created confusion and even though Pat knew that most of the students had surfed before, he still went through the motions of his introductory talk. Even though this might have been for risk management reasons, there may be more experiential means to deliver this information to novices.

The reused flipchart for explaining the rules with the scribbled-out date, from three weeks previous, shows a lack of preparation and joy in practice—as it would not be difficult to write up a generic reusable sheet. The disenchantment of students may be increased by the generally negative nature of the rules on the flipchart page, as four of the six rules tell the students what not to do. This is a good example of how practitioners are not giving 'students the space to think creatively' (Beames & Brown, 2016, p. 79): they simply tell the students the rules as opposed to briefing them on the potential learning opportunities stemming from the experience. The lack of acknowledgement of students' skill and experience in surfing is also somewhat irrational and can add further disenchantment to the learner's experience. Finally, the instructor's irate reaction to a student using their phone—'she has no interest, so feck her'—presents a fed-up attitude with little interest in inspiring and engaging with the learners.

The egg task is a prime example of the irrationality of rationality. This task seemed to centre on participants trying not to flinch when an egg was tossed above them and risked breaking on them; the practitioner could not articulate any reasons regarding the intended educational or developmental outcomes of this activity. Even though the other practitioners did question this task (after the fact), to Seán it was standard practice. The humiliation involved in such a task for the learners resonates strongly with the concept of the irrationality of rationality, as the egg game has no links to the claims of public outdoor education practice in Ireland or anywhere else. The tag rugby game, used to keep the group occupied until lunch was ready, was scored unfairly by the staff member, and resulted in greatly damaging any team spirit that had been very deliberately worked-on and developed earlier in the session.

There is also an inaccurate assertion in the story's claim that staff are highly qualified. Similar to findings from Pierce and O'Callaghan (2018), the vast majority of outdoor practitioners at the OETCs visited hold basic (43%) or intermediate (32%) technical awards in line with Sport Ireland's Adventure Sports Framework. While 12% of awards held are academic, only 8% are relevant to outdoor education or education in general.

Brookes (2003a, 2003b), and his neo-Hahnian critique of outdoor adventure education, helps in understanding this dissonance between the relatively low training and qualifications of practitioners and the unsuitable pedagogical methods on one side, and the relatively lofty educational aims on the other. In this critique, Brookes (2003b) highlights the effects of attribution bias—where changed behaviour during a course leads to enduring character development after it—in allowing for the development of a perception among practitioners that their practices are more impactful than they really are. If one combines this idea of attribution bias with the calculated and predictable nature of supposed educational experiences, it is easier to see how the claim of highly qualified practitioners can be made by the Centre. Indeed, practice is controlled to a point where higher levels of qualification and/or experience are not required to deliver programme content that can be viewed as placeless, repetitive, and very limited in its capacity to elicit meaningful and enduring learning.

This fifth principle of McDonaldization, the irrationality of rationality, may be the key to arresting the pervasive and damaging effects of McDonaldization in outdoor education practice. One way to

guard against the irrationality of rationality is to employ Higgins and Nicol's (2002) three questions that outdoor educators can ask themselves:

- Why am I doing *this* activity with *these individuals* at this time?
- What does *theory* and *experience* tell me about the choice of activity and what young people are learning?
- How do I know if I have been successful in achieving my stated aims?

Asking these questions, and answering them, combined with an awareness of the irrationality of rationality may enable Irish OE practitioners to become more critically reflective of their important work.

## Conclusion

This study's findings show highly McDonaldized practices in Irish outdoor education, replete with prescriptive sessions and few, if any, links to curricular learning or measurable gain for students beyond taking part in entertaining activities that take place outdoors. Indeed, some of the experiences have been classed as a form of staged 'adventuretainment' (Sloan, 2022) that ignores 'place (natural environment), subject (ecological processes) and reason (resource stewardship)' (Gelter, 2007, p. 44) and curriculum. In a McDonald's restaurant and at the Irish outdoor centres, employees may not be rewarded for taking initiative, trying new things, thinking independently and responding to the varying needs of those they serve. They are trained to comply with established norms.

It is arguable that a certain degree of McDonaldization in any organisation is acceptable, and even desirable. Without efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control within educational experiences, it would be extremely difficult to roster practitioners, ensure appropriate resources are available, and make sure that programmes are as safe as necessary. McDonaldization becomes an issue in outdoor education when practices become warped to the point where the learning outcomes, and ways of arriving at those outcomes, bear little resemblance to the originally intended aims of the organisation. The negative consequences of Ritzer's (2019) concept of the irrationality of rationality are highlighted in the findings story (e.g. the egg task and the rugby game's ending), where Irish outdoor education practices may be perpetuating negative, damaging, and, in the words of John Dewey (1938), mis-educative experiences.

The implications from this inquiry suggest that for public outdoor education in Ireland to reach its potential, large scale change is needed. We suggest that the first step in the process of change will be for the sector as a whole to accept that Irish outdoor education is in a poor state. Next, leaders within the Irish outdoor education sector will need to examine ways in which further rationalisation of the sector can be limited and possibly reversed. This will involve raising the questions of how, and in what way(s), practice can be re-conceptualised and operationalised. This could include, for example, new programmes focused on specific curricular learning and/or higher levels of training for practitioners beyond adventure sports training. If public outdoor education in Ireland is to evolve beyond its current state, into a more integral aspect of the formal education system, greater national political will—alongside concerted lobbying and activism—may be required to strengthen policy and acquire necessary funding. The recent ETB sectoral review (Hannon & O'Callaghan, 2020) and strategic plan (ETBI, 2022) go some way to highlighting these imperatives.

Although the current strategic plan is for a three-year period, the stated aims and vision to further engage with sustainability practices, health and well-being and curricular learning (ETBI, 2022), are a long-term ambition which may require a large amount of upskilling and retraining of practitioners, as well as a shift in programme design and teaching methods.

Another suggestion for action is to establish a nationwide evidence base through evaluation and assessment of programmes and practice. Kendall and Roger (2015) evaluation report is a good example that could be followed.

Meaningful and enduring education change can be difficult and may need to include a reconsideration of 'cherished narratives' (Brookes, 2016, p. 17). Educational change is more likely to be embraced by a sector if there is a strong belief in the potential benefits to student learning that will come as a result (Chikasha, Ntuli, & Sundarjee, 2014). Rather than academics telling the sector what to do, however, it is arguable that the responsibility for driving theory and evidence-based outdoor education reform in Ireland lies with its practitioners and administrators. They have the power to re-shape the sector in culturally and ecologically responsive ways, to the educational benefit of all.

## Notes

1. Further education includes a range of lifelong vocational learning opportunities for anyone aged 16 or over (McGuire, 2019).
2. Before 2021 this funding came through the Department of Education and Skills.

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