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Autonomy in Outdoor Education: Educators' Perspectives

Autonomia w edukacji outdoorowej. Perspektywa edukatorów

KEYWORDS

outdoor education,
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Theory, qualitative
research, thematic
analysis, youth
development

ABSTRACT

This article explores how autonomy is understood and supported in outdoor education. The aim of the study was to examine educators' perspectives on autonomy and its role in learning processes in outdoor settings. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 13 outdoor educators working with children and youth in the United States. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that autonomy in outdoor education is embodied, relational, and context-dependent. It is expressed through direct engagement with environmental challenges, opportunities for choice, and participation in group processes. Educators reported that autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and social development. Outdoor environments were found to support the integration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in line with Self-Determination Theory. The study highlights the importance of autonomy-supportive practices, including flexibility, trust-building, and balancing freedom with structure and safety. The results suggest that outdoor education offers a unique context for fostering autonomy as meaningful participation rather than individual independence.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

edukacja
outdoorowa,
autonomia, teoria
autodeterminacji,
badania jakościowe,
analiza tematyczna,
rozwój młodzieży

W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób rozumie się i wspiera autonomię w edukacji outdoorowej. Celem badania była analiza podejścia edukatorów do autonomii oraz jej roli w procesach uczenia się w środowisku outdoorowym. Zastosowano metodologię badań jakościowych, opartą na częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadach z 13 edukatorami outdoorowymi pracującymi z dziećmi i młodzieżą w Stanach Zjednoczonych. Dane poddano refleksyjnej analizie tematycznej. Wyniki wskazują, że autonomia w edukacji plenerowej ma charakter praktyczny i relacyjny i zależy od kontekstu. Wyraża się ona poprzez bezpośrednie zmaganie się z wyzwaniami środowiskowymi, możliwości dokonywania wyborów oraz udział w procesach grupowych. Edukatorzy zauważyli, że autonomia wzmacnia wewnętrzną motywację, poczucie własnej skuteczności i rozwój społeczny. Stwierdzono, że środowisko na łonie natury wspiera integrację autonomii, kompetencji i relacji, zgodnie z teorią autodeterminacji. Badanie podkreśla znaczenie praktyk wspierających autonomię, w tym elastyczności, budowania zaufania oraz równoważenia wolności ze strukturą i bezpieczeństwem. Wyniki sugerują, że edukacja na łonie natury oferuje wyjątkowy kontekst do wspierania autonomii jako świadomego uczestnictwa, a nie jedynie indywidualnej niezależności.

Introduction

Autonomy is a key concept in contemporary educational theory, particularly in relation to motivation and student engagement (Szulawski & Szapiro, 2016). Within Self-Determination Theory, autonomy is defined as acting with a sense of volition and psychological ownership, rather than independence from others. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, is a comprehensive theory of motivation explaining human behavior and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It conceptualizes motivation along a continuum from amotivation, through extrinsic motivation, to intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation varies in the degree of internalization, ranging from external regulation (driven by rewards or punishment) to integrated regulation, where goals align with personal identity (Deci & Ryan, 2013). Intrinsic motivation is driven by curiosity and inherent satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both intrinsic and internalized extrinsic motivation predict higher well-being, engagement, and better outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT identifies three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy – central to SDT – refers to the sense of volition and self-determination (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Competence involves feeling effective, while relatedness concerns belonging and connection. Frustration of these

needs is associated with mental health difficulties, including depression, anxiety, and maladaptive behaviors (Cordeiro et al., 2016; Schrooyen et al., 2021). Autonomy develops throughout childhood and adolescence, supported by cognitive and neurological growth, including executive and metacognitive functions (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). These processes enable reflection, identity formation, and value-based decision-making, making autonomy a key focus in education. However, in many contexts, including Poland, its implementation remains limited (Szulawski & Szapiro, 2016; Lejzerowicz & Galbarczyk, 2020). The topic of motivation in education became urgent in recent years in Poland, where the latest studies, TIMSS 2023 (Dobosz-Leszczynska, 2024) and PISA 2022 (OECD, 2024), showed that despite high academic achievements, students don't like school and don't see the subjects they're studying as useful in future life.

One of the educational approaches that fulfills students' autonomy is Outdoor Education (OE). OE is a form of experiential education that takes place in outdoor environments giving. Experiential Education (EE), as defined by the Association for Experiential Education, is "a philosophy of education that emphasizes learning through direct experience and guided reflection" (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.). Rather than a single method, EE is a philosophical approach grounded in questions about knowledge, reality, values, and social relations. Its foundations can be linked to classical philosophy, including epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, politics, aesthetics, and logic (Crosby, 1981), all of which gain practical expression in EE (Priest & Gass, 2018). The roots of EE date back to Aristotle, who emphasized learning through experience (Arystoteles, 2009), and were further developed by John Dewey (1985), who argued that education should be practical and socially embedded. In the 20th century, the approach evolved through outdoor education (Bąk et al., 2020) and alternative pedagogies such as Montessori and Waldorf (Uhrmacher, 1995), as well as in Poland through Janusz Korczak (1907). A key conceptual model is Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which includes concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application (Kolb, 2014; Priest & Gass, 2018).

Over the past two decades, a growing body of evidence suggests that OE contributes not only to academic learning but also to students' motivation, wellbeing, social competence, and engagement (Becker et al., 2017; Mann et al., 2022).

OE is now applied in education, therapy, and community work, supporting social-emotional learning and community building (Frank, 2004; Gass et al., 2020). Research confirms its effectiveness in improving learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement (Burch et al., 2019; Uyen et al., 2022; Kong, 2021).

Outdoor education provides a distinctive context for supporting autonomy. Learning takes place through direct engagement with the natural environment, physical activity, and social interaction (Priest & Gass, 2018). These conditions create

opportunities for learners to make meaningful decisions, face real challenges, and participate in shared experiences (Schoel et al., 1988).

Although previous studies have documented numerous educational benefits of outdoor learning, considerably less attention has been paid to educators' own understandings of autonomy and the pedagogical practices through which autonomy is intentionally fostered. Most existing studies focus on student outcomes rather than educators' perspectives or the educational processes that underpin autonomy-supportive practice.

Exploring educators' perspectives may provide valuable insight into how autonomy is conceptualised and enacted in outdoor education. Understanding these perspectives may contribute to both theoretical discussions on autonomy-supportive education and the development of educational practice.

This article is based on my Master's research at the University of Warsaw, Faculty of Psychology under the advisement of dr Karolina Małek (Łoskot, 2025). The research explored autonomy in experiential education, and this paper focuses on outdoor education, a branch of experiential education.

Research Questions

Due to the exploratory qualitative design, the study was guided by research questions rather than hypotheses.

My research questions were following: How do educators understand autonomy? What role does student autonomy play? What enables educators to support student autonomy?

Methods and Research Tools

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 outdoor educators working with children and youth in the United States. Participants were recruited by the author among educators met personally during an internship in the USA. Forty people were identified using snowball sampling, and then those who work with children and youth were selected. Finally, 15 interviews were conducted. The study focused exclusively on educators working with children and adolescents, as the development and expression of autonomy differ across developmental stages. This decision ensured greater coherence of the study sample and allowed for a more focused exploration of autonomy-supportive educational practices. The participants are

listed in Table 1. Interviews were conducted online using Zoom platform in English, recorded, and transcribed. Interview recordings were automatically transcribed using Zoom and subsequently reviewed and manually corrected by the author. Minor discourse markers (e.g., “like”, “you know”) that did not contribute to the meaning of participants’ statements were removed to improve readability while preserving the original meaning of the data. Prior to each interview, participants received information about the purpose of the study and the interview procedure. They provided informed consent for participation, audio recording, anonymized data analysis, and publication of the findings. Participation was voluntary, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their confidentiality. The total duration of the interviews was approximately 11 hours of audio recordings and produced 179 pages of transcript. Thirteen interviews met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis followed six stages: familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Coding was conducted manually using Google Docs. Segments related to educators’ understandings and support of autonomy were initially coded, after which similar codes were iteratively grouped into broader categories. Emerging themes were visually mapped using Miro to facilitate comparison between codes, themes, and supporting quotations. Throughout the analytic process, themes were repeatedly refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between categories. While the analysis was primarily inductive, it was also informed by Self-Determination Theory as a conceptual framework guiding the interpretation of autonomy.

As reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the active role of the researcher in knowledge production, the author’s professional experience in experiential education inevitably informed both data collection and interpretation. Throughout the analytic process, continuous reflexive consideration was given to the potential influence of prior assumptions. Emerging interpretations were regularly discussed with the research supervisor to enhance analytic transparency and credibility.

In preparation for the article, the OpenAI model was used for the translations and text editing.

Table 1. *Study Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Experience in years	Current Role	Context
Alex	50–60	~30	University educator (training EE practitioners)	Large city
Aurora	60–70	~40	SEL specialist in public schools	Large city
Ernie	60–70	~30	School counselor	Large city
Franky	60–70	~45	EE implementation in schools	Large city
Fred	40–50	~30	School psychologist / EE educator	Large city
Freya	30–40	~5	Outdoor education educator	Large city
Helene	20–30	~8	Community environmental educator	Medium-sized city
John	30–40	~10	Outdoor education instructor	Small town
Joseph	60–70	~45	Mental health educator	Large city
Laura	50–60	~23	EE educator in schools	Small town
Leon	30–40	~10	Outdoor education educator	Large city
Rebecca	40–50	~10	Community educator	Medium-sized city
Teodor	60–70	~35	EE implementation in schools	Large city

Results

The analysis identified three main domains: (1) understanding autonomy, (2) outcomes of autonomy, and (3) practices supporting autonomy in outdoor education. These themes emerged through an iterative process of coding, constant comparison across interviews, and repeated refinement of thematic boundaries, consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis.

Table 2 presents the thematic structure generated during the analysis, including the three overarching areas of the analysis and emerged themes during the research. In this article there's presented the general idea that comes through the themes.

Table 2. *Areas of Analysis and Themes Identified During the Analysis*

<i>Educators’ Understanding of Autonomy</i>	The fact of experiencing The Creation of Meaning Students are like cats Cooperation
Outcomes of Student Autonomy	Commitment “I never knew I could do that” “Climbing a tree is just like the various academic activities you do in class” The “I” in the group
The Implementation of Autonomy by Educators	Being mindful of the student and being flexible “They’ll give me a chance because we have a relationship” A Teacher’s Openness Setting Boundaries “Never forget what it was like to be a child”

Understanding Autonomy in Outdoor Education

Autonomy was primarily understood as embodied and experience-based, emerging through direct engagement with real situations. Educators emphasized that in outdoor education, autonomy cannot be transmitted through instruction but must be personally experienced: “You can’t just tell them what it means – they have to feel it, be in it, especially outside” (Alex). Autonomy was therefore closely linked to action, physical presence, and interaction with the environment. Participants highlighted that meaning is constructed through experience rather than explanation.

A key element of autonomy was freedom of choice, particularly the possibility to decide whether and how to engage in activities. The principle of challenge by choice was described as central: “Idea ‘challenge by choice’ is part of the norm. Participants can decide to observe the experience, be an observer and not engage directly” (Teodor). This approach allowed participants to regulate their level of engagement according to their emotional readiness and individual needs. Importantly, even limited participation was considered valuable: “Sometimes just standing near the group fulfills their daily need for challenge” (John).

Autonomy was also described as situated and bounded, requiring decision-making within specific environmental and social conditions. In physically demanding contexts, participants were encouraged to continuously assess their limits: “They can choose depending on how they feel... when you go up there, you start questioning everything you think about yourself” (Freya).

Another key aspect was the relational nature of autonomy. Decision-making was embedded in group processes: “Out here, it’s never just about you. Your choices affect the group” (Leon). This indicates that autonomy is co-constructed and interdependent rather than purely individual.

Autonomy in outdoor education can therefore be understood as embodied, choice-based, and relational, emerging through direct experience and shaped by both individual readiness and group dynamics.

Outcomes of Autonomy in Outdoor Education

Autonomy was associated with a range of outcomes across motivational, emotional, and social domains. One of the most prominent outcomes was increased intrinsic motivation and engagement: “When they decide how they want to do it, they care more. It’s not something we’re making them do – it’s theirs” (Laura).

Autonomy also contributed to the development of self-efficacy and competence, particularly through overcoming challenges: “They get to the top and suddenly it’s like – ‘I didn’t know I could do that’” (Fred).

Another outcome was initiative and creativity, as participants sometimes reshaped activities: “They completely created their own activity... they took on the challenge of building their own challenge” (Fred).

Autonomy further supported emotional development, including coping with fear and uncertainty, and gradually expanding comfort zones.

A key theme was also transferable learning, where outdoor challenges were interpreted more broadly: “It’s not just climbing – it’s about facing something hard and figuring it out” (Rebecca).

Finally, autonomy contributed to social development, particularly awareness of others: “They learn that their choices matter – not just for them, but for everyone else” (Aurora).

Autonomy in outdoor education thus enhances motivation, competence, and emotional resilience, while also supporting transferable learning and social responsibility within group contexts.

Supporting Autonomy in Outdoor Education Practice

Supporting autonomy required a combination of pedagogical strategies, relational work, and contextual sensitivity. A central aspect was flexibility and responsiveness: “You always have a plan, but outside, you have to be ready to change it” (Helene).

Supporting autonomy also involved stepping back and limiting control: "You have to step back and let it happen" (Alex). At the same time, autonomy was balanced with clear structure and safety boundaries: "They have choices, but within a safe frame" (Franky).

The relationships in giving autonomy are fundamental. First of all, the relationship between educator and student: "If they trust you, they're more willing to try" (Freya). But not only the relationship with students. Also, relationships with other educators. Educators highlighted that supporting autonomy is also a collective process among educators. They emphasized the need for collaboration, shared reflection, and mutual support: "We learn this work from each other... you need other educators to reflect with, to grow" (Rebecca). "I don't think you can do this alone. You need a team that shares the same understanding" (Leon). This indicates that educators require not only individual competence but also access to professional communities to effectively support autonomy in practice.

Supporting autonomy in outdoor education can therefore be understood as a dynamic process that combines flexibility, trust, and structure, while also relying on collaboration between educators and responsiveness to participants' needs.

Discussion

The findings extend previous research on autonomy-supportive teaching by illustrating how educators working in outdoor education conceptualize autonomy not primarily as freedom of choice, but as the opportunity to experience, interpret, and take ownership of meaningful learning processes.

The results are consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which conceptualizes autonomy as experiencing one's actions as self-endorsed rather than externally controlled. Participants' accounts suggest that outdoor education provides conditions in which autonomy is supported through meaningful experiences, reflection, and trusting educator-student relationships rather than through unrestricted freedom.

The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how educators conceptualized and implemented student autonomy in Outdoor Education practice. The findings show that student autonomy is not a single instructional decision but a complex and dynamic process shaped by relational quality, educational structure, broader social context, and individual learner characteristics.

The present findings complement previous studies demonstrating the motivational benefits of outdoor education by providing qualitative insight into the educational practices through which autonomy is fostered. Rather than focusing solely on learning outcomes, participants described concrete pedagogical strategies that enable students to assume greater ownership of their learning.

In line with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy cannot be understood in isolation from the basic psychological needs for relatedness and competence. These needs are interdependent and jointly support student development. Children learn to balance independence with social relationships while developing a sense of agency and competence. This interplay was evident in participants' accounts, where autonomy was linked to reflection, which in turn supported relationships. Similarly, competence and relatedness were connected through trust and shared responsibility, enabling learners to take risks and engage in learning.

The study also highlights that OE itself fosters autonomy by enabling learners to construct meaning from their experiences. Participants emphasized that acknowledging learner diversity is essential, and OE offers tools to address this diversity while maintaining group cohesion. The teacher–student relationship in EE is based on cooperation and shared responsibility, requiring educators to reduce control and adopt a more facilitative role. Autonomy was understood as a continuum rather than a binary state, developing gradually within safe boundaries.

Conclusions

The findings have practical implications for teacher education and outdoor education practice. Educators may support students' autonomy by creating opportunities for authentic experience, encouraging reflective dialogue, allowing productive struggle, and adapting learning activities to students' individual needs while maintaining appropriate educational boundaries.

The findings suggest that increasing student autonomy in OE is associated with higher engagement, intrinsic motivation, agency, and self-esteem. Participants also observed reduced stress, deeper learning, and improved transfer of knowledge to real-life contexts.

The study further indicates that EE may be particularly effective for students at risk of social exclusion, as it supports autonomy, relatedness, and competence, fostering both personal and social development. However, these outcomes require strong relational foundations, including trust and cooperation within the group and between educators and learners.

Additionally, professional support, peer collaboration, and the ability to relinquish excessive control emerged as key factors enabling educators to implement autonomy effectively. The results also highlight the need for comprehensive teacher training, as implementing autonomy requires both conceptual understanding and experiential learning.

Overall, the study suggests that OE provides a promising framework for supporting student autonomy and improving educational outcomes, while further quantitative research is needed to confirm its impact.

By exploring educators' perspectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how autonomy is enacted in outdoor education and highlights the pedagogical potential of experiential learning environments for supporting students' motivation, agency, and personal development.

Limitations

The study is limited by a small sample size and its focus on educators from the United States. The findings are based solely on educators' perspectives and do not include the experiences of participants.

Additionally, the researcher's background in outdoor education may have influenced interpretation, despite efforts toward reflexivity.

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