

00:08 Nathan Cheney: Hi there, and welcome to Popular Podagogy. I am your host, Nathan Cheney. If you missed our episode last time, we are a podcast that is brought to you by the Queen's University Faculty of Education and the purpose of our podcast is to bring on some current researchers and teachers and have them come talk about educational issues that are happening in the classroom, as well as to share some of their stories so that you can reflect and relate as teachers on some of the things that we are doing.

00:37 NC: Some of the things that we'll talk about are going to be extremely funny and some things will take on a more serious tone, but we hope as you come through the podcast journey with us that you'll actually have an opportunity to take something away from it, as well as have a smile on your face by the end of it.

00:53 NC: Last time, if you missed our podcast, we had Lee Airton to talk about pronouns, and we are fortunate enough to be joined in studio today by another new faculty member, Kristy Timmons. Hi, Kristy, how are you doing?

01:06 Kristy Timmons: I'm good, how are you doing?

01:07 NC: Not too bad. So we're gonna start off, Kristy, with an interview that you recently did with the Queen's Gazette. Now, for anyone who's out there that's listening and doesn't know what the Queen's Gazette is, it's the campus newspaper, and every time we have a new faculty member at Queen's for the most part, they do a little profile piece about our new faculty member. And so, I was extremely interested when I was reading through Kristy's piece, because one of the things that I heard is that at the end of the piece, they kinda go over the interests.

01:37 NC: And one of the things that I saw was that you have recently taken up rock climbing. So I have some questions about rock climbing, but my first question is did you take up rock climbing 'cause it was all part of your master plan to escape students when they're in your classroom?

01:51 KT: Good question. Honestly, it was just moving to Kingston from Toronto. I love Toronto. I was always very active there, and people are like, "Okay, you're gonna be slowing down a little bit when you go to go to Kingston," so it's like, "Okay, I need to think of a few things that will keep me active when I come here", and it hasn't been that, I really do love my time here in Kingston, but I was looking for a hobby to kind of start up new while I came here. So rock climbing was something fun that I could do with some new friends that I've met in the area, but also with my husband here in Kingston.

02:16 NC: Well, that's good. I'm glad that you were able to find something in Kingston that you actually were able to enjoy doing and that you are fitting in nicely in the new city. So we're glad to have you here, for sure. And you're definitely a good addition to the Faculty of Education. So welcome.

02:31 KT: Thank you.

02:32 NC: So your background is as an ECE, and instructing ECEs. So my background is actually, I used to be an elementary school vice principal and as part of being a vice principal at my school, a big part of my job was to walk around the school and be present in classrooms and the one that always stymied me a little bit was, I would always go into the kindergarten classroom and it was at

the end of the building, and every time I went in there, I just felt terrified, as it looked like chaos, and I knew the students were actually learning stuff, but every time I was in there, there was just all of these things going on, and going from all the other classrooms to that one, it was pretty interesting to see. And I spoke to the teacher to see what the madness was all about and she said that it was the stations, and that it was play-based learning and that the students needed to be up and moving.

03:20 NC: I guess my first question is, how do kindergarten teachers and ECEs survive what seems like the Hunger Games? I know you have a background in play-based learning, so can you please explain what that is to our audience, who might not be as familiar with it?

03:34 KT: Yeah, absolutely, so maybe I'll start by answering what play-based learning is and then talk about how teachers navigate that.

03:41 NC: That'd be awesome.

03:42 KT: There's ECEs, and researchers might define it kind of on a spectrum. And so you can think about play and play would be completely free play. So the child deciding what they want to do and how they navigate a learning activity, and then there's play-based learning, so we find that sometimes some teachers are a little bit scared of play-based learning, 'cause they wonder what their role in that would be. So if we think about play and play-based learning on a spectrum, it could go from completely free play where a child is deciding exactly what they want to do, what material they want to play with, too more teacher-directed play.

04:17 KT: And so when I go into different kindergarten classrooms, I see lots of different things. And so, that energy kind of level that you're talking about is quite a different spectrum, depending on where you fall on that. And then there's debate in the literature and debate when you talk to teachers about what actually is play. So if a teacher has some control and is facilitating, do we actually consider that to be play?

04:38 KT: And in my opinion, yes, it is. I think that the teacher has a really important role in facilitating play, but you have to kind of see where you fall on that continuum. In terms of how teachers actually survive that, I think it's matching that with their own personality. And so, for some teachers will be in that classroom and it will seem so busy, and if they walked into another teacher's classroom that was really play-based learning, and then other teachers wouldn't be so stressed about that, because it matches more with their personality. So I think it's a fit as well.

05:09 NC: Absolutely.

05:10 KT: And my advice is always do what's comfortable for you in your classroom.

05:15 NC: And I come from an intermediate level and so the intermediate level is a whole another animal because you're dealing with puberty, and you're dealing with hormones and you're dealing with the social aspects of everything. And it's quite a different animal. And I know that with our kindergarten teacher when she would come up, she would come to me and she'd say, "I don't know how you deal with it." And I would go to her and I'd say, "I don't know how you deal with it." So it's actually kinda nice to have that reassurance that it is a personality fit, there.

05:42 NC: Just going back to play based learning, though, how does play-based learning fit in with inquiry-based learning, 'cause inquiry-based learning is a very popular term that gets thrown around a lot in education circles right now. So I know that there's some overlap between the two. So how do those kind of tie in?

05:58 KT: Absolutely, I think that's a really good question. We kind of throw these words around, like project-based learning, inquiry learning, play-based learning and sometimes we see that people use them interchangeably, and I think they are very, they overlap. They're constructs that overlap. So I think about inquiry-based learning coming from questions that the students are asking, and then when you think about play-based learning, it's also coming from questions, but sometimes it's the role of the teacher to be observing the student more, if we're thinking about an early learning context. So instead of the child or the student actually posing a question, you might have to be that kind of observer in the classroom that's witnessing something that the students are doing and then you use that to drive your planning. So they're very similar and there's lots of early years teachers that talk about inquiry as being part of their teaching.

06:46 KT: But it's how you facilitate, starting from the student's interests and starting from the question in a way that's child-centered, so definitely overlapping constructs in pedagogy.

06:56 NC: Now, a lot of research shows that a lot of the best kind of learning occurs in those small groups, and that's a lot of the ways that play-based learning is set up and as well as inquiry-based learning. So this can become a challenge, though, because a lot of the time in a kindergarten classroom, there's only a teacher and an ECE and especially in a full-day kindergarten classroom, and they have quite large class sizes. So how do you think the teachers can actually achieve this so that they're actually getting to all of the students and making sure that those small groups are effective in that even if it is play-based learning, and I know in your research you've touched on this, is a lot of teachers are worried about the assessment side of things, where they're actually having to go and assess these students and get to all of these students. And there's a difference in assessment there. So I guess my question is, how is it that with these large class sizes that you recommend the teachers and ECEs tackle those classes.

07:45 KT: Yeah, class size is always an issue and I think it's an issue throughout the grades, it's not just in kindergarten.

07:50 NC: Yeah, it's never gonna be something that everyone's happy with.

07:52 KT: Absolutely, so I think it's a challenge that we faced in the early years, but I think the reality is now we do have two educators in the classroom and you can do lots of really creative things now that we have two educators. And so the idea of the full-day kindergarten program, now it's called the kindergarten program, 'cause all of the kindergarten programs in Ontario are play-based. And so one of the ways that you can do that is you can navigate the skills of the ECE and the teacher. So, sometimes that might be... When I was teaching in kindergarten it would mean kind of splitting out in the classroom so you have a smaller group, so instead of having 26 students, you would have half of that, right?

08:26 KT: And then you can do some really interesting things and you can be navigating. But the other thing is that's key is how you set up the environment. So that's important no matter what grade you're talking about, but I think it's super essential in kindergarten, is you're really thinking about

how students are gonna be independent at these various learning centers. And so, yes, that means maybe thinking about how many students will be successful working together, and how many students can collaborate with one another. But if you set up the learning center really well in those stations that students are rotating in and out of, you don't necessarily need to physically be there, because you've already thought in such a purposeful way about what's gonna happen when you're there. So when the students are there. So I think once you've navigated that and you think a lot about what that learning environment looks like, it changes your role.

09:10 KT: So as a teacher then you're able to go and listen to what the students are doing and then maybe just go to another center, grab a material and just plop it down at the math center, because you heard a conversation and you're able to probe in that way. So I just think it's about a shift in a teacher's role as opposed to necessarily being something that's more difficult.

09:30 NC: Now, going off of that, one of the things I also noticed when I was reading through some of your research articles, is grouping, and the importance of grouping and how grouping works, especially in a kindergarten classroom and when you're setting up play-based classrooms, and I just kind of wanted you to give a little bit of an elaboration on that. So I know this is something that comes across again all grades. It's not something that's unique just to kindergarten, but is there a benefit to ability grouping in kindergarten? What is the perception of ability grouping in kindergarten and how teachers navigate along that, so that they're making sure that the students are having the most effective experience?

10:05 KT: Good question, I'm kind of bringing two different projects that I worked in on to bring that answer together. So one of the projects that I worked on looked at children's self-regulation and engagement in different learning centers in a kindergarten classroom. So when children were engaged in small group, whole group, transition and play time, and it wasn't surprising, but during small group, and during play children were most engaged and most self-regulated. And really, if you think about it, it's not surprising, 'cause they're probably gonna be less self-regulated or engaged during transition, 'cause there's so much going on. And during whole group, if the teacher is trying to lead something with 26 kindergarten students, it's possible that many students if you're on a carpet will be distracted, so they're gonna have to inhibit some of those feelings on the carpet.

10:47 KT: And so I think that's great that we know, okay, they're most self-regulated when they're in their small group play context. That can really inform how we plan the day. But I also wanna be wary to think that means we should never have whole group time. 'Cause I've talked to some school boards and they're like, "Okay, great, so that means we'll tell kindergarten teachers, they should not have whole group time," and I'm like, "No, no, no, that's not what it means." What we're finding is that, yes, they're most self-regulated at this time, but then we have to think about how to support them in those self-regulation skills during whole group time. It doesn't mean scrap it, it means to be really thoughtful about what we're doing.

11:22 NC: And that was something that I actually wanted to bring up is a lot of people see that as, let's get rid of the whole group time. But kindergarten is also a very important building block towards the rest of their education and even though there are movements in education to try and move away from that teacher-centered learning and direct instruction from an educator, there's still a place for where they need to learn how to follow routines, and listen to rules and do those types of things. So how does the play-based learning transition into a more traditional educational setting, as they move up through their schooling?

11:57 KT: In some ways, I think that, I hope that it's not the idea that we have to move to a traditional way, but almost that we can navigate this play-based learning through to grade 1 and to grade 2. And I already see that happening when we talk about increase. So, I almost wanna say that we're gonna do something different at the end of kindergarten to prepare them for grade 1. One of the things I always say to my students is that we talk about preparing them for grade 1 and then for grade 2, and then in grade 8 we're preparing them for high school, but if we do what we need to do at that particular level, they'll be fine when they get to grade 1 and when they get to high school, we just have to be really thoughtful about the things they are doing.

12:33 KT: So I don't necessarily think it's about preparing them for the traditional context, but maybe changing that traditional context, but I think that play-based learning, if we think about the real world, we're navigating and we're collaborating with other people, and that's quite difficult to do for adults and a play-based learning, or an inquiry learning environment allows students to practice those skills and to actually engage in some conflict resolution in a real way, so I think those are important skills.

12:58 NC: And I just have a little story off of that, actually. When I was teaching, shortly before I got my position at Queen's, I took a bunch of our students on a camping trip and one of the things that I thought was actually most beneficial is that we didn't have structured activities for part of the time, and part of it was that we just said you're in the woods, go have fun, and these are grade 7 and 8 eight students. And for the first 15 minutes, they looked at us, like we had to tell them what they were supposed to do and they didn't know what to do, and then as time went on, they slowly started to figure it out. And by the end of it that was actually where you started to see some of the leadership capabilities that they had, some of the... There was obviously challenges with that as well. If you throw a bunch of grade 7 and 8 students in the woods and say have fun.

13:39 NC: But there was a lot of positive that came out of that. And when I'm reading a lot of the research that you have, I actually equate that experience with that, where some of the skills that we're looking for and that we're trying to build and that we say that we are really wanting out of education, such as critical thinking, leadership presentation skills, or communication, all of these things are actually coming from a similar nature of learning that you would find in play-based learning or inquiry-based learning. And so I think that answer is really appropriate where you're saying that we are preparing them for grade 1 and grade 2 and grade 3, it's just not the grade 1 and grade 2 and grade 3 that maybe you had when you were growing up, or I had when I was growing up, which is the more traditional form of education.

14:20 NC: We're gonna take a quick break to hear from our sponsors, but we'll be right back with classroom confessions.

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15:24 NC: And we're back. So if you had an opportunity to listen to our last podcast, we are introducing a segment called classroom confessions, where we bring on either a teacher or researcher, any sort of educator to come in and talk about something funny that has either happened to themselves or a student in the classroom. Obviously, we're gonna keep it so that no personal identifiers are in there, but it's just a way for us to kind of show that every teacher has funny moments. And we originally actually wanted to name this podcast the staff room, because we wanted to talk about how teachers were coming to the staff room and having funny stories about their students and about things that they did. And quite honestly most teachers are pretty funny people.

16:10 NC: So I gave an example last week of how I carried around sad piano music for my students. And I have another example for you this week. So I'll start off, Kristy, if that's okay, just so that you have an idea of what the bar is for the story. So earlier in the podcast I mentioned that I had gone camping with a bunch of grade 7 and 8 students. And there was one student in particular who was a little bit of a behavioral problem, but overall was really enjoying their time camping. And when we were out camping they would just kinda walk around the outskirts of the forest and they were on their own, they were having a really good time, and we just kept an eye on them as we were going along. Until we got into a game of Capture the Flag and all the students were playing, and this student was playing as well.

17:02 NC: And then at the end of the game, no one knew where this person was and we all thought that he was just really good at Capture the Flag. But as time went on, we started wandering around the forest and we couldn't find the student anywhere and panic started to set in, because if you've ever lost a student in the woods, it's not something that your administrators really like. It's very much not something that their parents really like. And all of the students were getting very concerned and all of the teachers were getting very concerned as well. So it was my task to go around and try and find this student and we wandered around the entire forest and couldn't find them anywhere, and we wandered around the entire camp ground, and we couldn't find them anywhere.

17:41 NC: And then finally, I ventured back up, and I had gone back before and gone back into the cabins where we were all staying, and finally, I ventured back in, and I just had a hunch, I didn't really know, and I knocked on the door and apparently what had happened was the camping food had gotten to him a little bit, and so he wasn't feeling so well, and he'd been in the bathroom for the last half an hour, but he was very embarrassed by it when we went through the first time and decided not to actually speak up, but once I said that we were worried about him missing, he was very apologetic and he came out after feeling a little bit better, but for about 20 minutes, I thought I had lost the student in the woods. And so, that is my classroom confession. So, Kristy, I'm gonna ask if you have a classroom confession to share today, and if anyone who's out there is listening, if you wanna share one of your classroom confessions, again, we'll keep it completely anonymous.

18:38 NC: No personal identifiers, but you can share your classroom confessions with the email popular.podagogy@queensu.ca, or if you just have any questions and wanna give us a shout, you can get us there. But now we're gonna listen to Kristy's classroom confession.

18:54 KT: Okay, wonderful. I'm gonna give an example from a kindergarten classroom. It's actually from some research I did in kindergarten, and so one of the things I did was, actually my supervisor when I was doing my PhD is we were interested in how children creatively would write sentences that we'd ask them to write, we were looking for the representation of number, so their sentence would have a number in it, and we be coding for how they were actually writing the sentence. So some of the sentences would be teacher has five little red crayons, or it could be daddy has six hockey sticks. And so one of them that I still have, I actually have this example in my office. So the young child, he was five years old, and he had written "Daddy has hokey sex" was his sentence that he wrote. So that's an example that I still have in my office and I use in my literacy and language class as an example of the funny things, the creative writing that children can do and their inventive spelling.

19:48 NC: Spelling is very important, yes.

19:49 KT: Another one was something about two horses, so that the student wrote two "hors," so that was an example. And then another example, which is to all those teachers that have students write lines, not to do that. So one student wrote, "I'm a very bad little boy," he was seven, but the sentence was something about seven crayons or something like that, and he wrote, "I'm a very bad boy." So how's like that? So awful, right, so obviously he had been asked to write lines, which is so sad, and thinking about... Like we're trying to get children excited about writing and thinking...

20:26 NC: Those are the type of kids that grow up to have hokey sex.

20:29 KT: Yeah, they are. [chuckle] So, just so funny examples but also sad examples and taking that with you and thinking about the things we ask students to do in our classrooms.

20:38 NC: Hopefully, if you're a teacher out there, and you're listening to that, you'll know better then to tell them to write lines, and also if you have funny stories you can share that with us as well, because we love hearing about all of the funny things that your students write. So that is our classroom confessions segment.

20:56 NC: We're almost done here on Popular Podagogy, but first I wanna ask Kristy what research she's working on and so anyone listening can go find your research, so if you can tell us what you're working on, and where they can find it, that'd be great.

21:07 KT: So one of the projects I'm working on right now is to really operationalize what self-regulation is, because there has been actually one paper that came out by Stuart Shanker, it found 446 definitions for what self-regulation is, and so we have... It's in medical research, it's in psychology research, it's in education research, and so we talk about self-regulation as being so important in the early years, but also how that impacts in our career down the road.

21:35 KT: And so one of the things that I'm trying to do is to support teachers in supporting children in self-regulation skills, but it's really difficult to do if we don't actually know how to define self-regulation or know what it is. It's measured in multiple different ways. And so one of the projects that I'm doing right now is a pan-Canadian study of policy documents, and looking for the ways they're defining self-regulation and comparing that with empirical research in terms of what actually develops self-regulation skills with students. And then the next step will be to actually go

into kindergarten classrooms and say, okay, this is what we find an empirical work, this is what we find in the policy document, what should we actually be trying to support students in doing it in our classroom.

22:13 NC: And do you think that the policy documents and the empirical work is well known amongst teachers? Do you think that that's something that they're quite familiar? I know this is a loaded question, but do you think that is something that they're quite familiar with and that that self-regulation component is something that we know how to teach students, 'cause I know that our kindergarten classrooms and all classrooms across education have really changed quite a bit in the last 10 years, so that expectation might have changed as well. So do you think that's something that we need to kind of focus on as teachers?

22:43 KT: I do, I think we've come a long way in terms of thinking about what this actually looks like in the classroom. The kindergarten program, for example, actually frames the curriculum expectations and one of the frames is self-regulation and well-being. So I think that's a really good attempt to really think, yes, this is really important, so we should try to teach this in the curriculum, but we're still lacking an understanding what that actually means for what we do as teachers, so if researchers are having a hard time operationalizing what self-regulation is, it's probably gonna be also very difficult for teachers to say, okay, I read this in a paper or I see this in a policy document, but what's the best way to actually do this in the everyday demands of the classroom?

23:19 KT: So what my hope is, is to have some conversations with teachers and to learn from them in terms of what they've seen has worked in the classroom and then also to back that on to some of the empirical findings that we have and hopefully we can find a place where we can go forward and give those strategies to teachers. So I think we have come far but it's still evolving.

23:36 NC: You're getting everyone on the same page, that's the hope.

23:39 KT: Yeah, and to be moving forward, yeah.

23:41 NC: Well, thank you for coming in today, Kristy. And that does it for another episode of Popular Podagogy. If you like what you hear, please check us out and subscribe on iTunes or on the CFRC website or on the Faculty of Education Twitter and Facebook page. Thanks for tuning in, and we'll see you next time.