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**0:00:02.7 Theme song:** Talking about innovation in teaching in Education, Popular Podagogy, discussions that are topical and sometimes philosophical, Popular Podagogy, Popular Podagogy.

**0:00:18.8 Chris Carlton:** Good afternoon, Josh. It's always a pleasure working with you on these Popular Podagogy podcasts. How are you doing today?

**0:00:25.0 Joshua Vine:** Good, good, Chris, how are you?

**0:00:26.6 CC:** I'm doing fantastic. We've got a rainy day out there, but it's nice and dry in here.

**0:00:30.8 JV:** [chuckle] It is.

**0:00:31.9 CC:** So count our blessings. Josh, I was thinking about our exciting podcast topic today, and getting our students outdoors to teach the curriculum. And I was trying to remember back to my own elementary school experiences. And I must admit, I don't actually remember much of my learning from that time. But there were two memories that came to mind. And I just wanted to share them with you and get your thoughts on them, as well. The first one was a light and sound experiment that we did in grade four. As a class, we hiked out to a massive field, where half the class stayed with the teacher and the other half walked to what seemed a mile away with a parent to another field, but still in sight of the other team. And then what we did, I remember, we had two walkie-talkies, we had a couple of binoculars, a red flag, stopwatches, and the coolest of things, we had this starter pistol.

**0:01:23.3 CC:** And we proceeded to do several experiments to try and demonstrate that light and sound travelled at different speeds. And, Josh, it was absolutely amazing. And what I learned, still sticks in my head today. And I just think about that often. Here's how many years past that. And I'm still remembering that. The other lesson was a kite-flying outing that we did in grade six for the flight unit, where we designed, built, and tested our own kites. And those are basically the only two lessons that I can remember in detail from my entire elementary school time. So what about you? Do have any elementary school learning experiences, Josh, that you still remember?

**0:02:04.8 JV:** Yeah, yeah. Good. Good question. And I do. I've been kinda as I'm listening... I think there was a really cool one we did. I think it was grade seven, grade eight, possibly science class, and then we had to build a canoe or a boat that held you and your partner out of cardboard and tape, basically, and see how far you could get on the day of, because you had to build your own paddle, build everything. The entire class did this, it was over multiple weeks. The end of the year, we went to... We had a boat launch in our town that had kind of two ramps about 100 yards apart. And we had to see if we'd get from one to the other without sinking. So it was a really awesome half-day outing.

**0:02:46.6 JV:** And it was a lot of fun. So I remember that one. That one really sticks out. And then field trips, we went to Gould Lake a lot, multiple times over the years, probably multiple grades. But there was this really amazing kinda outdoor cave, we had to find different rocks sort of thing. And I think Mica was the mineral that we had to try and find. And just bringing that back and learning about the different minerals and just being outdoors was incredible. So those are two things that stick out for me. And kinda like you said, I don't remember a lot of those in-class experiences. I remember those outdoor ones, going outside. And learning and especially that canoe project was a lot of fun.

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**0:03:24.2 CC:** That sounds amazing. It's amazing when we can actually explore and do things outside and it's still part of the school curriculum, or still part of the school journey. And like you said, those are the things we remember. And I think you're gonna like this topic that we've got today because we've got two guest speakers coming in that are gonna talk just about what you and I discussed, and that's getting our students outside and learning in nature, and having those fun hands-on experiences that you and I still remember after how many years back? It should be a good one.

**0:03:56.5 JV:** Awesome, looking forward to it.

[music]

**0:04:00.3 CC:** Hi there. Thanks for joining us and welcome to another episode of Popular Podagogy where we try to bring big ideas in teaching and education to life. I'm your host Chris Carlton, and this podcast is being brought to you by the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. As teachers, many of us know and have seen the powerful benefits of getting our students outside to breathe in nature and play. Teaching our students outdoors and letting them learn and play in various subjects has been shown to strongly support their emotional, behavioral, and intellectual development. In this podcast, we will be speaking with two innovative educators who are getting their students outside for many different subjects in creative and fun ways. We will discuss why they feel it is important and how it can be accomplished in any season.

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**0:04:53.9 CC:** I'd like to introduce our two guests to our podcast today. And that is Erik Vreeken, who is an elementary educator with Limestone District School Board, and Paul Gifford, a lead facilitator with Teach Outside, which works with the Upper Grand District School Board. Welcome to both of you.

**0:05:11.2 Paul Gifford:** Thank you.

**0:05:11.5 Erik Vreeken:** Thank you.

**0:05:11.6 PG:** Glad to be here.

**0:05:13.9 CC:** Now, Erik and Paul, I've been teaching for 17 years, and at the end of this school year, my students do a reflection questionnaire for me to comment on how I can improve my classroom for the next year's students. And I have to tell you that I get some pretty honest comments on things like the quality of my dad jokes, and my dancing skills. But without fail, when they list the top three things that we need to keep doing, it's always the outdoor experiential activities that they highlight as being memorable and fun. And I know that isn't gonna be a surprise to the three of us. So I asked this question for our audience. And I will start with Paul. Paul, why is it so important to get our students outside? Or why do you think it's so important?

**0:06:00.5 PG:** Well, it's always been important. And of course, I think it's memorable, because your brain actually landmarks your experiences in nature, in ways that it doesn't anywhere else and the physical activity. I think right now, it's so important, probably more than ever because of the pandemic. And what will come in the shadow of the pandemic, which is a mental health crisis in school.

**0:06:29.8 PG:** And I know that the diagnosed mental illness in school age children and teens was 20% before the pandemic, it's now 40. So it's doubled. That's diagnosed. So you can imagine the undiagnosed and teachers that I work with have been seeing... They see it in their classes that these children are suffering. And one of the simplest, least expensive, most effective ways to improve mental health is to get out into nature and experience human nature in nature. And we can do that. And our school is never far from a good landscape.

**0:07:12.2 CC:** And it's that grounding effect you're talking about just getting them out and even just hugging a tree has that amazing effect on everybody that gets to experience that. Erik, can you elaborate on that?

**0:07:25.0 EV:** I agree with Paul. I think that's a really, really important thing. I even go even farther that... Generally speaking, in our society, we've lost real connection to the environment and we're talking about a time where that re-establishing that connection is really, really important because that distance that we have with the environment allows us to make decisions and carry our life in a way that we maybe don't really understand the impact of what our world is going to be. So much of the lifestyle of kids now is about being comfortable inside and their social life is so tied to devices and that kind of connection. I just see the ability to have young people outside and understanding how they fit within that natural environment is really, really, really important. I also think it's a way

to maybe break down some of the perceived risks that people have about being in the out of doors, especially as we live more and more inside, that if we can do and make connections in school, hopefully then kids realize, "Okay, you know what? It's good for me to be outside. And it's okay for me to be outside and I want to be outside. I think it's an incredibly important thing.

**0:08:52.6 PG:** Yeah, agreed. Interestingly that you mentioned that, that the kids used to play... When we grew up, we played after school pretty much every day. And one of the reasons I run this program in local landscapes near the school is that the children who live in those neighborhoods then can go back to those places after school as their parents become more comfortable with the actual risks versus the perceived risk. I totally agree with that.

**0:09:19.3 CC:** I think it's that idea of getting that bubble wrap off of our children as well and getting them outside to experience it and realize that it is as safe as Erik, you were saying as well, it's safe. Now, because of my passion in teaching science, I have a lot of fun experiments that I can do outside and ones that will align with all of the seasons. So whether it's snow, volcanoes or summer pond exploration, I use nature to highlight hands-on science and get to students to connect as we were just talking about with what they're discovering. So my next question, Erik, you can start with it. What have you discovered about teaching different subjects outside and in different seasons, is there only a narrow band of subjects that we can teach outside?

**0:10:07.2 EV:** No, I don't think so. And I think really the only limitation that we've got is A, what we're comfortable with, and B, maybe what the time is that's available. And when I say that, not everybody's always gonna be comfortable branching out and getting outside, but I think as we dabble in it, if we're not somebody that's a little bit more experienced then we develop some confidence and then we're more likely to get outside. When I say the time aspect of it, of course, is that there's always this dance about how do we manage curriculum and manage it in different ways, but if we can kinda change our lens so that we're thinking about, "What can I do to carry this outside," then it becomes more and more easy... I'm thinking about what I've done with my class in the last little bit and before we went on air, we talked about the snowfall and we're kind of moving into a poetry unit where we wanna be able to develop connections and we had a big snowfall here about a week ago, Monday and the kids walked in the door and I said, "Don't even take your stuff off," grab a pencil, grab a writing lapboard and we're going for a walk.

**0:11:26.6 EV:** And of course, right away, the door opened with questions, "where are we going, what are we doing?" And we made our way down through a series of parks at a local spot where we've got some running water and we ended up doing solo sits for about the first 20-25 minutes of the day where the kids have the opportunity to just kind of sit, gather themselves at a time of the year where it's kind of crazy, but also then to collect the thoughts and ideas that tie to this theme that we were gonna come back to and that was the idea of connecting to winter. I dropped the kids off, after a little while we picked them up and one of the kids in my class, a young man said, "So how long... So how long are we sitting for?"

**0:12:10.0 EV:** And I said 25 minutes and his words to me were like, "What, 25? It feels like we were only sitting here for five, 10 minutes." And I think that's an example where we think about what a limitation would be, but me taking the writing, planning process outside just gets them to just open their mind a little bit and also be kinda grounded with the environment around them and that could extend to all kinds of things. You know, social studies. Recently we visited a spot where there's a great national amphitheatre that overlooks the lake and we did a social studies lesson on

indigenous connections to the land and treaty rights and the local treaty. And I think things become more real in particular, in some topics like that when they're actually on the land and interacting with the space.

**0:13:07.0 CC:** That incredible connection that they can make with nature being right in front of them, whether it's poetry, social studies, science. Paul, what have you found?

**0:13:16.2 PG:** Well, I liked Erik's words real in particular. That you do connect to something that is clearly real, and it often is quite particular, it's very specific, which is a really good thing when you're trying to get to curriculum. The problem with curriculum is that what children will discover in a natural place may not be what you have planned, or even if you have planned it, not in the order that you had planned it. Or... And I get this all the time, when we did growth and changes in plants, last month, or we did rocks and minerals last... Or they're doing it next year. To which I say, "No, they're doing it now. Right now, those two." They are doing it.

**0:14:06.6 PG:** The other thing about curriculum in nature is there is an ecology to it. Obviously, science is a subject that people associate with learning outdoors, but there's an ecology to the way children discover things in nature, and one thing tends to lead to another, which leads to another. And then loops back and there's all these interconnections. And so what I try to encourage teachers to do, and I only work with teachers that teach multiple subjects, so that they'll have the amount of social study, science, math, language, whatever the combination, they're gonna have four or five subjects, they have time, and then they can be creative in allowing children to uncover the curriculum versus covering it in their linear plan.

**0:14:57.9 PG:** So, allowing it to emerge, standing back a bit. So there really isn't anything that you couldn't, with the children couldn't learn out there, and the other thing is that you combine your outdoor indoor classroom well, so teachers that are really good at this, and far better at than I am, developed a seamless connection between learning outdoors and indoors. It's more than just following it up. The two places are indispensable, so if you've got a field lab outside and you've got a more focused lab inside, using the materials and the equipment and the technology that you can have in a lab.

**0:15:38.6 PG:** You can have an art gallery or... Sorry, art studio outside. But then you might have to go to the next step inside, like your group of seven did, sketching outside, painting inside, or the ideas that emerge outside get so... Are so memorable for the children, that those debriefs, that we talked about it, a debrief, become the beginning of something that you may not even have planned. So any subject, I mean, particular combinations I like is starting with science, social studies, easily emerges through geography and just history, finding things that show that something happened here, and we weren't the first people, and what Erik was talking about.

**0:16:24.6 PG:** So if you're acknowledging that people were there before you, what happened? Where were they, what did they do, how did they live? All these questions. I don't think that there's a better place to teach inquiry, or to approach learning from an inquiry-based perspective, than nature, because it just draws, especially younger children, but all children and teenagers. It's also better for differentiated instruction because they will find their ways in entry points to the curriculum. It sounds romanticized, but I've seen it again and again, and over time, I just take less stuff with me, just trusting the landscape.

**0:17:07.0 CC:** It's an incredible extension of an educational area that we can use, and I find when you both talked about flexibility and cross-curricular, it takes it away from the silo teaching, where when we go outside, we could be talking about math, we could be talking about science, we could be doing poetry, and it's all encompassing, it's just around us. And that's real life, so it's fun to see that happen with teachers when they go outside.

**0:17:33.7 PG:** Yeah, teachers will have kids working on different things, subjects, following an outdoor excursion often, and they get comfortable with that.

**0:17:42.8 CC:** Which again, is how we're supposed to do it.

**0:17:46.1 EV:** Yeah, I like, Paul, with the thought of memorable. Because I think when we step away from what a traditional classroom would be and we move our way into an environment, an outdoor environment, you get the opportunity for many more memorable moments. And I think, when I think about my own experiences as a teacher and a student, what do I remember? I remember those memorable moments that happened actually in an unscripted way, that became teachable moments. And for me, I always think that it helps me build my community, because we have those moments, sometimes they're not always positive, but we have those moments that we can then attach to and then we can build off of, kinda later on, and then they also become this anchor that we can move forward with. And as previously mentioned, like spot solo sits, my guys, that's only the only the second time that we've done a solo sit, and they've already embraced it, because of some memorable moments that they had before.

**0:18:56.1 CC:** It's the things we take away, and Josh and I were talking about it earlier, when we think back to our elementary experience, it's those outdoor experiences that both Josh and I talked about, going outside and learning something and learning in real life, so we're gonna take a quick break here and we'll be back for more discussions around teaching the curriculum outside.

[music]

**0:19:17.9 Speaker 6:** Looking for a flexible personalized Master's degree? The professional Masters of Education offer students the Queen's experience, fully online and part-time to accommodate your busy life. Concentrations include global education, indigenous education, and educational administration. Visit [educ.queensu.ca/PME](http://educ.queensu.ca/PME), to take your career in education to the next level.

**0:19:45.4 CC:** From our conversation so far, it's obvious that we all have had success and adventure with many different subjects in the outdoors and have seen how engaged our students are when we do that. So my next question, and Erik, you can start with it. Why do you think some teachers are still hesitant with the thought of trying to teach outside?

**0:20:05.5 EV:** I think often it has to do with what a person's comfort zone is, and perhaps what their own previous experiences with education have been. I think for many people, the notion to move your classroom to the out of doors, it takes away a lot of the structure that lots of people feel most comfortable with. The walls kind of hold them in, and if you set your guidelines within a classroom, it's just a little bit easier to manage than if you go and move outside where there are that many more variables that could possibly be involved. As we previously mentioned with another question, it's those random moments that pop up that can be really enriching, but I also know that

for some people, because of maybe a little bit of lack of experience or lack of confidence, they become really, really daunting, and as a result, then they're not really sure about where to go. Staying in a classroom, it's easier to control what's gonna happen.

**0:21:18.0 EV:** If you go outside, you have to spend a little bit more time thinking about things and try to think about, "Okay, how do I manage my students? How do I manage what potentially is gonna happen?" But also then "Where do I find a spot that's going to be... That's gonna be appropriate. And it's where I'm gonna be able to find all the things that I want to find." So I think for a lot of people, the idea of going outside, the struggle is just that it moves them outside of their comfort zone, and then of course, for generally speaking, as humans, we don't wanna be moved outside of our comfort zone, even though we know that if you try something outside your comfort zone, there's a greater risk, but there's also a much greater reward.

**0:22:06.0 CC:** And I actually mentioned this to... Or I asked this question to my teacher candidates, and their first response was very similar to yours, it's they're worried about the students going wild. They see them at recess time, they see them when they're doing these different outdoor activities or the outdoors centers, and they think, well, that's what they are when they're outside, they just go wild, and we try to talk about the fact that just like any new experience, it takes practice, it takes time. You set the expectations, and then the students will eventually, as we've been talking, they'll see it as an extension of the classroom, and so the same rules apply outside as they do inside. And I think, Paul, part of your job is actually teaching teachers how to get outside so you've got some experience in this, too. What are you seeing? Why are teachers hesitant?

**0:22:57.8 PG:** Yeah, so this is one I've been thinking about for a long time, and it was originally with my work with Evergreen Brick Works in Toronto and teachers at the Toronto District School Board, so in the urban environment. And keeping track of what they were telling me about why it was that they didn't take their students outside. And then more recently in Guelph, so over the past five years, I think I've worked with probably about 50 teachers and close to 400 walking trips, and just really trying to figure it out, like what is the psychological... It is a psychological reason. What are the barriers specifically? And I have come up with them, and it's funny, it seems so obvious in retrospect, but it took a long time to figure it out. One of them is, I agree with what Erik said, it's definitely out of the comfort zone, but you touched on something when you talked about your teacher candidates going out, Chris, and they see recess and they're going, "Oh my god, what if I take them off the property, they're barely constraining themselves here." One of the issues is that landscapes and school grounds are not good landscapes for learning. They're designed for recess for the entire school, so there's actually a required amount of asphalt 'cause it's the all-season, all-weather surface, there's no required amount of grass.

**0:24:35.2 PG:** You get about an acre of asphalt, two acres of grass, very flat, scattering of trees, branches cut off below eight feet, not so much to prevent climbing, 'cause you just say "No climbing." It's for site lines. The irony of all this is, well, you can see students better from the middle of the asphalt courtyard, and when you've got 500 of them out there, that's not a class, but if you had your own class and you had one other capable supervisor with you and a good landscape that had a mixed forest and some topography and some undulating land, places to hide and treasures to find and forts to build, and all those things that have been traditional children's... Have been hallmarks of children's play.

**0:25:25.3 PG:** If you had a place like that, it's what they call... Is it Loris Malaguzzi called it "The

Third Teacher?" It's like you've got another very good teacher out there with you doing most of the work. Outdoor educators work with groups of 10, no more, and often less. And I challenge them, I say, "Okay, you go in and take 25 out on to that school ground, and tell me how it went." And they're like, "Oh, right." And as one student put to me when we came back from... So we go out for about 100 minutes in total, but we're about an hour in the local landscape. It's a conservation area near the school, and they come back and are told that they had to stay outside, because they have the recess break first, and then the nutrition break inside.

**0:26:18.0 PG:** And... She said, "Why do I have to stay outside. I've been outside for 100 minutes, I'm exhausted," and I said, "Just, you know, hang out. You know, there's no solo spots on the school grounds," and she said, "You know what, the only thing I can... The only thing there is to do out here is get into trouble," and I wrote that down, it's a grade six student. Because that is so true. I think what happens is that teachers have not experienced success in a good landscape where nature is doing a lot of the work for you, where it draws on the second teacher, which is the students themselves, good landscapes. And I learned all this working with Evergreen's learning programs, there are seven elements to a landscape that will engage children, and by doing so, make it safer because they are engaged right, they learn to move through it, they settle down, they open up, they move like foxes, right. They hide from each other.

**0:27:15.3 PG:** That's fantastic. When they hide, they're quiet, they settle low, they find things, right, and one thing leads to another, so I think it's... I think of a school ground, not all of them, but most of the typical school ground is like a psychological motor around a school, that is a barrier to the landscapes that if teachers got out to them and got some help working with them, they would say, "Oh, I can do this," and that's what we do in the program. We find better landscapes, we walk there and we allow teachers to experience success, but 25 kids, you have to have another teacher with you, you should. So that's probably the biggest problem is class size, increasingly more difficult to manage children in the school, so you can't imagine taking them out and then not having good landscapes to go, so you can't experience success where nature does a lot of your work for you. That's it.

**0:28:11.8 CC:** And Paul, you and I talked about this a little bit, and I'm gonna jump back to Erik as well. You mentioned that it takes a good three outings for teachers to start to feel comfortable about doing it on their own, I think that's what you had mentioned?

**0:28:24.0 PG:** Yeah, three to transition, five now added two more.

**0:28:27.6 CC:** Okay.

**0:28:28.2 PG:** Five 100 minutes. Yeah, well, just because when I went back around and I talked to teachers that were going out, they were just like, "Well, I was just... I was just," you know, the idea edge work, sort of working on the edge of your comfort zone, and then you expand it, I'm still in the edge, and I needed more time so that I got comfortable and confident, so now we go out five times.

**0:28:51.5 CC:** So, Erik, I jump over to you because I've had some of your teacher candidates come back to me and say... 'cause I know you're outside a lot and they say, "Oh, I wanna do what Mr. Vreeken does, I wanna get outside, I wanna do those solo sits and things like that," and I'll say, "Fantastic, you're gonna try it in your next practicum." And they'll say, "Oh no, I'm not ready for that yet." But they know the value of it. They love that they did it with you.



**0:29:18.6 EV:** Well that's always nice to hear. Thanks. I think... I think first of all, there's a couple of thoughts with that, but number one on practicum is really, really challenging because a practicum isn't necessarily you being able to create your own learning environment, rather you're having to match the learning environment that belongs to your associate teacher, and if your associate teacher is somebody who is somewhat a little bit more conservative maybe in their approach to getting kids in the outdoors, it becomes awfully hard to kinda branch out because... And I think about something that Paul said in those multiple visits, you know, I don't think it's just a teacher that has to do multiple visits to become comfortable, it's also the kids, and this year, I've had to change what my approach was and, you know, it's that whole transitioning, returning back to school at the time of COVID, what we traditionally do is we go to a local conservation area, take a city bus to get there, we walk in, it's about a 30-minute walk, and then we spent time at the conservation area and we revisit the conservation area four times during the year, different seasons, different experiences.

**0:30:33.4 EV:** This year, I didn't get to the conservation area in time, and then with a, you know, change of washroom facilities because of course that's always something, to factor, if you're away all day. I chose a different path, but the thing about going to the park that we went to is that there were a couple of students that really, really struggled with it, and they struggled with trying to find grounding, and the next day when we talked through, one of them said, "You know, it was almost... It was almost overwhelming," like, this is the first time we've had a field trip in two years, and he said, "It was just... It was, I just don't know really... Really didn't know what to do, and that's... And then I got caught doing, caught up doing things that maybe I wouldn't normally do," which was fascinating to me, because it didn't make me then think, "Okay, did I take too big a step."

**0:31:29.1 EV:** Because when I think about this process of how do you develop it, you develop it by taking baby steps, developing your confidence there, and I think... I start here, we don't even come in on the first day when the bell rings, like the bell rings, we meet in our spot and I say, "Drop your stuff, we're going," and we actually will spend the first 30, 40 minutes outside doing things, but already I'm coaching them on how we need to manage being outside, right, how are we gonna circle up so that everybody can see each other and how can we understand that that's a way of showing respect. And it's those baby steps that I think then really quickly Paul, total up to your number of five. But it's not just for the educator to develop confidence, and try it with their kids, but it's that the kids then kind of think, "Oh, okay, alright, so this is how this is gonna go. We're gonna do this now," and it's like, "Okay, I got this because we've done something similar like this before, and we're gonna get to explore." But there's certain parameters, right?

**0:32:44.2 PG:** Interesting, yeah, I agree. I develop something called Stepping Stone Landscapes. One on the school grounds, if they have something that's got enough in it, that we can experience some success and begin to transition the children into this idea of the outdoor classroom. And then one that's not too far away. That's got more elements. I've spent hours serving land around school that kind of set up literally what are stepping stones? Baby steps. And what I'm finding now Erik, it's interesting that you talk about this is that teachers are asking in advance for those. Normally, they haven't maybe thought of that, but this time they're like, "Do we have to go off the school grounds on the first trip," and I said, "Certainly not. And we won't ever go until the students are ready." So that's the other thing is if you try to go too far with your class too quickly, because they do need...

**0:33:44.8 PG:** There are out outdoor routines and rituals and structure and you need actual

infrastructure, place to sit. Landmarks, boundaries. So what I often do now, as I say, "Let's... What are your rituals in the classroom, how is your structure working for you. Let's mimic that, and let's take..." It's like an immersion. "Let's take steps". And exactly, by the time that's all finished, we get two full classes out in the landscape, but it takes that long and you're kind of desensitized teachers culturally to what they grew up with in the classroom anyway. And there is no as you... I don't think there's any mandatory training in this... In a Faculty of Education. Right? It's a choice that people take that it's an option. So of course they don't, they're not comfortable with it. But they do quickly take their indoor management skills, 'cause as I say like "If you can handle this class inside all day for 190 days, you can handle them in a good landscape where there's lots to do." But step by step.

**0:34:56.3 CC:** And so both of you have basically answered the next question, the next question was, how do you make it work? And what would be the easy first steps, and both of you have said, just baby steps. Take them out try to experience it and not expecting them to be able to go on that long hike or that long field trip without having experienced the outdoors in some way before that... That make sense?

**0:35:18.7 PG:** I would say that it depends on the teacher. I think Erik would be able to pull that off and then use the discomfort that he was able to manage on that long field trips, but for teachers not to get scared away from it. And baby steps, the thing is you gotta... I really believe you gotta find a good landscape. If you take them out to the Asheville courtyard... And that's not a baby step, that's gonna backfire unless you're... Unless you got balls and hoops, and that's a different class. You need to go where there's actual nature, natural infrastructure. And we now know from good research, what those things are to look for. So a lot of what I do with teachers is, "This is what you're looking for in a landscape, and it includes boundaries, it includes the great..." There are hazards that you can see, and so the risks are real and you can manage them, but you wanna be in a landscape where teachers really feel like, "Okay, I trust this place and I'm now trusting my students in it as they've adjusted to it." You gotta take the... I did take a group into the rock conservation area too soon, and there's cliffs in there. And nothing happened, but the teacher was really worried and I don't blame her, and that was the problem, is like I was ready for this and I knew where they were, she wasn't. So we had to go step back, right? Teachers, they can do this. But there's no... Nobody ever shows them how... Yeah.

**0:36:56.7 EV:** I also think that you... You can develop your confidence in a number of different ways, and regardless... Before we started the recording, we were talking about where each of us are, and I think in many, many cases, school boards, there's opportunities to have your kids out of site. If you're not somebody who's ready to carry the load initially as far as organizing everything, there's lots of opportunities for you to go to go to a place or travel to a spot, where there are people that can kinda help with the management and the organization, or even a little bit of the curriculum development. In our board, we fortunately have an outdoor centre called Gould Lake. And not every class can go, there's lots of people would like to go. But for people that maybe have never really had the experience, they have trained people that can help guide your class and create that framework, and I think as you go to places like that.

**0:37:57.5 EV:** I think in many cases, people will go and think, "Okay, this is great, I think I can maybe try this, or this is something that I could possibly try on my own." And that's how then they kind of widen what their comfort level is. I think about it Paul, one of the things that you said about that idea of finding the appropriate spot on the part that I always find is a kind of a delicate dance. I wanna travel and I wanna be around our school, but I also know I don't want the kids to be so

comfortable in that area. That it's no longer we're there for, to learn and explore together. Now it's like, "Okay, I'm on my own and I'm doing whatever I wanna do."

**0:38:41.6 EV:** And I think if you find spots that are wild enough, and you give the parameters, then it's great. I mentioned that creek earlier on. Well, I know that there are kids that I teach that are in that creek, they tell me about being in that creek, they tell me about all the cool things they find in that creek. Also, some of the things that aren't great about that creek. So I knew that when we went there, that water, running water, is a huge, huge grounding thing, and when I wanted them to have that experience about connecting with the out of doors, I wanted them to be able to hear the water, but I knew, "Okay, let's set the parameters." I started by saying, "Okay, I know that you guys sometimes are in this spot, and I know that you get to explore sometimes. In this case, we're gonna explore, but we're gonna explore this way."

**0:39:32.0 EV:** And that's that confidence and developing it. And then from there then the idea is that we try and branch out and then maybe end up in different spots. Some of the toughest kids that I've worked with, when they've been in the out of doors with me and something happens, it's really remarkable to see them become kids again. And I think of a time that I was out and it was evening and we were out, and all of a sudden, a coyote howled. I had some of the biggest, toughest kids in my class, basically attached to my hip, because they've never had that experience before. And it was like, "Whoa, what's that?" And "I can't see that." And that's that idea of pushing the boundary so that they learn and develop a little bit of confidence, but it's also then you realize that these are just kids and in many cases, they haven't had those experiences to the outside.

**0:40:25.4 PG:** Yeah, it's interesting 'cause I've worked with a lot... I work in specifically in schools, and they get the funding because they have tough kids. And what I have found pretty consistently is that it's like we've given them permission to play. It's almost like they had skipped parts... Well, I think they have skipped parts of their childhood, certainly now, having spent the last two years behind screens. It's almost like they skip that joyful wondrous play, which we know it needs to happen between... It's usually between let's say, age of six and 12, where there's some autonomy, that sense of guiding your own adventure in a space that is... It's got everything that you need for that. And I think children have skipped that, and I think the tough kids in particular miss that, and if we can get them into good places and allow them that playfulness, they almost go back a couple of years and start acting younger. They do. I mean, that's kind of what's happening. And this kind of work has always helped those kids, because they just have so little success in the classroom that they've given up that they ever will have that. You know what that's like.

**0:41:44.4 CC:** So I'm gonna jump right into the next question because we're sort of flowing that way, it's wonderful. So who do you think benefits the most from getting students outside and using the outdoors to help teach the curriculum? Erik, let's go with you first.

**0:42:01.0 EV:** I can just say everyone. I think about all the positives, I think about the opportunities for kids to learn, I have this image in my mind about a class that I had a number of years ago, and having a young man, and we were at a local conservation area in the spring, near a wetland, and the birds were just kind of filling the wetland, and there were all kinds of red-winged blackbirds that were doing the take-off from the top of a cattail, or a grab a bug, and then the dive down. And they were doing solo sits and for some of them, it was really hard because... To sit, because so many of them are... Just wanna move, and I looked over at this one lad and a Canada goose came flying in and passed probably six feet over top of his head, and you could hear the wings beating, and it was

like the goose was gonna land on top of him, and his eyes got huge and he froze, and then the goose went by, and then when I talked to me, he was like, "Did you see that? That was the most incredible thing I've never..." And just basically exploded in his enthusiasm. So I think about kids that way, but I also think for teachers, it offers a whole other way for you to see your children.

**0:43:28.1 EV:** To see your kids. And Paul said some of the toughest kids struggle in a classroom, and it's true. But that's also because of the structures that we've got in place in class. I've had some of my arguably toughest kids that we're outside and then they shine and they get to be who they are, and that then makes my life better. And it kind of frees me up. Because now that we have a common positive thing that we can just keep building on. So, I hate to say it, but it's everybody that's involved. It's a huge, huge benefit.

**0:44:08.9 CC:** Yeah. That selling feature.

**0:44:10.6 PG:** Yeah, well, I agree with all of that wholeheartedly. For me, you see it quickly with the students. Now I'm working with junior kindergarten all the way to grade six, a lot of grade two, three classes, you see it very quickly, the benefits. They're lighting up, they're opening up, it's mindfulness, it's all the stuff that they're not doing when they're stuck inside or when they move from one screen to another screen. So this is the antidote. I never have children say to me, "I'd rather be..." I will ask them "Would you rather be sitting home playing Minecraft?" No, definitely not. Never, not once, and they never miss it. And they wanna go back. In time, the teachers.

**0:45:06.1 PG:** They say to me at the very end, usually, it was good for my mental health too. Partly because I got to see children in an environment that empowered them, and I'd never seen it before from this child and this child and this child, what Erik was saying. And probably because I need this. I forget I'm in that... Teachers, it's an isolating job, you're on your own in the classroom, that's the way it's set up, one teacher, 25 kids. And we think of a school as just being hustle and bustle and so social, well, it is with the children, but the teachers, it's emotionally exhausting, meetings are something they just wanna... Because they're exhausted by the time they get to them. So we don't often get to take care of ourselves, and I'm concerned about teacher mental health right now. And so I've magnified that part of my program to allow them to just enjoy the bird song, enjoy the light reading, see that their class is safe, just that. Then they're ready for their next class, so are the children.

**0:46:24.2 PG:** The other one I would add is the parents. I often hear from parents of those kids that struggle in the class, just saying, "Thank you so much. He's actually getting up in the morning, excited, 'cause he knows he's going outside today." And the parents benefit 'cause the kids sleep better, they have more of an appetite and they start playing outside at home. So everybody does, I certainly do doing the work, you get to the point where you can't not do it, you have to go... [chuckle] Right Erik? You gotta go outside or you go bonkers.

**0:46:54.8 CC:** I think, and touching on that, Paul too, is that for me as well, the teacher aspect of it, when I've got it planned into my week and I know that this day I'm going outside, it's the same thing, I get up bright and bushy-tailed and I'm excited about what we're gonna be doing that day. And it's nice to have that feeling of excitement going into a teaching day. The outdoors just does that for so many people, and you guys have highlighted that. So I can't thank you both enough for sharing your thoughts and expertise with us. We know as teachers, we need to push ourselves to find new ways to make education engaging and meaningful, and getting our students outdoors, like

we've been talking about, is one of those important ways to accomplish that. So I'm gonna ask you both, and we have to do this in two sentences, which is gonna be difficult for you guys, one final tip from both of you, what advice would you give teachers wanting to try and incorporate outdoor learning experiences into their practice, especially when we're going into the winter months? Just two sentences. Paul, can you do that in two sentences?

**0:48:01.3 PG:** I'll try. I would say get some help with... Get another, if not another teacher, a volunteer who will help you. Don't do this alone, or go to an outdoor center that offers a program and a landscape and all that stuff that's just expensive, but go to it in a way that you're saying, "I'm going to look at what they're doing and seeing if I can't do that in my home school." So get some help, don't do it alone, particularly when you begin.

**0:48:35.9 CC:** Awesome. Erik?

**0:48:38.8 EV:** Take baby steps, get outside, get outside in the area that you're comfortable with, do some unstructured things, then move to the next degree of comfort, a local park, and then slowly just keep pushing the boundaries. And the kids will enjoy it and then will follow along enthusiastically.

**0:49:03.0 CC:** I absolutely love being able to talk to teachers, educators, who are passionate about what they do, because it's just contagious. And I hope with the podcast listeners will be able to do those things and just for one even instant, be able to get outside and experience that aha moment, both as a teacher and from the student's side of it. Thank you so much, gentlemen, I can guarantee you I'm gonna convince you to come back on another podcast because we aren't done this conversation. So thank you to both of you.

**0:49:35.3 PG:** You're welcome.

**0:49:36.8 EV:** You're welcome.

[music]

**0:49:38.1 CC:** That does it for another episode of Popular Podagogy. Again, thank you to our two amazing guests, Paul Gifford and Erik Vreeken, and I'm pretty sure I'm gonna be convincing them to come back again some time to talk more about this amazing topic. Also a big thank you to Trevor Strong, who composed and sang our new theme song. It definitely has that arrogant warm flashback sound to it, and I can never get tired of that band. Josh, where can our listeners subscribe to make sure they don't miss any of our popular Podagogy podcasts?

**0:50:06.7 JV:** Yeah, good question, Chris. If you like what you hear, please be sure to subscribe to us on Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Spotify, the CFRC website, the Faculty of Education website, and honestly, pretty much anywhere you get your podcast.

**0:50:22.1 CC:** Now, before we go, I'm gonna put Josh, our amazing and generous producer on this pod. Josh, I am all about Queen's swag, and I'd love to give some away to our podcast listeners. So how can we make that happen?

**0:50:36.5 JV:** Well, what about we give something away to the first 10 listeners that email me and

suggest a topic discussion for one of the future Popular Podagogy podcast? They could email me at [joshua.vine@queensu.ca](mailto:joshua.vine@queensu.ca) with a suggested topic, and we'll pick the first 10 listeners for the giveaway.

**0:50:54.7 CC:** I knew you'd come through with something for that, that would be really exciting. And I look forward to reading some of our listeners suggestions for our future topics as well. Well, that is it. From myself Chris Carlton, our producer Josh Vine and the rest of the amazing podcast team, stay healthy, stay safe and stay connected, and we'll see you next time for another episode of Popular Podagogy.

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