

RAIN OR SHINE:



EXPLORING THE BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION



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BY CAROLYN GRUSKE

Blue skies, green grass, and fresh air don't usually come to mind when describing the features of a typical classroom, but that's exactly what outdoor education offers—even if snow-covered fields sometimes substitute for lush lawns.

"We live in Winnipeg, and it's really, really cold.... Our school division has policies that say that any temperature colder than -28 Celsius and we are not allowed to be outside," says Shannon Siemens, a Grade 1/2 teacher at Brooklands School, but still, she found a way to make outdoor education work.

EASE INTO IT

Siemens, who is also a certified trail guide, and her colleague Mara Le Clair, a Grade 1/2 teacher and a trained play therapist, began taking their students outdoors and teaching lessons outside ten years ago. Now,

the entire K-5 school participates in what they call “outdoor school” for at least six weeks, starting around mid-May and stretching until the end of the school year. To prepare for this, Siemens and Le Clair first gradually introduce walks and shorter outings into the curriculum during the fall, then they spend about two weeks outside with their class in the winter, before transitioning to six straight weeks outdoors in the spring.

Just like the students, teachers have to be gradually eased into doing their schooling outside too. It takes time to adapt pedagogies and curriculums to teaching outdoors, just as it takes time to understand what benefits the outdoors offers. That is something Le Clair experienced when she and Siemens first began moving their classes outside.

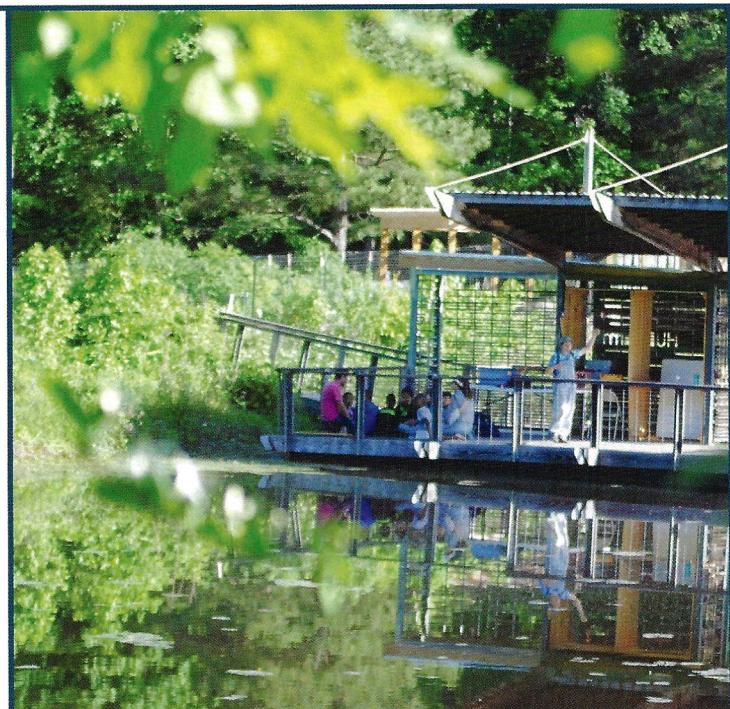
“We started [with] Walking Wednesdays. There’s a whole bunch of things near our school that we discovered as we decided to go outside,” says Le Clair. “Shannon and I would drive around and figure out where we could walk to with the students and what would be a neat experience for them. You can’t just take a classroom outside and say, ‘We’re walking for forty minutes.’”

Le Clair and Siemens decided to embark on their outdoor education journey after attending the Manitoba Nature Summit. They learned about a two-week challenge for teachers, with the goal of getting students outside all day, rain or shine, for two weeks.

Spurred on by the concept, they convinced two other teachers to also hold their classes outdoors. “When the two-week challenge was over, we had to come back inside. That was the worst,” says Siemens, laughing, but that’s how she knew their experiment was a success.

Learning curves aside, Le Clair and Siemens both believe the benefits of being outside outweigh the challenges. Overall, they say the students exhibit fewer behavioural issues, as they have more freedom to move around; that they are more invested in learning, as they have more autonomy to make decisions about how they engage with the lessons; that their attendance improves; and that they build resiliency, having learned that they can survive experiences such as unpleasant weather conditions.

“We’re teaching the children by being outside on a rainy day that this too shall pass, that the rain will not be there forever,



we will not be wet and cold forever,” says Siemens. “This is a beautiful metaphor for how they will grow and develop that sense of understanding that any moment they’re in also can pass and that, literally, the sun will shine again.”

RESILIENCY AND INCLUSIVITY

Stephen Mullaney is another educator who has found that teaching and learning outdoors instills a sense of resiliency in students. Serving as the outdoor adventure and education coach at Merrick-Moore Elementary—a K-5 school located in North Carolina’s Durham Public Schools District—part of Mullaney’s role is to help other teachers find ways to conduct their lessons outside. He models lessons, assists in adapting lessons for the outdoors, and develops ideas suitable for “Wilderness Wednesdays,” when students engage in hands-on learning and participate in programs that benefit the community and the environment.

A certified wilderness first responder, Mullaney is also involved in organizing bigger and more adventurous learning opportunities at the school, including swimming, bike safety, canoeing, kayaking, camping, and mountain climbing, for all of the students.

Mullaney describes his school as one that is historically “low performing.” However, building up Merrick-Moore’s

outdoor education opportunities has improved the school's reputation and student morale.

But as much as Mullaney loves being outside and can see the benefits outdoor education offers, he knows not everybody feels that way.

"I don't expect every student to be miraculously changed by the outdoors.... And I even tell them that," Mullaney says. "What it does, though, is gives them a shared experience. And especially for students who find that being outdoors is hard, no one can ever take that away from them. If they... have these difficult experiences in the face of obstacles, they know they have that mental [fortitude] within themselves to understand that they've overcome really difficult things before in the outdoors, and that they can apply that in other situations."

This seems to be especially true of students who have different physical or mental abilities, says Mullaney, explaining that the teachers make alterations to the activities as needed to ensure inclusivity. "Those students rise to the top.... They shine in a totally different light than anybody's ever seen them."



Seeing students become stronger and more resilient is one of Mullaney's primary goals. He believes that academic learning goes hand-in-hand with building social, emotional, and leadership skills, and that those develop better outside of the four walls of the classroom; this belief came about, in large part, due to his own experiences as a student who didn't thrive in a traditional educational environment.

RECONNECTING WITH THE NATURAL WORLD

Those observations about the types of benefits students obtain from being outside are very familiar to Gillian Judson. A former high school teacher who taught social studies and French as a second language, Judson is now an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University in the Faculty of Education, where she specializes in education leadership. She also runs the website imaginED, which provides teachers information and resources about imagination-focused teaching and education.

Judson began researching what is required to encourage students to develop ecological understanding, experience a connection to the environment, and acquire a desire to care for the Earth. It also led her to learning from Indigenous colleagues who believe and teach that a connection with the natural world is "at the heart of being human" and as such contributes to a person's inherent physical, spiritual, and emotional wellness.

"In that research, I realized that some of the ways we're teaching are not conducive to cultivating a sense of care, concern, and emotional connection with the natural world," Judson says. "My doctoral research led me to think about ways of teaching and learning that are conducive to supporting that. I'm interested in outdoor learning, but not just any outdoor learning. I'm interested in the role of imagination, and emotional connection in the natural world."

According to Judson, while there are still benefits to taking students outside and having them sit through their regular lessons, there are better ways to take advantage of the open spaces.

"I do not think all outdoor learning experiences are created equal. For example, I don't think that we have as big an impact on children's learning and development when it comes to connecting with the natural world if we just take

a worksheet outside and they sit and do the same practice [questions]. We need a different pedagogy when we're outside if we want to foreground emotional connection."

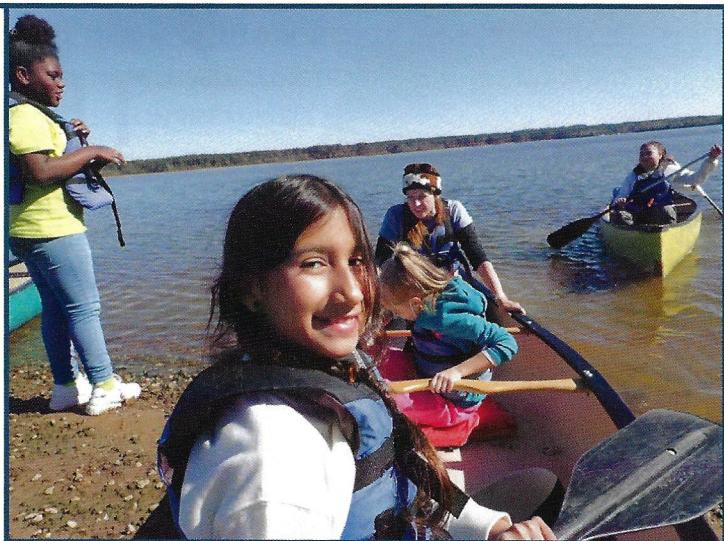
Judson suggests that teachers who are new to teaching outside start with what she calls a walking curriculum: exploring the schoolyard or playground with the goal of better familiarizing students with the natural world. Ideally, this would be done in support of the regular classroom lessons. For a French teacher, for example, a walking curriculum might be built around vocabulary that describes what the students see (such as trees and plants) or ways that the children move as they explore the grounds (running, walking, jumping). For a teacher who is introducing a unit on animals to a class, students can look for places where a small prey animal like a mouse could live and then try to spot where a larger predator might hide.

But no matter what the subject or grade, Judson says "my advice would be first get outside."

OUTDOOR EDUCATION IS FOR EVERYONE

Just getting outside is the approach that Le Clair and Siemens took at the beginning and it's the advice Mullaney offers any teacher who is contemplating adding an outdoor element to their teaching. Ideas about how to take advantage of the natural environment will come with exposure and time, and with watching what catches the students' interest.

"They're discovering and playing, and then their inquiry leads to what happens next. It requires a lot of observation,"



says Le Clair. "You don't really plan for a big chunk of time all at once. You see what the kids are doing, what they're interested in, and then you evolve your plan."

Mullaney, Le Clair, and Siemens also insist that outdoor education is for every school, regardless of socio-economic backgrounds. Mullaney says his school pursues grants and strikes deals with local wilderness outfitters, and that even if a student can't afford to take part in a hiking or climbing trip, the school will find a way to ensure their participation. Siemens and Le Clair recall starting out using dollar store ponchos and garbage bags to keep the rain off their students, but say that over time their school has built up a stockpile of outdoor clothing and gear that students can use if needed.

And as much as it can be challenging for teachers to add yet another thing to their already overloaded list of responsibilities—especially something as daunting as outdoor education—there is a personal benefit to be derived from doing so.

"Something that I didn't realize was how beneficial [being outside] was going to be for me as well," says Le Clair. "It really does affect my mood and my energy level and my happiness metre."



CAROLYN GRUSKE is an award-winning reporter and magazine editor. She often writes about the intersection of business, technology, and the law, but she also has a deep interest in educational topics.

PHOTOS BY STEPHEN MULLANEY