

# Teaching Off Trail

My Classroom's Nature  
Transformation  
through Play



Peter  
Dargatz



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To Embry, Oakley,  
and Arden

My favorite tyke hikers  
who make every day a  
playful adventure

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# Foreword

If you're looking for a traditional foreword, you've come to the wrong place. This book is all about teaching off trail and playing with a purpose. With that, welcome to my game—I mean, book.

[illegible]

Good evening everyone! Welcome to *Which Education Is Best?* Wow, what a treat awaits you tonight: our championship finale and the answer to the question we've all been waiting for—Which education is best?

For centuries, philosophers, scientists, teachers, researchers, and even politicians have discussed and debated the best model for educating our youth, engendering progress and causing problems along the way. The time for discussion is over. It's time for action.

Tonight our two remaining teams will finally answer that age-old question. Say it with me!

Which education is best?

Let's meet our championship teams!

Dr. Rachel Larimore and Megan Gessler of Team Nature-Based have dominated their competition up to this point, dismantling Team Direct Instruction and squeaking out a victory over Team Experiential Learning on their way to the finals. Rachel and Megan, please introduce yourselves to those at home.

**Rachel:** I'm originally a farm kid from central Illinois, now living in Michigan. I'm a scholar, author, speaker, and consultant focused on nature-based early childhood education with my business, Samara Early Learning. Prior to this, I served for ten years as the founding director of a nature-based preschool, and before that I was a nonformal environmental educator for about twelve years.

**Megan:** Hello, fellow passionate educators! Much like Rachel, I too come from Illinois farmland. I spent much of my childhood summers camping around the country with my family and developing a love of nature. After having children of my own, I decided that our amazing family experiences with camping, scouting, and 4-H didn't go far enough in providing space for children to develop a kinship with nature, so I followed my heart and earned my master's in education at Antioch University New England, along with my Nature-Based Early Childhood Education Certificate. I have ten years of experience founding, directing, and teaching in nature-based preschools, and I am the founder of the Northern Illinois Nature Preschool Association. With our combined experience, Rachel and I make a formidable team!

**Peter:** Thanks Team Nature-Based! Let's meet your competition: Team Play-Based!

Fresh off the release of their amazing book, *The Playful Classroom*, Jed Dearybury ("DairyBerry") and Dr. Julie P. Jones are riding high after conquering Team Lecture and defeating Team Independent Study in overtime. Welcome back Julie and Jed! Tell us a little about yourselves.

**Julie:** Hey, y'all! While my favorite skill set is capturing literary criminals with a cup of hot tea beside me, my public role is equipping and empowering future teachers. I am director of student teaching and elementary education at Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and mommy to two middle-school-aged girls who tolerate my playful, imaginative spirit and keep me on my toes.

**Jed:** Hey, fabulous people reading this book! For almost two decades, I have been educating everyone from elementary to college kids (and their sometimes-boring professors) about the power of play for *all* ages. Our team is no doubt the best in this educational game show. My sparkle along with Julie's imaginative spirit makes for a great duo!

**Peter:** All right, teams. It's time to play *Which Education Is Best?* Round One is called *Buzz or Bust*. In this round, each contestant will be given a current educational buzzword and thirty seconds to explain how their type of education utilizes that word. Once both teams have finished their explanations, their opponents can choose to "bust" their buzzword. Let's get started!

Nature-Based, you're up first. Rachel, your buzzword is *informal assessment*. Your thirty seconds start now!

**Rachel:** Well, *informal assessment* is the ongoing observation of children to identify how they're developing physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally. This type of assessment isn't a formal, sit-down test that every other child in the county, state, or country is taking. Instead, children are observed as they go about their daily lives of play. Rather than creating an artificial situation to "test" their knowledge or skills, we use authentic assessment to observe how they move their bodies, use language, write words, and so forth. In other words, we just pay attention! Now, I will say, I don't love the term *informal* because it makes the assessment process sound loosey-goosey or willy-nilly. Ongoing, authentic assessment is intentional — BZZZZZ!

**Peter:** And time! Play-Based, get ready! Julie, your buzzword is *social-emotional learning*. Your thirty seconds start now!

**Julie:** Oh, yes! When most people hear *social-emotional learning*, they think of weekly guidance lessons. Sadly, many educators still have a separatist view on this concept. But in the new integrated paradigm, cognition, emotions, and movement are not considered separate entities. We don't keep them in the tidy drawers of a brain cabinet. These aspects of ourselves are integrated, like a bowl of happy spaghetti, and that integration is beautiful! Our cognitive experiences become hardwired to our emotions and strengthened when movement is also present. Our brain remembers each experience through the emotions tied to it. Is it playful? We sure hope so! Social emotional learning *is* the learning.

**Peter:** And time! Back to Team Nature-Based and Megan. Your buzzword is *building empathy*. Your thirty seconds start now!

**Megan:** Sorry, I'm busy eating my bowl of happy spaghetti. Yum! What better way to explore empathy than in nature, where so many provocations abound! Children can observe similarities and differences between plants, learn how to care for animals by filling bird feeders or moving worms from the sidewalk to the soil, explore adaptation by observing how birds flock together for protection, notice the effects of predator-prey relationships, or witness the life cycle by examining remains—all of these experiences with other-than-human life forms lead to a more holistic understanding and feeling of kinship with all of nature, including humans. And now, I'm off to find the garlic bread—

**Peter:** And time! Here comes our final buzzword for round one; Jed, your word is *inclusion*. Your thirty seconds start now.

**Jed:** Playful learning and teaching absolutely level the field to make the classroom more inclusive. Playing destroys the rigid boxes that life often puts us into. Who needs to think outside the box, anyway? Just destroy it altogether. The confining walls of the boxes we live in often separate us into isolation. Playing literally tears down those barriers and brings us all together. Students, young and old alike, need time, space, and opportunity to experience those freeing moments that play provides. Go for it, y'all! You will be happier than a mule in a pickle patch! BZZZZZ!

**Peter:** What a whirlwind of a first round. But the game isn't over yet. It's time for round two—busting time! In this round, teams switch words and aim to bust the other team's reasoning to show why their method fits the needs of that buzzword even better.

Okay, Team Nature-Based, let's get busting! Rachel, please bust *social-emotional learning*.

**Rachel:** Oh, social-emotional learning is foundational to everything! Our internal emotions and social interactions with others are deeply connected to our development in other domains. Things like awe, wonder, curiosity, motivation, empathy, compassion, creativity, and persistence support children's physical and cognitive development. These skills, and so many more, are vital to children's livelihoods and growth. Play in the natural world, which means being part of something bigger than themselves, supports the development of these important skills.



**Peter:** Great busting! Play-Based, you're up! Julie, please bust *building empathy*.

**Julie:** Empathy is personal. It happens over time as we continually struggle with our place in the world. It cannot and should not ever be on a checklist. As educators, we have the privilege of providing our students with experiences like mirrors and windows that allow them to see both themselves and others. When we invite playful experiences into our classroom, we learn as part of a community.

We experience the world around us through both our own and others' lenses. Daily. With joy.

**Peter:** Busted! Let's switch it up! Jed, keep busting! Your word is *informal assessment*.

**Jed:** This one is a piece of cake! Watching students engage in playful learning is hands-down the best way to informally assess students. Are they communicating politely? Are they collaborating to achieve their goals? Are they thinking critically to solve problems? Are their creative juices showcasing their learning in unique ways? All these questions and more can be answered by observing students while they play. Trust me, just watch them and you'll be prouder than a possum on a pancake!

**Peter:** Well said, Jed! Time to wrap up round two with our final bust. Megan, your word is *inclusion*.

**Megan:** Our natural world exemplifies the harmony born from a diverse and inclusive ecosystem. All elements of nature—plants, animals, climate—exist in equilibrium, mutually benefiting each other. The flower needs the bee and the bee needs the flower, yet each bee and flower is unique and valuable. Allowing children to see how interconnected nature is—how each individual part plays a vital role in the whole—provides an elegant yet pragmatic springboard for embracing and celebrating inclusion and diversity. Even that pancake-eating possum plays an important part in the ecosystem!

**Peter:** Beautiful busting everyone! What an even match so far! But I would expect nothing less in the finals of *Which Education Is Best?* It's time to determine a winner in round three—*Best or Bust!* In this final round, after hearing everything your opponent had to say, it's time to tell us why your education is *best* and the other team's education is a *bust*. Team Play-Based, you're up first!

**Jed:** No way, no how, not gonna do it. These two types of learning go together like butter and biscuits. You can't bust them up! Students need both play *and* nature. This educator just loves a walk "artside." Create, imagine, and play with sticks and stones

and flowers and leaves. Just watch the amazingness that happens when you do. You will smile bigger than a rat in rubbish!

**Julie:** Play is far more than twenty minutes of recess. Each of us has a unique play personality, and we embrace what brings us joy. For students to love learning, educators must welcome play, not just as a behavior but as a mindset. To truly empower our students, we must provide them with experiences they may never have attempted in order to find what might bring them joy, and that might be art, hiking in the woods, crafting a list of jokes or riddles, or every one of those! When we approach education with a playful mindset, we can get fired up by all kinds of experiences.

Interesting perspective, Team Play-Based. I wonder what your thoughts are, Team Nature-Based.

**Rachel:** I think Jed's spot on, though maybe the butter has melted into his biscuit. What do I mean? For me, nature-based learning *is* play-based—they're inseparable. The only distinction from more mainstream approaches is that in nature-based learning the natural world is a partner in play, contributing objects, space, inspiration, and more. Play-based learning is *great* and play in and with nature is *even better!* All this play and learning with the natural world makes for happy, healthy, curious children. And isn't that the goal of education?

**Megan:** Clearly, weaving together nature- and play-based philosophies provides the best of both worlds. By allowing children to play in and with their environment, we provide the space for developing kinship with one another and with the natural world while developing critical skills such as curiosity, communication, collaboration, problem solving, resiliency, and a love of learning that can carry them throughout life. The ultimate goal of education should be to develop *life* skills, not grade-level skills.

**Peter:** What an unexpected and inspiring finish! After seeing these educational models and methodologies battle it out, this well-fought intellectual contest has yielded a winner. Drum roll, please.

..



And the winner of *Which Education Is Best?* is . . . *both!*

Congratulations, Team Nature-Based and Team Play-Based!

It appears that a nature-based and play-based education encompasses the essential elements of an emergent and whole-child approach to learning. But does such an educational experience even exist?

# Acknowledgments



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And last but certainly not least, to my past, present, and future students (my kids!) without whom none of this is possible, thanks for allowing me to be your teacher. Thank you for helping me realize the importance of teaching off trail. And most importantly, thank you for being you!

# Introduction

When you hike, the trail won't always be straight and clear. Rocks, roots, and other hazards can trip you up. There are peaks and valleys, some steeper than others. There are curves and switch-backs. And regardless of how well a trail is maintained or what scenery it reveals, the desire to go off trail and explore still calls. Do you stick to the path cleared for you, or do you go off trail and blaze your own journey?

Quite a decision to make.

Going off trail is memorable and meaningful, but it is also controversial. Do the risks of going off trail outweigh the benefits? Are there hazards? Is the area in question ecologically vulnerable? Will your actions leave lasting ecological impacts on the land? When you explore a space outside your own backyard, you must respect the rules of that place. However, in places where it's not prohibited, experiencing nature off

trail allows sensory delights that bring outdoor exploration to the next level. Children love picking flowers, treasure trailblazing, and enjoy experimenting with a branch's flexibility. With some common sense and some basic education about respect for the environment, going off trail is an excellent element of responsible outdoor exploration.

When you are teaching, the school year doesn't necessarily follow a straight and clear path. Assessments, meetings, and various responsibilities can interfere with instruction. There are ups and downs, with some years more tumultuous than others, and there are do-overs and setbacks, some more frustrating than others. And regardless of how well you planned or how engaging you think the curriculum is, you will still feel the desire to go off script and try something new. Do you stick verbatim to lesson plans and provided curricular resources, or do you teach off trail and adapt your instruction accordingly?

Again, quite a decision to make.

Similarly, teaching off trail is memorable and meaningful, but it is also controversial. Do the risks of teaching off trail outweigh the benefits? Are there hazards? Are the children in question educationally vulnerable? Will the actions and activities associated with going off trail leave positive and lasting impacts on their learning? When teaching in any school, the expectations of that administration and district should be respected. However, when you can, teaching in a more personalized and passionate manner allows for novel educational experiences that take student learning and professional development to another level. Children love playing games, treasure creative expression, and enjoy experimenting with new and unfamiliar items. With some common sense and basic education about student engagement, motivation, and personalization, teaching off trail is an excellent pathway to effective and efficient child development and education.

This is the decision I made. I wrote this book to share the process, pitfalls, and products of that decision. With play and passion, I teach off trail. I hope after reading this book, you'll do the same.

# Education Evolution

1



Markers and glue sticks are strewn across the floor. A cardboard box has been transformed into a jetpack, paper towel-roll rocket boosters and all. Pieces of felt and clippings from old magazines have been collected and attached to various projects, each serving their own very important purpose. Minutes before, a melodious mixture of celebratory applause and hoots and hollers echoed throughout the room as the Math Championship belt changed hands. A couple of incomplete puzzles and loose pieces cover the counter. A drying rack overflows with coffee-filter turkeys, bingo-dauber trees, and marker-cap pattern trains. A quick scan around the rest of the room shows a swimming pool of stuffed animals, a bookshelf of nature artifacts, a large storage tub of baseball cards, and a menagerie of dress-up clothes and housekeeping items. Anything and



everything you can imagine can be found throughout this classroom—except students.

Where are they?

A quick look out the window, and the mystery is solved. A few students scale a fallen tree while a few more make adjustments to their mouse houses. Still others draw in the dirt with sticks. A pair near the rock pile add bark pieces and dried leaves to their stew. A couple more are hanging out at their sit spots, observing and tallying birds in their nature notebooks. A trio of boys turn their constructed shelter into a pirate ship. Even with their treasure chest bursting with acorns and seedpods, their hunt for more loot never ends.

But it wasn't always like this.

## On the Wrong Path

Rewind a few years and you would have seen a more traditional twenty-first-century kindergarten classroom. Bright colors illuminated every wall and chairs neatly surrounded rectangular tables covered with organized and inventoried color-coded storage bins. Tablets, laptops, and other state-of-the-art technology were loaded with the latest reading and math apps, charged and ready for action. The classroom library was organized by reading levels. The spotlight pocket chart clearly showed the behavior infractions observed that day. Everything and everyone had their place. And they were expected to keep it that way.

Morning equaled literacy, period. A structured reading lesson gave way to specific word work with a big book or poem. Writing time provided a guided lesson followed by some silent work time and possibly some sharing time. Phonics drilled and killed letter sound associations, rhyming, and phonemic awareness. Sight words were introduced, practiced, searched for, practiced again, used in a sight word game or activity, and practiced again. Eventually they became part of a weekly assessment along with words utilizing the sound of the week. During stations time, teacher-selected worksheets and phonics games were assigned to teacher-selected groups. While those groups worked on their

task, small guided reading or prereading skill groups were pulled for more intense instruction. Anytime during the morning, students who didn't reach a predetermined data point in a certain skill left the room for more direct instruction and practice with a paraprofessional.

After station time, it was time for recess and lunch. Of course, if anyone didn't complete their work, they could just take the first five to ten minutes of their recess (or longer if needed) to finish up. No big deal.

Following recess and lunch, the march back to the classroom led into math time. After a brief look at the calendar, various math topics, including numeral identification, numeral formation, patterns, measurement, number sentences, counting strategies, and addition and subtraction, were taught and practiced using an interactive whiteboard. After completing the lesson, the students broke into predetermined groups to review. Some stayed at the interactive whiteboard for their activity. Others practiced math facts using flash cards. A few other groups used worksheets to dig deeper into the skill of the week or played a math board game. Once the math groups concluded, students gathered around the whiteboard again to copy down numbers and work toward mastery of numeral formation and/or addition and subtraction.

After math, the class traveled to specials, usually two per day: music, art, technology, guidance, or fitness. This period was crucial planning time for the teacher, who utilized every available second to review the literacy and math worksheets collected that day and to copy new ones for the next day. After the class returned from specials and scarfed down a snack, intervention block arrived. If students didn't complete their daily work, needed extra support because they didn't complete it correctly, or lagged in some skill according to collected data, they had some time to finish their work and possibly even work with the teacher.

Then, if time remained, the class might work on science or social studies, but usually in a condensed format. Lots of experiments require setting up and preparing ahead of time, so they were usually skipped, though the teacher might talk about them and see if students could figure out the lesson's objective. If the







experiment was completed, rarely did the class discuss the results or troubleshoot anything that happened during the process. There just wasn't time.

At the end of the day each student completed their end-of-the-day jobs, filled out their stoplight charts, reviewed the standards and academic objectives of the day, and maybe even played a little during what was called "choice time." Of course, if work was incomplete, choice time wasn't an option. And if your name wasn't

on the green portion of the stoplight chart (clearly visible to everyone at the front of the room), choice time wasn't an option. And if the class needed more time to practice sight words, review math facts, practice lowercase letter formation, preview the next day's lesson, review another skill, or discuss the upcoming assessment, choice time wasn't an option.

But who needed choice time, anyway? It was usually loud, messy, disorganized, and full of bickering and disagreements. On particularly challenging days, the class

prepared for dismissal by sitting quietly to think about the mistakes they'd made and brainstorm how they would fix them.

Day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year, this pattern continued. The students never figured out how to fix it. It took some time, but eventually the teacher did. Well, actually, to be quite honest, he had help.



## Rock Bottom

A few more days, and another year of kindergarten would be in the books. What a year of achievement it had been. Amazing assessment data, remarkable running records, and reading levels above and beyond district expectations. Academic success all around. Definitely worth celebrating!

One particular student's success stood out. Having seen her ability and potential, her teacher had individualized much of her work in reading, writing, and math throughout the year, and by the end of the year, all that pushing and prodding paid off. She read at a third-grade level. Her exemplary writing samples included lyrical poetry, thorough nonfiction research, and unbelievably detailed personal narratives. She multiplied independently and displayed extreme articulation in her math reasoning. Of course, her teacher beamed with pride. However, with her drive and enthusiasm for academic success, she would have thrived with or without teacher support. She had scaled an impressive educational mountain with a spectacular view of phenomenal percentiles, delightful data, and superb scores. However, as the end of the school year drew near, she came tumbling down the mountain. And she took the teacher with her.

Anyone who has taught kindergarten in late May and June knows this time of year is a game of survival to avoid bloodshed and maintain sanity. With curricular requirements completed and just a handful of days remaining in the school year, this teacher chose to survive by traveling back in time. Aiming to bring back the sights and sounds of his own kindergarten experience, students played games, sang silly songs, and made art out of anything they could get their hands on—except glitter. Teachers learn many things during teacher training, and although retaining everything is impossible, this teacher distinctly remembered two crucial pieces of advice: first, be nice and friendly to the school secretary, and second, always appreciate the custodian. Nothing severs a positive relationship with custodial staff like glitter. Nothing.

No longer shackled by the monotony of the schedule and the limits of academic-first activities, the kids were just being kids.





These moments unleashed smiles and uncovered skills that had been hidden by the previous tsunami of data and assessments. But the star student's bright shine began to dim, leaving her teacher in the dark.

While her classmates were busy building block cities and feverishly painting in watercolors, the girl watched from afar. When it was time to change shoes for fitness, she tied her laces in mangled knots. During choice time, she refused to share when a peer wanted to use the materials she had chosen. While problem solving with her teacher, she feigned illness when she felt unable to discuss a solution. For nearly 180 days, this superb student had failed to understand or improve the social skills she needed to successfully participate in her classroom community. She lacked problem-solving skills because her studies hadn't required any. She had missed the spirit of kindergarten—the love of learning and the joy of just being oneself. She was a student, not an individual. She was a number, not a learner. Despite her numerous successes, she had been overlooked and forgotten for nearly 180 days, and as a result, she wasn't ready for first grade. She wasn't ready for life. Ultimately, despite incredible academic achievement, she had failed kindergarten. So had her teacher.

I am that teacher.

My short fifteen-minute drive home after school that day felt like forever. I knew my wife and two-month-old daughter were waiting for me at home, ready to snuggle and smile away the stress of another school day. Their presence always quickly erased anything that had gone wrong at school—until that day.

Seeing my sweet, innocent child only worsened my condition. As I struggled to understand where my teaching had gone awry, I looked back on my career so far. Though I had taught grades from kindergarten through fourth grade for nearly a decade, earned my master's degree, achieved a national teaching certification in a very rigorous and reflective process, and built wonderful rapport with my colleagues and the students and families I'd had the pleasure to serve, I came to a very painful realization: I would not want my daughter to be in my classroom.

Talk about a gut punch.

I went from beaming with pride to feeling worthless inside. I had hit rock bottom. During the final days of the school year and summer vacation, I contemplated my next move. I briefly considered leaving teaching entirely. But teaching is not just what I do; it is who I am. Quitting was a fleeting idea at best. Still unsure of my next step, I looked at other options within education: Did I need to change grade levels? Did I need a new school? But these only would have bandaged a broken leg. The problem had nothing to do with *where* or *what* I taught; the problem was *how* and *why* I taught. The shimmer of academic successes had blinded me to what truly mattered. I had become distracted from teaching's true purpose by performance pressure and student-learning expectations. My concern for my students revolved around their academics, so if they performed well, I unknowingly looked the other way from anything else they were dealing with in or out of the classroom. Nothing else mattered as long as math scores grew and reading levels soared. I had become everything I dreaded: I didn't teach; I test-prepped. I didn't see children; I saw data points. I didn't prepare them for life; I prepared them for assessments.

I never should have let this happen.

I couldn't let this happen again.

I wouldn't let it.

Not to my students.

Not to my daughter.

## Organized Chaos

Before we get too deep into my story, please note that organization is not my strong suit. As my story develops, you'll better understand how disorganization might be better than organization when you're working with five-year-olds. This book may occasionally resemble my classroom: organized chaos. Everyone knows that the shortest distance between two places is a straight line. But where's the fun in that? Like the daily hikes my class takes in our outdoor classroom, we will also go off trail frequently throughout this book, often by design. In fact, I firmly believe it is imperative that students leave the





comfort of the trail to blaze their own paths. This may lead to weathering rougher stretches, circling back, and occasionally getting lost, but when students have more control over their own paths, they are more likely to understand and retain the steps taken along the way. You can take the safe route or the adventurous one. Both may lead to the same destination, but will they each provide the same engagement, interaction, and joy along the way?

Think of it like this: At the beginning of each school year, I make two classroom schedules. The first is a cookie-cutter, color-coded, minutes-managed schedule that carefully details when one subject ends and another begins. It is a dream schedule, mainly because it could only happen in my dreams. The second one better mirrors reality. Besides inputting specials, lunch, and recess, it is essentially blank—not because we won't be learning, but because learning can't be scheduled. Each day brings new possibilities, opportunities, and adventures to capitalize on, not schedule or plan.

The key question is, do you control the learning, or does the learning control you?

It took me a while, but I eventually found the answer in my journey as an educator. So come along as I explain my transformational and ongoing journey. Hopefully you'll be inspired to start or continue your own. The *what* will certainly be an integral part of this story, but not nearly as important as the *why*, and hopefully will not overshadow the *how*. Hold on tight for an up-and-down, topsy-turvy ride, with storytelling, practical applications, and humor (or attempts at it), where we'll bend the rules and burst comfort bubbles along the way. We will begin with the redesign of my classroom and the instruction that came with it, then discuss the power and purpose of play. The remainder of the book will showcase how we can and should let nature take the lead. Together we'll explore my educational philosophy, my somewhat unorthodox instructional planning, and the unexpected expectations of doing whatever it takes to help every child succeed.

# Fingerpaints and Nap No More

When I tell people I teach kindergarten, they react in a variety of ways. Some laugh, some show surprise, and some ask why, but the reactions essentially fall into two groups: misunderstanding and prejudice. I don't mean to imply that these people are confused or mean, but unless you teach kindergarten today, you can't, and probably won't really understand it. It certainly ain't what it used to be. To make this all a bit clearer and bring you into my world, let me dig deeper into both categories of responses.

## 1. So Much Fun

The most common response is something like, "Oh, that must be so much fun!" While I can't disagree that working with early learners provides hilarious and unexpected moments, I would not describe teaching kindergarten as *fun*.

When you hear "kindergarten," what comes to mind? Fingerpaints, naptime, play—does any of this ring a bell? Well, in the majority of today's kindergarten classrooms, those things are gone. In recent history, an ever-increasing emphasis on academic achievement has been placed on our youngest learners. I used to joke that I would strike it rich when I designed a standardized test that could be completed in a pregnant woman's second trimester. While that is obviously sarcasm, the truth is that our youngest learners face more pressure to perform than ever before. Simultaneously, for a variety of reasons described later, children come into the educational system less prepared physically, emotionally, and socially to reach these growing (and often developmentally inappropriate) expectations. Society expects more with less. We demand even more from our teachers. Not much fun.

*Assessment.* There's a dirty word. Teachers cringe when they hear it. I am not here to argue for or against assessment in kindergarten. Truly, I understand both sides of the argument. Assessment helps teachers understand the skills students have and those they have not yet mastered, sometimes termed "lagging skills." Appropriate assessments provide solid information that helps teachers plan instruction. On the other hand, assessment





can also create unnecessary stress for both student and teacher. Students have unique learning styles, diverse needs, and different motivations, so assessment may not always be the best way to get to the core of what students can do and decipher what they need. I once saw a quote comparing assessment to popcorn, making a great analogy: "Popcorn is prepared with the same oil at the same temperature and in the same pot. Yet the kernels pop at different times. Don't compare your children to others. Their time to pop will come." When assessment scores guide instructional groupings, plan interventions, and factor into the evaluation of the teacher and the perceived effectiveness of schools, they hold power. Power can be problematic, as can assessing children before they are ready. Not much fun.

*Lockdown.* The classic and somewhat misleading movie *Kindergarten Cop* had me thinking I would have to ask students to stop climbing tables and chairs. Who would have guessed we now practice hiding underneath them? In a world where violence in schools has become more and more prevalent, schools actively take steps to prepare their staff and students for worst-case scenarios. Think about explaining to an innocent child why this is an important safety drill. Consider sitting in a darkened classroom with more than twenty children for an extended and undetermined length of time. Ponder having development time dedicated to teaching staff when and how to barricade classroom doors and when to flee or fight back against a physical attack. This reality is stressful and sad, and it seems to be getting worse as the country becomes more and more divided. Not much fun.

## 2. But You're a Guy

Just looking at me, most people would probably not think I taught kindergarten. As I stand over six feet tall and weigh more than two hundred pounds, I might seem out of place in a sea of "littles." Factor in my above-average clumsiness, and one might question whether placing me with children who can easily be squished was the most responsible choice. To some people, seeing a man in an early childhood classroom is like seeing a unicorn. When people

find out what I do for a living, more often than I'd like to admit I've been reminded, "But you're a guy."

While I've never considered genitalia to be a determining factor in my ability to work with children, in my experience, overcoming being male is a real thing, especially in early childhood classrooms. That being said, after some initial shock and even confusion, most people I encounter tell me that having more males working with our youngest learners might not be so bad after all. Of course, there are always differences of opinion.

One such difference of opinion caused headaches when I embarked on my kindergarten career. After receiving my initial class list, I also received one of my first (and worst) emails as a kindergarten teacher. Apparently, the fact that I was male did not sit well with one parent. This concerned parent even called the office, asking if "Mr." had been a typo. Paraphrasing, her email described her discomfort in my ability to be the nurturing caretaker required for children at this developmental stage. In her words, I lacked "maternal instincts." This email brought up many feelings for me: confusion, anger, disgust, sadness, and hurt. I felt unwanted and dismissed before I even stepped into the classroom. I also felt extra and unwarranted pressure. I respectfully responded with a request to meet, but it went ignored. All I could do was prove that my ability to teach







was not determined by my physical makeup. (A few years later, this same parent wrote a letter imploring that her other child be placed in my classroom.)

I may not be a traditional-looking kindergarten teacher, but then again, that traditional kindergarten no longer exists.

# Follow the incredible evolution of one public school kindergarten into a nature kindergarten

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**Peter Dargatz,**  
public school  
kindergarten  
teacher,  
coordinates  
a schoolwide  
nature center

collaboration and a district-wide family nature club. He is also a founding member of the Wisconsin Nature-based Early Childhood Association (WINBECA).

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“Going on Peter Dargatz’s journey throughout this book was pure joy! He is a natural storyteller. I have been working in nature-based education for two decades, yet I still found myself jotting down notes to share with other teachers. *Teaching Off Trail* is a heart-felt, fun, and fully inspiring tale that shows just how much children (and teachers) benefit from nature and play—not just as a diversion from learning, but as its most essential foundation.”

—**Catherine Koons Hubbard, Nature Preschool Director at Schlitz Audubon Nature Center (Milwaukee, WI) and co-founder of the Wisconsin Nature-based Early Childhood Association**

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