

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #282

Christie McKelvie:

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There's a direct correlation to the time spent outdoors, the time spent in your natural environment, the more likely you are to rally behind ideas, to take care of the environment and to just be these good stewards of the earth.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today, we are going to be talking about place-based education as a positive disruptor in how we think about the concept of, what is school and why does it matter.

And joining us today is Christie McKelvie, co-founder and director of the Rooted & Free Nature School. So Christie, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Christie McKelvie:

Thank you, Annalies, for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Annalies Corbin:

Excellent. Very excited to have this conversation. I think that it's super timely, given the fact that we are collectively in the summer space here in the North American part of the world. And so, in the Northern Hemisphere, we are enjoying summer for the most part. But let's set some context for our listeners as we get started.

Rooted & Free has a mission to empower children through place-based experiential and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that grow a child's mind, body, and spirit while also fostering a lifelong love, respect, and understanding of nature. Rooted & Free Nature School offers half-day programming on a beautiful 340-acre camp for children ages zero to 14 throughout the school year.

As they bridge the gap from home to school, they offer opportunities for children to connect with nature while fostering the development of the whole child. Through exploration and hands-on activities that are both child-centered and teacher-directed, they introduce social, emotional, and physical skills, as well as language and math competencies. Based on the theory that children learn through play, classroom routines encourage active involvement, meaningful experimentation, and reinforcement through repetition. So, let's start with, I can tell you're a teacher.

Christie McKelvie:

Yes.

Annalies Corbin:

And that's a good thing. So, let's step back from all of this before we literally get into the weeds on the work that you're doing, because I think the backstory about how this program, the why, is really, really intriguing. And I think it will resonate with lots of people, not just teachers who are also parents, but parents in general and communities that are really looking to find different ways to engage their youth. So, Christie, why on earth did you do this? Because it's a big endeavor.

Christie McKelvie:

Yes. So, my background was that I taught elementary school in a public school setting for six years prior to staying home with my four children. And during that time, I did a lot of read-alouds with them. We played. I played with them. They played alone or amongst siblings. We were outside exploring a lot. But then when my now 18-year-old was five and I took him to his kindergarten readiness test at the local public school, I remember that I started to question myself and I started to say, "Oh no, should I have been quizzing him with flashcards? Should I have done sight words? Did I not do enough?" And I was feeling these pressures that so many families feel.

And I had this inner battle. I knew what was best, and I knew what was developmentally appropriate, but I think the pride in me of, "I don't want to look... you know, people know I'm a teacher, and here I'm sending my child without having done flashcards." So I started to have this inner battle of, I know what's best for children, but I feel, like, does my child need to fit in this box that they're checking at this readiness test?

And looking back, I see the joy that my children had when we would go outside, the learning that was taking place that was so much more depth than we could do through the worksheets or through flashcards. And I knew that academics shouldn't be pushed on them at such a young age and that it should be... that they come upon, you know, what's exciting to them, that that's what they explore, that's what they learn, a lot of choice.

So, I knew all of this. I wanted to find the science behind it. So, I started after this 13 years ago, having this inner battle, I started to do research and I stumbled upon Finland's model and how they wait till age seven to start formal education. And then, I came upon a forest school model, which really resonated with me because my husband's also a teacher, he's a middle school science teacher, but before that he worked at an environmental center. We love the outdoors, we love nature, we love science. And so this was just four schools for this natural blend of the outdoor world and working and learning alongside children.

So, through all of my research, and I saw the ability to blend my passions, I knew that I wanted to create something that really honored the rhythms of childhood and didn't just push academics. And I saw firsthand through my own children how they thrived when I was giving them that time and that space to grow.

I mentioned to you how I read... before we started this, how I read your book, Hacking Schools, and how you mentioned how we are still basing so many school models off of this outdated factory-based model, and I knew that I wanted to be a part of that change. I have a dear friend who will often say, "It is what it is." And I joke with her that that sounds so carefree, and I wish I could also have that mentality. But at the same time, I know I don't because, to me, I see something and I say, "It is what it is, but it shouldn't be. And how can I help change that?"

And that's what started Rooted & Free. I saw what was expected of these young five-year-olds and it just started to get the wheel spinning in my mind of, how can we do better for these young learners? And from that, we expanded. We now offer programming up through eighth grade as well, but starting by honoring childhood at a young age.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And I love that story because... and here's the thing, I've talked to so many founders, I'm a founder myself. And so I understand the journey or the voyage that founders, when you start to talk to them, what you will find is there was this reason, there was this gap, there was this angst, there was this something, there was this joy. It could be the full spectrum of stuff, right? But it's those emotional connections that tend to drive founders to coming up with new solutions to problems, or creating a new product that's going to meet a need, or in the case of folks in the world of education, to really find a way to honor the learning process and to embrace the joy that is students and to instill in them a love for a lifetime of learning.

And then, when you can blend that with the other things that you love, you know, so in your case, nature and being outside and all of those pieces. In my case, archaeology and anthropology and sending kids on digs and excavations, it's really

easy to see how those connections get made. So, I appreciate the journey that you've been on very, very much because it feels very familiar. And so, I love that.

I want to talk with you just a little bit before we literally dig into the way the program works and the way you've structured it because I know there's going to be a lot of interest in that. But let's talk a little bit about the concepts and I guess maybe the new resurgence because this concept is not new, it's been around for a very long time, but the renewed resurgence in this idea of place-based education, of making meaningful and deliberate choices to move learning outside of the traditional school setting and, instead, place it someplace where kids can naturally connect all the dots, all the opportunities that the place itself brings to the table, the learning possibility. So, let's talk a little bit about place-based education and why it's so important to you.

Christie McKelvie:

Yeah. So, place-based learning is so important, and we find in the nature-based, place-based being the setting, as children are falling in love with the world that is directly in front of them, so those trees that are surrounding them, the birds that are singing, the cool critters that they're seeing, they're falling in love with their environment and their surrounding. And they are what we like to say is that our lead teachers, that we do have somebody designated as a lead teacher, that really nature is the lead teacher for our programming. And that there's just so much with the season, so much that curiosities that come up through what they're seeing in their play space and in that nature around them, that through all of that, it makes them fall in love, which then also makes them become good stewards.

And as adults, like there's research that says that there's a direct correlation to the time spent outdoors, the time spent in your natural environment, the more likely you are to rally behind ideas, to take care of the environment and to just be these good stewards of the earth. And to us, that's really important because we see a lot going on that has not been fantastic for our environment. And just the learning that takes place as kids gain confidence.

Like, at Rooted & Free, it's 340 acres and we have different trails that we take and they get to know the camp that we hold Rooted & Free on so well that it's just so fun to watch them as the year progresses, navigating with confidence this world around them, that here they are, with our preschool class specifically, these three and a half to five-year-olds walking through these big woods with such confidence of knowing the place that is around them.

Annalies Corbin:

The other thing that's super interesting and that I love about this program element, and nature schools in particular, but I see it in lots of other program models as well, is this idea around risk. You know, it's interesting because for many, many years, when I

think back, I don't want to give too much away, "How old are you, like really, Annalies?" But back in my day, it was not uncommon, right? You just roamed free. Kids were out. They were out in their neighborhoods. If they lived in suburbia, they were out in the urban environment. Rural kids really were out and about, right? I was a rural kid. And I remember wandering all over the ranch unaccompanied, just you're doing this thing, right?

And yet, we, collectively, as a society in many parts of the world, over time we really drew our kids in, and we became very... as parents and as schools and as communities, we became very risk-averse. And there are consequences to being risk-averse. We need to take risks in settings that are conducive for risky behaviors that are not detrimental, right? We're not looking for people's lives to be on the line, but a simple risk is kids need to climb a tree. They need to fall out of a tree. They need to scrape a knee on the way down, right? Those kinds of things become tangible life lessons, and we've sanitized our growing-up experience in many ways. So, let's talk about risk a little bit in the program that you have.

Christie McKelvie:

Yeah, so risky play is a big part. And we even put out in our parent handbook and we make sure families understand. First of all, you have to understand the difference between risk and a hazard because people will group those two together and then they become so adverse. And I even remember where my children went to school, they weren't even allowed to pick up mulch on the playground because that was considered a stick and they had a no-stick play.

So, we get to a point where we're just trying to draw these lines, and we don't know where to stop them. So, then, it gets to even, "Well, mulch is from a wood product, therefore don't touch it with your hands." And understand that risk, how we have it on our site defined is it's present when a child is able to see an activity, they can assess the potential consequences, make their own choices about whether or not they want to participate in this activity. So, that would be, the climbing a tree, they can see this tree. We as adults are also constantly assessing. You know, we're doing risk-benefit analysis on a regular basis, even when we're not realizing we're doing it, we are. Constantly, safety is very important to us.

But you're right. Too often, we then confuse risk with hazard, which is when there's an unsafe situation the child can't see or assess, they can't make informed decisions about whether or not they want to participate. And so, we put those two together, and we think anything risky is also a hazard. And yes, the kid can fall, they can scrape up their knee. But in our play, we want children to have choice when they can see and they can assess the potential consequences.

So, climbing the trees, exploring a shallow stream, playing with sticks. And we do, we let them play with long sticks and we just tell them, "If it's longer than your arm, one end needs to touch the ground." So, we create, I don't want to call them rules, but just kind of best practices for the kids for the safety of themselves and others. We do carving. We start off with potato peelers, and they carve sticks, and then those kids that are ready eventually progress to an actual whittling or carving knife. We do a lot of running and in the winter, sledding. There's steep hills that the kids play on and every once in a while they might tumble down them. But kids are so resilient and they learn from all of those risky play activities they choose to engage in.

Annalies Corbin:

They do. And it's really remarkable because they grow and build confidence naturally when they are able to (a), engage in those safe but risky endeavors. And then, the other thing is you're naturally building and growing that student's agency and their own self-advocacy. And you can, in fact, see it in kids super, super young when you allow them the opportunity to explore their world, engage in their world, make choice, evaluate, and so on and so forth. So, I appreciate that very much.

So, let's talk a little bit, Christie, about how the program works, because you've got multiple age groups. You've got 340 acres, I assume that you work with in school, with out of school, with families, with community. Help us understand the ecosystem that makes up Rooted & Free.

Christie McKelvie:

Sure. So, we do offer programming all the way from infants through now age 14. And our infant toddler program, that is the caregiver stay. So, we call it Explore Together. Caregivers are there and it's been so fun to start that program and to see that grow. There's so much interest in our community for that. And we get a good mix. We have some where families are already engaging in this type of learning with their children but they want to have peers to do alongside with. And then, we have families that come that they're like, "I would never be here. This is so out of my comfort zone, but I know it's good for my kid, so I'm putting on my big girl pants or my big boy pants and we're gonna do this." And it's really neat to watch the adults grow in their confidence as well with being outdoors and giving their children that space.

And one thing that we really coach the parents in at that age level, and even as our kids get older, is the way that they show their own... if they have some personal discomforts with the outdoors, to try their best not to pass that fear on or in their communication of if their kid is running with a stick, instead of yelling, "Be careful," to all those potential risky play, instead, reframing their questions to say, "What's your plan with that? or "Do you need more space for the stick that you have right now?" or just simply, "I'm here if you need me." And so, that's a big part in that group.

Then, we get to our preschool, which is a drop-off program for ages three and a half to five. And that is just such a fun group that we work with. And we have 12 students in each class. We have three different classes. And the classes are half day, two teachers and one assistant, one like teen helper, and just those small ratios, the amount that the kids can truly dive into their wonders and their curiosities, and how we can let the season changes, and all the opportunities that nature offers really guide the learning.

And so, that's a blend of we have a lot of free play, free exploration, but there is also... I don't want to call it theme of the day but certain concepts or things like we see that the kids are super curious about the spider that they found the last day they were here. So, the story that morning during circle time might be about a spider, and we do a mix of fiction and nonfiction to just keep all those conversations going.

And we put out a lot of learning opportunities for them in the morning when they first get dropped off. So, we might have some fine motor things that they could choose to do at the tables or they can just go out and be playing. We have a nature cabin and play space at the beginning of the morning that they can just go in. So, they can, kind of, in the morning, they can choose fine motor or gross motor, and that's a really fun way. But we have a blend of free exploration but then also some guided within the teachers.

And then, we get to our K-to-second enrichment program that's also just a two-day a week and that is homeschool families, choose to add that into their programming and that's been really fun to work with that age group too as they take that learning a little deeper.

And our final program is Forest Fridays. That's just once a week. And we have three different age groups, K to second, third through fifth, and sixth through eighth grade. And that is a blend of, we have families, and I do this with my own children, who sign their kids out of local school, whether private or public, and they have them come for the morning to learn and explore at Rooted & Free. And then, others that they are a homeschool family and they're using this as an enrichment to what they're already doing.

Annalies Corbin:

I love the combination of all of those things and the way that you've figured out and honestly been brave enough to take on such a wide range of age groups and experiences because not all organizations choose to do that. So, I appreciate that.

I'm also curious because I know that we have a fair number of formal educators who listen to Learning Unboxed, and one of the goals of this program always has been, by highlighting and having conversations with really innovative folks out in the world that

are doing creative educational things, that there's a lot of things that we can pull inside of the traditional educational experience to make it better, to make it more relevant, to make it more engaging and fun for everybody, from the teacher to the participants and the families that are engaging in that.

So, I'm really curious about the elements that you see, that you feel like can be pulled into a traditional setting. Having been a traditional classroom educator, I think you are uniquely positioned to actually have some thoughts about this. And with that, because one of the conversations that will frequently happen is, okay, those out-of-school programs are super, super cool, but what about the rigor or what about the standards alignment? How do I actually take these program elements and pull them into my classroom? So, help us understand that, Christie.

Christie McKelvie:

Yes, that's huge. And I'd say the first step you can do when we talk outdoor education is just physically take your classroom outside. So, whatever you're doing, and I know in certain settings that would be hard to do, but I know when I taught in the classroom, I would just take read aloud outside to start with because we had a read aloud chunk of time. You know, just taking baby steps of getting students outside.

And there's so much research now on ways that you can give student agency and still cover the standards, right? And so, I think that's a huge part within public schools is figuring out how you can take whatever that standard is, and instead of following the textbooks formula to get to that, instead you find real-world opportunities.

But when it comes to nature, I would say just modeling for your students that sense of wonder and that excitement of going outside, that excitement. And you have to get your administration on board of, what are the times we can take classes outside? The elementary school I taught at had a large grassy area, but we were right in the middle of a town. It wasn't 340 acres of woods like I have now. And I would just take him out under the trees, and we would do our read aloud.

And then during math class, we created this math trail, we called it, where I actually went around to different locations around community. Again, I had to get administration's approval, but turned the concepts we were learning in math into real-world problems. So, we actually walked to the local pizza shop, and they had to calculate what would it cost to order one slice of pizza and a small soda. And we went around and spent a day doing all that. And then, we had kind of like a field trip day where they went and they actually were able to order themselves the pizza. And they went to the library and they figured out how to get certain... So, we turned this real world math in your community.

So, I think within the public school, it starts with the teacher, it starts with their mindset and it starts with the students by modeling that wonder, that curiosity that you have for whatever topic and whatever you can maybe create into an opportunity for the students to really find their own interest within that and their own agency as you have mentioned. I think it gives the children permission to do the same and you're modeling that for them.

So I think that would be my biggest. I mean, my biggest suggestion would just be get outside, whether that's your courtyard for 15 minutes a day or a local park that you get permission to walk with your class to. Because the first day, second day, you might feel a little unruly without having the four walls to confine them but I think you'll find children, there's so much research that says if you're able to find a spot that has even just one tree, the way that their mental health and their bodies actually relax, you'll start to see benefits academically as well. So, that's my encouragement.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. I, again, appreciate that and completely agree. So, love seeing kids get outside. You know, as you think about the last 13 years of Rooted & Free, and you also think about the fact that your own children are growing but your programs are expanding, what are you excited about from a programmatic or offering sort of standpoint within your community for Rooted & Free? What are you working on?

Christie McKelvie:

Yeah, so one thing that I'm very excited about, it's taken a long time to get this going, but we have created a partnership with the local conservancy to create a scholarship fund for our program. And so, I'm very excited to be able to open up enrollment to more families and especially families that wouldn't normally be able to take on as a small school, private, like there's these expenses that as much as you want to say, "Oh, it's for everybody. Everybody, come," there's real needs that we need to cover to keep our program afloat. So, I'm super excited that we have a scholarship fund that is getting started to see just more and more families be able to come and engage and be part of our program.

Our staff just each year, the growing that we have, it's so exciting to bring on new members and to learn from them. There's so much to learn from the families that come, the students that come. So, I think just over the years, the learning that I've had, but then also knowing that we're now being able to expand even just among other... like, I don't know, socioeconomic. Like, knowing that that is because that is one drawback right now is we are tending to more of the families that have the resources.

And another wonderful thing is our gear library, like our extra rain suits, our extra winter gear, and great waterproof gloves and mittens is growing as well. So, as families enter, if they can't afford to purchase certain gear that is needed for an

outdoor school because, yes, we are outside in the winter. And we do have indoor options at our school, but we are primarily outside. So, I'm excited, too, as we're growing and seeing our resources grow in ways that we can offer what we offer to more and more families.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, that's fabulous. I'm also curious, then, how does the community at large interact with Rooted & Free? And when I'm talking about the community at large, I'm really not talking about the families that participate, but how does Rooted & Free sit within the bigger, broader ecosystem that is the community where you exist?

Because that's the other thing that I see lots of struggle with, right? Traditional schools will often see themselves as an island, and yet school is connected to community, right? It's the same thing with all kinds of programs. We tend to put our head down. We're doing this great thing, whatever that great thing happens to be, but we forget to look up and put the work that we're doing into the broader context of our community as an ecosystem. I'm super curious how your community thinks about Rooted & Free. And that's putting you on the spot. And I realize that, right? But I think it's a question that doesn't get asked often enough. And it's not to put you on the spot. I'm just really curious, how do you think the community thinks about what's going on there?

Christie McKelvie:

Yes. And really, that is a great question, and one that I should spend more time thinking about. I know you said not having it be with the families or thinking, but really I do think that is, right now, the primary way that we are... anytime we order merchandise for our school, anything like that, we go to local small businesses within our area. So, things for us, we find it important to support other small businesses.

So, the community knows us through maybe things like that and just seeing our desire. But as far as beyond that, I mean, we mentioned the partnership with the Conservancy, and just as more and more families are out, and if they either have their magnet on their car, they're wearing some sort of gear and just the conversations getting started about nature school, and we'll do cleanup days where we'll go and pick up litter, have family fun days where we invite the community, which that's always super fun having people who are not part of our programming come. And we have our local zoo bring animals to do a live animal program.

So, we have, kind of, like the outreach in that way, but it's a good reminder to me to make sure that there's other ways that we're not just isolating ourselves. And we really do try hard. My kids, my personal four children are in public school now. I do this fun thing where their sixth grade year, they're home with me and we do educational trips and they help me out at Rooted & Free. You know, we have this one year that I

take one-on-one with each of my kids. But beyond that, they are in public school, I'll pull them for educational trips.

So, it's never this us against them. You know, you'll never hear me say, "Oh, public schools, they're so bad, they have it all wrong," because yes, they do have a lot wrong, but they also are doing a lot well. And as you've talked to many teachers, the teacher's hearts and their goals are usually good and appropriate. It's just figuring out the way.

So, that's a great question about the community, and it's one that, definitely, I want to think more about the intentionality for Rooted & Free to plug in even more.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. One of the things that I find is there's always opportunity. There's always opportunity. We don't necessarily recognize or realize, especially when, again, our heads are down, we're literally in the weeds doing the thing that we do so well. But I think that that's a systemic issue is trying just to get all of these amazing things because there are really incredible things happening in the world of education, public education, formal education, informal education.

I mean, if you just pull it all apart, that's the purpose of Learning Unboxed is to go out and say, there's this cool thing that's happening over here. Let's talk about it. Let's understand it. Let's figure out what we could learn from it. What could we take away? How could we internalize it? And how could we bring these kinds of ideas into our community? Because the reality is there are lots and lots of kids out in the world who all deserve and want a high-quality, amazing educational experience, right? It's not just enough to learn, but we have to be able to grow, to flourish, to thrive, to become those fully-formed humans that we need in our society and our world.

So, I appreciate that very much. That's why I asked that question. So, very, very much. So, Christie, I want to thank you so much for taking time out of your day to join us on Learning Unboxed, to share your story and your enthusiasm, and help us have a better understanding of the value of place-based education and nature schools in particular. So, thank you for all that you do and for joining us today.

Christie McKelvie:

Yes, thank you. And thank you for all that you do and keep up the good work. Thanks for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.