



NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

MAY/JUNE 2010

# Helping children, helping nature by Raed Abu Hayyaneh

Children have an innate interest in all natural things; they always like to play with natural elements like water, sand, mud, and to watch birds and butterflies. Children who have regular contact with nature have a better learning experience and enjoy benefits to their physical development.

Education should be more than just sitting in a classroom and studying textbooks. Educational experiences while gardening or sitting outside watching the birds and the butterflies can teach children how they fit into the natural world and the importance of looking at their surroundings. Gardening with children of all ages encourages their interest in nature and enthusiasm early in life and develops valuable basic skills and an understanding of how the whole of the eco-system works.

## The value of learning with nature

Experiences spent learning with nature help children to understand the beauty of our world. These interactions cannot be reproduced indoors. Children benefit

greatly from daily connections with the natural world, and these benefits have a lasting impact, especially when positive outdoor experiences come at an early age.

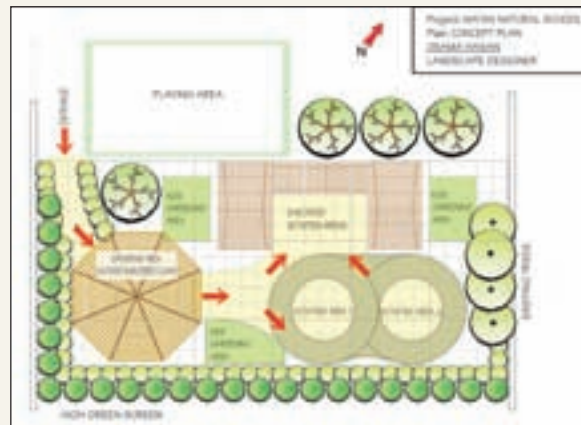
We can create outdoor classrooms to develop children's creative, observation, and motor skills. Many skills can be gained from outdoor classrooms:

- Through regular contact with wildlife, children develop close observation skills and find patterns in nature.

- Outdoor classrooms allow and lead children to incorporate math skills, like counting, prediction, and estimating. Children can also explore measurement concepts such as length, area, perimeter, and volume. These experiences lay the groundwork for later, higher-level math skills.

- Working in the natural world inspires children to learn new words, write signs, and create poetry. Such experiences are especially important for children who struggle with traditional methods for teaching reading and writing.

- Outdoor classrooms offer many possibilities for discovery. Children who are engaged and active are far more likely to exhibit positive behaviors and build stronger social skills. Children can share ideas, negotiate, make decisions, and work together in an outdoor environment.



Ma'an School is a model for nature schools in Jordan.

- Visual-spatial skills become highly developed in outdoor classrooms. These skills are developed as children hike, build, create, and look at their natural surroundings.
- Science skills are a natural fit with outdoor classrooms. Children develop a sense of wonder and appreciation for the world around them, especially as they help care for living things.

## Nature clubs in Jordan

Jordan is a beautiful country with many natural treasures, but increasingly its natural environment is under threat. Wildlife is disappearing, pollution of air and water is increasing, and unplanned development is spoiling many of our beautiful areas.

(continued)



Children playing in nature

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

To ensure that future generations of Jordanians inherit a country that is still beautiful and that has a better quality of life for its people, we must encourage the children of today to love and care for their environment.

In our work with schools in Jordan, Save the Children supports nine kindergartens through equipment, renovation, and teacher and supervisor training. We work closely with teachers to create the nature conservation program to provide a fun way for children to get to know more

about their environment and contribute to its protection. The program also helps to develop the values and skills necessary for children to understand their relationship with the environment and to assess its importance to their everyday lives. Informal activities help children — young scientists — to support nature conservation and our local wildlife. Through exploration, children learn about and support practices that preserve the local environment. We also work with our volunteer landscape engineer, Mr. Osama Husan,

in creating a kindergarten module on nature gardens.

We are looking forward to developing and implementing this module in all of our schools. Right now we are looking for program sponsors. This work will allow us to invite all children to support nature. Thinking globally and acting locally begins with inviting the new generation into a healthy environment.

*Raed Abu Hayyaneh is an environmental education expert.*



## Connecting Children with Nature Action Forum

October 17-20, 2010

Arbor Day Farm • Nebraska City, Nebraska

We are inviting 70 multi-disciplinary Nature Action Teams from around the world to come together to learn strategies and secure tools for launching campaigns to connect children with nature.

*Attendance will be by application only.*

Interested teams can apply for consideration on the Nature Action Collaborative for Children web site:

[www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature)



*The mission of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children is to re-connect children with the natural world by making developmentally appropriate nature education a sustaining and enriching part of the daily lives of the world's children.*

## Wonder Vitals

*Wonder*, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at: [www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature).

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.

### AFRICA

Irma Allen, Mbabane, Swaziland  
Hadijah Nandyose, Kampala, Uganda  
Sebastian Chuwa, Moshi, Tanzania

### ASIA

Bishnu Hari Bhatta, Kathmandu, Nepal  
Swati Popat, Mumbai, India  
Raed Abu Hayyaneh, Amman, Jordan

### NORTH AMERICA

Linda Esterling, Lincoln, Nebraska, United States  
Berta MacGregor, México City, México  
Jeanne McCarty, Fort Worth, Texas, United States  
James Wike, Memphis, Tennessee, United States

### OCEANIA

Toni Christie, Wellington, New Zealand  
Gillian McAuliffe, Floreat, Australia  
Fiona Robbe, Arcadia, Australia

### EUROPE

Helle Nebelong, Gentofke, Denmark  
Claire Warden, Perth, Scotland  
Marc Veekamp, Apeldoorn, Netherlands

### SOUTH AMERICA

Martha Cecilia Fajardo, Bogota, Colombia  
Caroline Hudicourt, Petion-Ville, Haiti  
Wil Maheia, Punta Gorda Town, Belize

### SUPPORT TEAM:

Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer, Redmond, Washington, United States  
Nancy and John Rosenow, Lincoln, Nebraska, United States  
Tara Hild, Lincoln, Nebraska, United States

### PRODUCTION:

Scott Bilstad, Seattle, Washington  
Carole White, Lopez Island, Washington

# The Secret Garden: A journey in organic design

by Jonny Holtom

As a teacher I like to spend as much time outside as possible, and usually find myself surrounded by like-minded *tamariki* (children). Explorers and pioneers the lot of us, we hunger for uncharted territories, so the steep, wild, and aptly-named 'Secret Garden' behind our playground stood before us as an irresistible expedition.

The first time I embarked on the journey to the top of the Secret Garden it was — for some less-travelled voyagers — too treacherous to proceed. Born from their experiences I began to see trails that beamed to be blazed. So, on preparing for our next adventure, I made sure to carry with me my trusty spade with which, based on the children's interaction, I carved steps to aid the smallest feet and terraced areas on which we could feel safe and launch future missions.

As we surveyed the terrain on which we travelled it began to reveal its plethora of potential pathways to explore. For me this extended beyond the physical boundaries of the Secret Garden itself and into the realms of interests that germinated, but not found fertile ground in which to put down roots.

The concept and process of organic design was to me just an abstract idea used in jest to describe structures that came into being by chance, necessity, or natural phenomena. But organic design has now — after more than two years' incorporating it into my teaching — become a solid and tested philosophy that is not only conducive, but enriching, to my role as a teacher in our centre. Its essence lies in the interaction-observation feedback cycle that steers the direction of the structure of environmental design. The most obvious example of this is that the now myriad pathways in our Secret Garden have been developed almost entirely along the children's chosen routes of exploration, and those that haven't have unfolded naturally through the lay of the land.

Another important consideration for me — outside of increasing the environment's potential as a vehicle for children's learning

experiences — was to maintain a sense of *mana whenua* (belonging) amongst the other teachers at our centre. One of our teachers beautifully conveyed a story, which I consider a modern-day proverb and have since carried into my outdoor design endeavours. The story goes as follows:

*The teacher was once a member of a school that had a small patch of forest adjoining their playground, and the children of the school would play in it. The teachers, however, decided to develop it into a space that was more structured, 'safe,' and aesthetically pleasing to them. Much time and energy was put into the space. But during construction the children could not play in the space. Upon its completion the teachers proudly named it the 'plantarium' and the children ventured back into it. They explored and played in this safer, more structured environment, but found it had lost its challenge and its wonder and they longed for the forest of old.*

Always with this in mind I sought to restore the original native wilderness as I removed the wild, dangerous, and ecologically-greedy weeds. Early last year I watched an article on Maori television about a polluted, weed-ridden lake and the local community's efforts to restore the *mauri* (life force) of the lake. The idea of *mauri*, with respect to an ecosystem, is for me felt strongest in the stunning beauty and vitality that resonates through all things in areas of lush, untouched native forest. Although by its nature our Secret Garden will never be untouched native bush, it is worthwhile when planting to consider what species may have existed together here hundreds of years ago.

In all planting we have embarked on, I have always involved the children in the process, especially when it comes to placing the plant in the hole. We have chosen the position and dug together, as I believe it to be a powerful sense of respect for nature that is instilled when a child has a connection with the introduction and growth of a plant in their everyday environment.

The Secret Garden has also provided me the right environment to see growth in

an ideological seed I have carried for over a decade — that is the philosophy of permaculture. Permaculture pertains to the closing of systemic cycles and re-incorporation of what was once considered waste back into the system as a resource. When looking at our environment in this light, the children's perspective and capacity for unadulterated lateral thinking is a bountiful resource. A child's mind sees far more potential modes of interaction with an object or space than most adults do. Thus, children make fantastic creative consultants as we seek to utilise and realise the potential in our surroundings:

- We keep all of the containers that our new plants come in, and have been reusing them to pot native seedlings that have self-sown in places where they otherwise would not have survived.
- We use a double-bay composting system which allows the contents to be turned regularly while adding lime and comfrey to aid decomposition and produce a product we can use in a matter of months.
- The set of woodblocks, that is one of our nursery's favourite resources, was made from a willow tree in our playground that the wind brought down.
- Parents are bringing plants from home that may have ended up at the dump had they not known we would embrace them.
- We have used off-cuts of wood to build bird feeders with the children to encourage more bird life. This brings with it the usually unwelcome form of seed dispersal. But in our case this has been embraced as the seeds in their droppings enrich the variety of tree species we have popping up around our playground.

The continual development of our outdoor environment, along with our children and their relationship to it, has paralleled my own teaching journey and continues to be a renewable and sustainable source of inspiration and passion as I journey onward. Wishing you peace in your town.

# Developing community EC caregivers by Irma Allen



There were *gogos* (grandmothers), older brothers, sisters, aunts, preschool teachers, and 'Care Point' volunteers interacting and learning together in a preschool, some with infants in their laps; there were young children playing outside in the playground; there were ladies cooking in the small, simple kitchen. The occasion was a special Community Caregivers' Training Course, taking place simultaneously in four different pre-schools in different parts of the little kingdom of Swaziland.

A team of four trainers was conducting their first Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) training, after having themselves recently received an intensive ECCD week's training of trainers course. They were assisted by resource people from the community who included extension officers in health, HIV/AIDS, early childhood education, and community development. The natural environment (the outdoor classroom) served as a medium for much of the training. Since many of the trainees came with their children, there were opportunities to involve them in the teaching/learning activities. It was very gratifying to see the results of a common vision and close collaboration among different community stakeholders (i.e., government, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], faith-based organizations, and individu-



als) in response to the need to provide improved care for our young children.

Swaziland, a beautiful, little country in southern Africa, has the highest HIV prevalence (26%) in the world. Currently there are about 200,000 people living with the virus in the country. This is ravaging the people, shaping the lives, not only of those that are infected, but those of their families, friends, neighborhoods, and communities. The crisis is most evident in the increasing number of orphans and vulnerable children. It is estimated that there are roughly 120,000 orphans and vulnerable children needing care now. However, the number of orphanages and other such homes are very limited. Thus, relatives (e.g., grandparents, siblings, and neighbors) find themselves with extra young children to care for. In addition, the government, with donor assistance, has been developing 'Care Points,' simple, one-room structures where community volunteers use large black iron pots and firewood to prepare a daily meal for the children. Programs, such as the World Food Program, supply basic food staples.

The young children tend to concentrate around the 'Care Points,' so there is a great need for early childhood education and care.

It was in response to that need that we planned and implemented a two-stage pilot project. It was a joint initiative of a faith-based organization, the Swaziland Baha'i Community, and UNICEF (with approval from the Ministry of Education). The first stage was to develop a team of ECCD trainers for four communities; the second stage was to assist each team conducting a one-week ECCD training for a group of community caregivers (including volunteers at Care Points) in their own community. The expected results were as follows:

- A minimum of 100 early childhood caregivers trained in their own communities or localities
- Four trained teams (which can form the nucleus of a child protection team in their respective community)
- Four preschools assisted to offer training services in ECCD in their localities
- Forged partnerships among preschool teachers, resource people in the community, and local authorities for this initiative and similar efforts in the future

Our small team of facilitators spent nearly two months of volunteer work planning, organizing, and then facilitating the two training programs. And every moment was worth it and the expected results were achieved! The participants were very interested in the training and appreciative. Spirits were high and joyous (this was manifested in Swazi tradition with much dancing and singing). The outdoors (summertime here) was bountiful and beautiful. Yes, there were a few challenges. However, overall, by working together, we were able to mobilize existing resources (i.e., financial, manpower, preschool facilities, and natural [the outdoors]) to carry out a cost-effective, relevant, and enjoyable training program for community caregivers.