

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

MARCH/APRIL 2013

Honoring the Child's Voice in Design

This edition of Wonder explores the following Universal Principle for Connecting the World's Children with Nature:

We believe children's voices (children's ideas and adults' observations of children's use of space) should be central to the design process.

You can find the complete list of principles in the Environmental Action Kit at worldforumfoundation.org/nature.

In addition to the Universal Principles, the Environmental Action Kit also has helpful information on professional

collaborations. There is a section called "The Power of Collaboration: Working Together to Connect Children with Nature" in which messages are shared by leading professionals. Ellen Hall, Director of Boulder Journey School, shares her thoughts on how collaboration creates an informed vision.

"My vision of children and their education has been shaped and re-shaped through myriad conversations with people throughout the world who hold visions of children and children's education from uniquely fascinating perspectives. These perspectives, gleaned from work in the physical and biological sciences, art and

music, architecture and design, etc. have informed my understanding of both outdoor and indoor environments, questions children might ask of these environments, hypotheses they might create and test, theories they might construct, refute, and re-construct, and the many languages through which they might communicate their learning. Together, as a learning community, we design and construct environments, filled with opportunities and possibilities. And then we observe the children, who are truly our greatest teachers."

What collaborations are you involved in that strengthen your work with children?

Perspective: Give the Children a Voice

by Caroline Hudicourt, Haiti

Having children participate in the design process of the school and outdoors should be considered an opportunity and a privilege. By inviting children to share that responsibility with us, we show them that we value their needs and their ability to express them, as well as their intellect. We prepare them to live in a democracy and train ourselves as listeners. We give the children a voice and we learn to listen.

In addition, we are using free, available, creative, and motivated brainpower not yet fully molded by the prevailing stereotypes of our society, taking a fresh look at the world and the environment. If we consult all the children of our school, we not only include many perspectives that would have otherwise been ignored, we also invite the children to work with us as partners. This gives them a sense of ownership over the construction or remodeling project. What children remember in a school, and what helps them appreciate it the most, are traces of their own work, such as posted texts, drawings, and pictures of them. These representations of themselves give them a sense of belonging. Participating in the decision-making process helps them develop a sense of shared ownership. Children feel that they are an empowered part of the school community, and that connectedness positively impacts their sense of identity and confidence. Adult-child collaboration builds the social ecosystem of the school.

(continued)



PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE HUDICOURT

Perspective: Give the Children a Voice continued

My school, Ecole Acacia, is now in Petion-Ville, Haiti, in the middle of the city. We plan to move to a more suburban area where we will benefit from a larger and greener property; it used to be part of a farm that belonged to my grandfather when the area was still rural. Now it's like a small forest in the middle of an urban area. As we build there, we plan to maintain most of the trees. Every year, I take all the children of my school on a field trip out of the city. My plan is to stop by the property on the way to the field trip, show the kids our initial plans, and get suggestions from them before we start construction.

Consider this:

- How do you inform children before asking them to make choices in your outdoor space design?
- What options do you give children to choose materials, plants, activity areas, emergent interests, etc.?

Reflection: Care Enough to Listen

by James McLauchlan, Thailand

During the summer of 2012, I spent seven weeks as a volunteer English teacher in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Chiang Mai is in northern Thailand, nestled in the rainforest mountains. I taught at a weekend school organized by Srichan Arworn for the children of her village. Srichan's backyard is a large garden; and she expressed a desire to teach the children more about gardens, plants, and nature. I told her I could give her a venue to do that based on what I had learned about outdoor classroom design in America. A shady area under a large tree provided a location for a large brick patio that became the cornerstone of the outdoor classroom.

Due to our language barrier, it was not practical for me to ask the children directly what they would like to see in an outdoor learning environment. I listened to the 'voices' of the Thai children by observing them before, during, and after our class sessions. Some of the children had unstable home lives and many struggled financially. These were some of the reasons why this outdoor venue was designed to be a beautiful, safe, peaceful garden area. I knew these children loved music and dancing, so the large patio was perfect for that. Time constraints prevented me from making or acquiring natural music makers, but I was able to build my version of a marimba out of bamboo.

I realized early on that most Thai children love to draw. I incorporated seating areas in the form of benches made from brick and scrap lumber, a large log, a wall made of brick, and some mats to lie on the patio. These made it easier for the children to sit and sketch or sit and reflect. Listening to the children's voices while designing an outdoor space can be as simple as understanding how a child thinks. So the wall and log are as much for walking and balancing on as they are for sitting and sketching.

The situation I encountered in Thailand was unique in many ways. The children's voices that guided me were those of the children I met in Thailand, as well as those from my years as a parent, grandparent, and coach. The Thai children, somewhat due to their socioeconomic status, did not have expectations about the design of this outdoor space. What was important and meaningful to them was that the space was built not just from brick, rock, and sand, but was built with *love*. The idea that



PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY JAMES MCLAUCHLAN

someone cared enough about them to build this outdoor classroom is something they will not forget. This is only the first step in getting these children more connected with nature. I will return in June 2013 to continue my work.

Consider this:

- What are the keen interests that children are demonstrating in your outdoor space? How are you considering the design of your space to support those interests? Is there enough space to work? What hands-on natural materials are available?
- How is the culture of your school community reflected in your outdoor design? Do children and families see themselves represented in the landscape, choice of plant material, and artistic elements?

Reflection: Children's Voices in the Design Process

by Robin and Toni Christie, New Zealand

As early childhood teachers ourselves, we have always felt that the experiences and ideas of the teaching team are vital to the design process as they 'know the space best.' But do they really? Have adults ever crawled under the fern bushes at the bottom of the fence, or squeezed between the twisted branches of the trees behind the shed? Do they know how the mud next to the rabbit hutch crackles in a good frost? Or that if you can climb to the very highest branch in the apple tree you can see all the way to the beach?



PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY ROBIN CHRISTIE

Children interact with their environment in unique and constantly changing ways that reflect the sum total of their experiences up to that point. Since their theories of how the world works are evolving on a daily basis, and they have a very different sense of physical scale, it is extremely difficult to know exactly how they view their learning environment. So how do we ensure their voices are heard in the design process?

Here at Childspace Early Childhood Institute in Wellington, New Zealand, we will often start in the same way as we might at a parent meeting by opening their minds to what a playscape can look like through field trips, photos, and videos of play-spaces from the local area and around the world. The notion that a playground is merely a slide, some swings, and a whole lot of safety matting is still pervasive in New Zealand society. The idea that we must move beyond that to include play elements that foster whole-person development is a vital message that children seem to understand more quickly than adults! Mudpits, retreat spaces, changeable rope structures, piles of bamboo, camouflage netting, strange climbable sculptures, coloured Perspex windows, fallen trees, living houses made of grape vines, water pumps, Seuss-like 'cabbage trees' (*Cordyline australis*, a New Zealand native. Look it up!), giant xylophones, and swing seats. Let's get as many ideas out there as possible!

Then we'll get out lots of paper and pens and sit in the middle of the playground and just draw while we talk. Now, it's important to note at this point that the drawings we make are simply a means to an end. As designers, what we're really doing is listening. The conversations about play that emerge when children's brains are relaxed and 'distracted' by the drawing process are where the real gold lies. While they might be drawing pirate ships with water slides, they are speaking of running and rolling, planting and harvesting, hiding, whispering, camping around the fire, being a rock star on the stage, and building a treehouse for the birds. As we listen, common threads begin to emerge about what is and is not successful in the space.

While this is only one of the techniques that we use (in combination with careful observation of the children's play), we find that it engages children in a way that empowers them to offer ideas in an accepting atmosphere over the entire length of the design and build process. Trust the children enough to ask for their opinions. After all, they know the space best!

For more on what Robin and Toni and the Childspace team are up to, check out www.childspace.co.nz, or look up Childspace Workshop on Facebook.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TRACY DELGADO-LASTELLA

Reflection: The Green Teens

by Tracy Delgado-LaStella, United States

The Teen Advisory Council and The Green Teens, our teen environmental group at Middle Country Public Library in Centereach, New York, have been very helpful serving as volunteers at such events as our grand opening event, the Spring Jubilee, and our annual Apple Festival. In addition, each group has also planned and implemented their own programs for school-age children in the Nature Explorium.

The Teen Advisory Council puts together a Spring Carnival program each year that consists of crafts, activities, and games for school-age children and their families. In the past this program has been held indoors. The Teen Advisory Council decided they would like to do the program outside in the Nature Explorium with nature-related topics such as insect and plant lifecycles and pollination as the focus of the activities for the day.

For the past several summers, The Green Teens planned and implemented "Let's Salsa," a program for children in Kindergarten through 3rd grade. The Green Teens read the children stories about the kinds of vegetables that grow in the garden, and teach the children how to make salsa and how to dance the salsa. These programs have proven to be extremely popular with the families in our community and we look forward to further participation on the part of our Teen Advisory Council and Green Teen volunteers.

Consider this:

In the Environmental Action Kit TOOLKIT for Early Childhood Programs there are suggestions for fun ways teachers and children can take action together to help the world we share become a 'greener' and healthier place. The "Take Action" section of the "Beneficial Bug Adventure" (p. 66) describes ways to involve children in creating a pollinator garden. Children can make their own observations and analyze spaces around the school or center as a way to participate in the design process. Tips for choosing an area include: finding one with as much sun as possible, making sure water is available nearby, and having shelter from the wind. Children can also help make native plant choices with scents and colors to attract butterflies, bees, hummingbirds, moths, or bats. Involving children in a project such as this extends their learning about plants, animals, and care for the environment.



PHOTOGRAPH BY NATURE EXPLORE

Future Issues of *Wonder*

We invite you to email your personal reflections and ideas related to the following *Universal Principle for Connecting Children with Nature* to Tara (tarah@natureexplore.org):

We believe it is important for families to enjoy regular experiences in the natural world with their children.

Wonder Vitals

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at: 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.

