

Wonder

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATURE ACTION COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN

MAY/JUNE 2013

Teaching with 'New Eyes'

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

We believe it is important for educators to understand their role as researchers and facilitators who observe children's interactions with nature and support the emergent curriculum.

(Find the complete list of principles in the Environmental Action Kit at worldforumfoundation.org/nature.)

Watch a child dance in the rain, witness a child's first taste of a sweet pea grown and picked himself, or quietly stand back and observe as a child gazes skyward at a soaring bird then runs, arms outstretched, as if flying herself. Special moments such as these can become powerful forces that shape

teaching and learning. There is such magic that happens when educators are able to watch children in their natural habitat, outdoors in nature, and recognize the significance of what is happening.

In the following reflections, NACC members share how they are utilizing accepted practices in education in extraordinary ways that exemplify the Universal Principle highlighted in this issue. Read on to discover how educators are observing children's learning with nature, building emerging curriculum, and using innovative approaches to train future educators. When higher education embraces these practices,



PHOTOGRAPH BY NATURE ACTION TEAM 13

educators enter the profession with the 'eyes' to recognize the rich learning that occurs in nature and are prepared to support children's natural curiosity and affinity for the natural world.

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.

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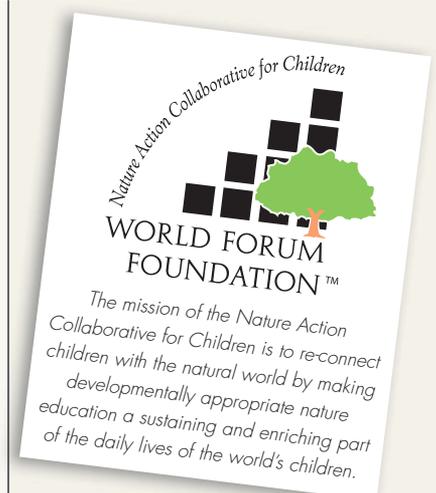
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Reflection: Nature Exhibition for Training Educationists

Nature Action Team 13: Reeta Sonawat and Annees Cementwala — India

We live fast-paced lives where originality is often compromised. As part of the Department of Human Development and Early Childhood Education, we are concerned that the area that is neglected the most in education is nature education. In an effort to bring learning into the classroom, nature has been replaced by artificiality. India is one of the few countries that has the concept of open schools, like the ancient gurukuls, where children were taught in the open, natural environment.

Despite the availability and means to educate through nature, very few attempts are made by early childhood educators to create a natural environment. Since research has proven that children learn best through nature, taking children out on a field trip to explain the concept of a forest or waterfall and letting them experience it themselves is definitely more effective than showing it on a flashcard or a teaching aid of the like. What we needed with this project was to sensitize young minds to nature and its beauty.

We created an exhibition on nature education to bring *naturalness* back into the learning process:

- We included aspects from nature: forest, landscape, desert, and aquaworld.
- Each was arranged in a different room of the school.
- We focused on including real materials from nature that were also very sensory.
- A sponsorship team was made to support such a large scale exhibition.
- Invitations and newsletters were made and given to various schools in the Western suburbs, some schools in the South Bombay and Central suburbs, and the various colleges and departments of Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University (SNDT) itself.

Finally the much-awaited day of the exhibition's opening; teaching aids, readiness files, and creative activities made by the P. G. Diploma students were placed outside in the corridor for display. Schools came with children to attend the puppet show. Throughout the day we hosted visitors, especially teachers from other schools. Parents of the nursery school children also came along with their children. Around 600 students, teachers, and parents attended over the two days.

The guest list varied from teachers of various pre-primary and nursery schools and trainers from Kidzee and Tree House to the Heads of Departments and lecturers of different colleges. All the visitors who came were asked for their valuable input and points for improvement.

Having a challenging topic for the exhibition, we were determined to put it up in a novel way, rather than to create the usual ways of using teaching aids. Creating a natural environment required a lot of effort, and involved doing things we had never done before. The praise we received for the exhibition was definitely very pleasing and made us realize that our efforts were appreciated and taken well by others. ■

Reflection: Letting Moments Unfold

Our Nature Action Team 76 includes Carmen Rivers, Mary Jo Fitzgerald, and Elise Hansen — United States

Wisconsin's Schlitz Audubon Nature Center's mission is to connect people with nature and to inspire them to become responsible stewards of the natural world. The focus of our Preschool is to provide a high-quality early childhood environment that meets preschoolers' developmental needs while inspiring them to love nature. We believe it is important for educators to understand their role as researchers and facilitators who observe children's interactions with nature and support the emergent curriculum by giving children the gift of discovery in the world around them as they follow their own interests. One of *our* Guiding Principles is that children learn through play and active exploration of their environment. We provide opportunities for children to have first-hand experiences, draw conclusions based on those experiences, and interact with each other to test ideas, and repeat experiences for further data. In our classrooms, indoor and outdoors, as well as on our hiking trails each day, we encounter the changes and challenges of nature. We use our senses to experience each moment in nature for its beauty and awe, but we also ask questions and try to learn more about the world around us.



PHOTOGRAPH BY NATURE ACTION TEAM 76

continued

Reflection: Letting Moments Unfold continued

Questions from children often take us in new directions. Our job then becomes that of a guide. For example, this fall sunflowers were at their peak in the prairie: yellow flowers as far as we could see. As teachers, we thought it was a wonderful time to focus on these flowers: the petals and seed heads. But the children were fascinated by all the insect galls on the sunflower stems. They had so many questions, so we followed their inquiry. We dissected one to see the larva inside. We found information about the kind of insect it was. And the children didn't forget. In the spring, they wanted to see the exit holes as the larva's metamorphosis continued. When it is a child's own discovery, the interest lasts.

We also know the most meaningful learning does not always happen during big, very involved units. Sometimes learning is about letting a moment unfold. For example, during one wintry day, wind was blowing with sleet and snow, we ventured outdoors. As we hiked, we came across a copse of evergreens. The children huddled together under the cover. It was not wet there and not as cold. "We are just like the animals finding shelter from the storm!" they shouted. This experience was much more profound coming from them than from a teacher. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY NATURE ACTION TEAM 76

Reflection: Faculty Develop and Teach Nature Literacy Course

Nature Action Team 48: Tammy Davis, Sara Starbuck, Victor Wilburn, Sara Garner, Tom Holman — United States

Our Nature Action Team is comprised of faculty from the Department of Human Environmental Studies and the Department of Health, Human Performance and Recreation at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. We teamed up to develop a new senior seminar course called Nature Literacy. The course was created to help students develop a conceptual definition and personal philosophy of nature literacy through the investigation of research and reports that focus on initiatives in environmental stewardship, natural history, and local ecology. This is the first semester that the course is being taught. Junior and senior level students from various disciplines such as Recreation, Biology, Elementary Education, and Child Development are taking the course. It is designed as a senior seminar-style class in which students lead classroom discussions about the required readings; and many of these are done outside. The textbook for the course is *The Nature Principle* by Richard Louv.

An experiential learning project is underway as part of this course. The project is to lead a local private school, Prodigy Leadership Academy, in a Nature Awareness Workshop. The university students are taking full responsibility to design/plan and complete this assignment using the research learned and discussed in class. The idea is to immerse the students at the private school in nature experiences that support the emergent and growing body of knowledge/curriculum. These experiences will help the children make connections with nature a sustaining and enriching part of their daily lives. It has also created awareness in the lives of the university students that they need more nature in their lives. A quote from one of the students, a Child Development major, from a reflective writing assignment reveals this level of awareness:

"I am realizing how our society lives outside of nature and the negative effects that follow. I plan to attempt to reconnect with nature first by surrounding myself with nature. I want to feel the breeze that makes the trees dance and that makes the grass look like an ocean. When I am in nature, I feel relaxed and a part of a bigger entity. I plan to help fill the students I teach with nature as well. I will be bringing nature indoors to the children and I will take the children out into nature."

It is clear this constellation of experiences from the Nature Literacy course is enabling our students to appreciate both the importance of environmental responsiveness and the joy of nature. ■

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 that children have daily access to nature-based outdoor and indoor environments in their early childhood programs and schools.

Reflection: Changes in Children's Play

Nature Action Team 78: Jim Foret and Mary Sciaraffa — United States

At the University of Louisiana, Lafayette we have implemented a nature-inspired outdoor space within the Child and Family Studies Early Childhood Lab. Throughout the process, the faculty in Child and Family Studies and the faculty in Renewable Resources have worked alongside university students to increase awareness of the importance of connecting young children with nature. We have observed both a change in attitude amongst university students and the young children at the lab. The university students enrolled in Renewable Resource classes have a sense of pride in being part of the planning, designing, and building of the outdoor space. They have gained a better understanding of the importance of understanding child development and children's interactions with nature. The university students enrolled in Child and Family Studies classes, who work directly with the children, have learned how to reduce their own biophobia in order to model a positive attitude toward the natural environment.

The faculty in Child and Family Studies and Renewable Resources are continually assisting university students in understanding their role as researchers and facilitators who need to observe how the children interact with the environment in order to enhance children's experiences with nature. Over the course of our project, the adults involved have noticed the change in children's play. The children moved from playing with toys set out by the teachers, to using the natural items to engage in more imaginative play:

- The children use tree cookies, clovers, and acorns to create cakes and salads.
- They continually move small logs from one side of the outdoor play environment to the other.
- Children move the logs, tree cookies, and twigs to a remote location to create a campsite where they can gather and tell stories to each other.
- They take pride in feeding the worms and tending to the garden.
- Children have begun to dig for worms to add new worms to the worm farm.



PHOTOGRAPH BY NATURE ACTION TEAM 78

The Child and Family Studies students have incorporated activities into their lesson plans that bring the outdoors inside. Throughout the project, the faculty in Child and Family Studies has worked with university students to conduct focused observations to gain a better understanding of children's interactions with the natural environment. Within the university classes, the importance of linking observations to assessing children's abilities and interests is stressed. Once adults understand children's abilities and interests, then the adults can plan for experiences that will assist children in moving to the next level of understanding.

Consider this:

The Environmental Action Kit section, *Accepted Practice*, contains statements from the fields of Design, Education, and Environmental Education. In the Education section, the International Step by Step Association's document *Competent Teachers of the 21st Century* describes assessment and planning in the following way:

"Quality pedagogy recognizes the roles of assessment and planning in promoting learning that enables every child to succeed. The educator combines developmentally appropriate expectations, national requirements, freedom for creativity and exploration, and the interests and needs of individual children and groups of children into a cohesive framework. The assessment-planning cycle supports each child's development and learning, building upon children's natural curiosity, previous knowledge and skills, interests, and experiences." (p. 28)

- How do you use focused observations of children's interactions with the natural environment to understand children's abilities and interests?
- In what ways do you use these insights to shape your support to children?
- How do you share these observations with children's families? ■

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