

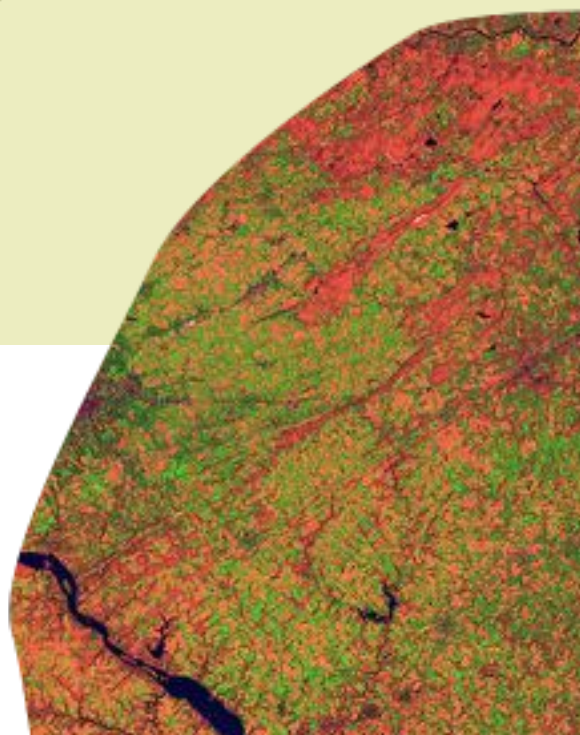
Title:

Author:

**Occupy Climate
Change (OCC!)**
*Grassroots initiatives
entry*



FORMAS



The Case of a Grassroots Initiative in Iran The Nature Schools

By Farzana Bashiri



Photo credit: Alireza Farhadzadeh @Damoon Nature School

What's the problem?

A million-years evolutionary journey has dedicated humans the chance to sustain life on the planet and flourish as a species in concert with Earth's other inhabitants. However, the perceived and actual separation between human and nature created by the current state of developments in our modern paradigms of living, has many obvious detrimental consequences for humans themselves as individuals and as a society. Within the spectrum of living conditions, perhaps urban dwelling is the most alienating to nature for humans and other species. As we have increasingly become an urban population in the world, some ecologists fear the future of a species dissociated with its natural origins from early childhood (Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Vahabzadeh, 2020; Behruz & Zarghami, 2018). Scientific studies on early childhood developments that show the crucial role of contact with nature in a healthy multi-dimensional childhood flourishing, are not few (Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Wilson, 2007). Although the mindset of domination over nature is found responsible for various ecological crises we face today, a reconnection with nature is proposed as a healing for the aching soul of a biophilic creature in sunder.

The Story of Nature Schools in Iran

One effort to show a way forward for connection and rooting in nature from early childhood has been the Nature School initiative. The idea has been simple yet challenging; nature is an

enriching environment for children’s learning and development, so just let children play freely in nature. Forging on this simple assumption, the activists of Nature Schools try to create an enriching natural environment for children, chiefly mimicking a traditional rural life of their own region. The main issue that creates a lack of enriching natural environment for children is the modernization and rapid urbanization paradigm and the demographic shift from large families to smaller families (Burns & Manouchehri, 2020). Perhaps the image of a child, alone in their apartment, whose views are blocked by walls, without playmate, without outdoor access, playing out their imagination through video games, is of the kinds that Nature School is painting as problematic. M, a Nature School activist frames the problem as:

Imagine the nomad, the rural and the urban life. The Nomad life has the deepest form of connection to nature and then the rural life and the last is the urban life. What we see as nature in the cities is an artificial and poor condition of natural landscape. Those urban children with little to no access to a rich natural habitat are of concern for Nature School.

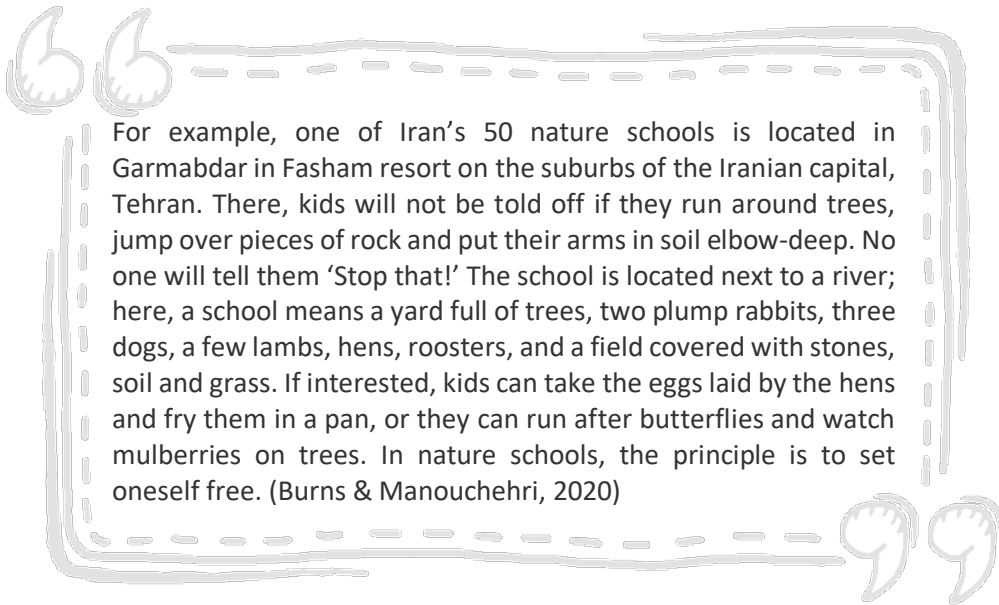
The story of Nature Schools in Iran began with Vahabzadeh, an Iranian ecologist and professor, who lost hope in academia as a space for changes towards sustainability. After forty years of hard work, he left university and turned to children who are still in the rooting stage and there is hope for their biophilic growth. The first Nature School founded was Kavikonj in Mashhad;

In Mashhad, Iran, for example, kids, teenagers, and other volunteers founded the Kavikonj Nature School—the first of its kind in the country—where urban youth, who otherwise have little access to nature and wildlife, plant trees, manage a small farm, and learn to care for the environment. (Burns & Manouchehri, 2020)

Over a few years, more and more activists whose hearts were with children and nature, joined the community that spread rapidly around the country. This became a movement opposing the formal education in Iran which is authoritative and ideologically informed, leaves little room for creativity, critical thinking, and individualized personal development, as well as no space for outdoor learning (Paivandi, 2012; Safari & Pourhashemi, 2012). More than eighty Nature Schools were established between 2014 and 2017 and the discourse was gradually gaining popularity and governmental permission from the Department of Environment facilitated the spread of the idea. In some cities local governments were lending land to the activists or allowing them to use parts of the botanical gardens and other kinds of public spaces.



What is it like in a Nature School?



Is Nature Schools still running in Iran?

Unfortunately, as the initiative was growing, a concurrent resistance against it was forming from the authorities' side. The reasons for opposition from the government and specially the Ministry of Education can be theorized extensively and can be explored within the mainly hegemonic politics of governance in Iran and the importance of formal schooling for the estate to keep integrity as a homogenous Islamic country (See Burns & Manouchehri, 2020 and Bashiri, 2020).

Nature Schools were constrained legally and a few of them exist today (an estimation of 30 by Bashiri, 2020). Albeit, for those activists who kept the idea and the practice of Nature School to heart and witnessed the astonishing impacts on children, abandoning the work was not an option. Activists found their own local solutions to keep working in one way or another.

A Bonfire Conversation

M, is one of the Nature School activists who established their Nature School in a village amidst the peak of the tensions with the government in 2017. They kept the school running and welcomed children even through the pandemic. M had to close the school due to some conflicts with the landowner in 2021, however, they believe the Nature School is still alive in the hearts and minds of those who had deep exchanges with this space. Nature School exists, in spirit, within the practices of those whom it inspired. The rest of this entry is in parts based on a conversation M and I had by a bonfire about the story of Nature Schools.



What is the purpose? What are the values?

Nature Schools, based on biophilia hypothesis and theories of outdoor learning and education in early childhood (Vahabzadeh, 2016), place a central value on the role of natural outdoor environment as the bed for learning and early childhood development. Playing in the natural environment and interaction with nature not only has proven to improve children's mental and physical health and develop their social skills like teamwork and collaboration, but also it is more likely that the children can form environmentally-friendly worldview (Molania & Arman, 2018; Tillmann et al., 2018; Turtle et al., 2015). If children can have meaningful interactions with nature in their childhood and form fond memories of natural landscapes, animals, and trees, these memories potentially give a sense of belonging to nature so that in their adulthood they might be more likely to react to natural destructions (Vahabzadeh, 2016).

For M it is not easy to guarantee anything about how Nature School can shape the future because of the many factors involved and given the political instability in the region and the world. But they say:

The main concern for us is to strengthen the relationship with nature. If we lose connection with anything it is difficult to understand its injuries and problems. It is important for the child to have a childhood memory of nature if they are to feel its loss in the future. On the other hand, I think this relationship in the childhood cannot guarantee anything per se, but Nature School can be an opportunity for adults to learn from the children how to authentically connect with nature. My hope is that by preparing this bed for human-nature connection, adults and the families who also have the need for nature, join this 'celebration' that we have thrown.

Another value that is central to Nature School pedagogy is the autonomy of the child in deciding their own way of playing and interacting with nature and other children (Azimi, 2020). They are not forced to learn "even to plant a tree" (Burns & Manouchehri, 2020). There is basically no teaching unless the child develops interest in learning a certain skill or topic more deeply, then the idea is to provide the facilities needed to such fulfill the learning need of the child. The idea is that only by allowing for child's own curiosity and interest for learning, their own capabilities would develop in unique and creative ways. That would as well mean the least intervention from adults/facilitators in their playing and learning process.

However, the dominant hegemonic educational approaches, religious and political ideologies, and cultural norms hold a strong stance on children's early childhood skill-gaining and learning (Paivandi, 2012; Safari & Pourhashemi, 2012). Consequently, promoting this non-authoritative and emancipatory approach has not been without legal and cultural constraints. Thus, making room for the discourse on Nature Schools pedagogical view within the dominant educational discourses, has become an activist agenda for the pedagogues. For M as well "spreading the idea, in families, in neighborhoods and in every corner is the main important goal". They added:

It is crucial to recognize childhood's needs and especially the need for free play. Recognizing the child as an independent person with their needs for interaction, space, and time. These are the main motivations behind my efforts. The problem is that there is no space left for childhood and people are deprived of the chance to live their childhood fully. Education is working as a means for transferring knowledge into a container and we do not value learning from experiences. Therefore, Nature School for me gave space to practice, support, and value creativity, lived experiences, observing, attention, problem solving, freedom of children to make choices and to lead their own learning process, and giving childhood the right to existence.

What about climate change?

Although nature School appears to be more leaning towards an educational praxis, there are several reasons that highlight this initiative as a form of radical environmental movement. First, the very founder of the initiative is a prominent ecologist with deep care for the dying nature. In his own words, Nature Schools have a radical view on connection with nature as a source of affection and belonging that hopefully keeps alive a sense of care and protection for nature in the future. Secondly, most of the activists that joined the initiative were previously active in environmental campaigns and NGOs (Bashiri, 2020). The third is the strong environmental framing of the Nature Schools as an essential environmental education model which allowed for its licencing from the DoE (Burns & Manouchehri, 2020).

However, I have noticed lately that the Nature School activists are not keen on prioritizing the environmental aspect of their work. I asked M about the distancing from environmental rhetoric and they responded:

When encountering many obstacles by the government and after being delicensed by the Department of Environment, our only audience and supporter were the families to whom we speak directly about *their* concerns. The parents' main concern is their child's growth rather than the environment. So, we focus on those narratives. This is more meaningful since in Iran an idea cannot be supported and developed among authorities, but it can among people.

When seeing Nature School within the landscape of climate change, M framed Nature Schools contributions in terms of mitigation and adaptation. In terms of mitigation, they mentioned the radical deep learnings for children in Nature School such as "limits to our resources" as well as "finding meaningful personal life-philosophies". In terms of adaptation, "personal development of tolerance and resilience in hardship" and "developing creativity" are some of the traits that allows for sustaining life in a climatically harsher planet. In his own words:

In Nature School we are not looking after training elites or we are not after 'success' as a stereotypical set of criteria for achievements in life. We want for the child to be able to find their own life philosophy, to make life enjoyable with their capabilities, talents, and the available resources, to be able to be content to what exists and to be able to optimize consumption. There is no abundance in Nature School, there is limit! In the school, there is limited amount of wood, for example, and if we burn all of them today, we must freeze tomorrow, and we would deeply feel the scarcity. With climatic changes we cannot go about doing agriculture and other practices as before. A child who has practiced creativity every day, can be more adaptable with the need for inventiveness during climate change. Some changes are inevitable such as drought, pandemic, war, etc. And our hope is that there will exist a generation that has the ability to tolerate suffering, like any other pains that the child encounters while playing in the Nature School and we don't deny them. We acknowledge pain in life. The child has learned that life can be a suffering and surviving/getting over the pain can be the child's success story.



What's missing? What needs to be improved?

What is obvious is the lack of institutional support from Nature Schools and even worse the ban against the spread of the initiative. This has led to a broken network of activists, lack of possibility to formally hold conferences and gatherings, and to enable research and educational possibilities to generate new knowledge about this alternative pedagogical approach. Therefore, the initiative is more vulnerable and faces more barriers to grow. M shares their view on such governmental support as:

From the institutional and legal aspect, I don't see any hope for this kind of discourse within the current governmental agencies. The essence of our discourse are some foundational concepts that are in contrast with the government's fundamental values.

To M, there is also another fundamental limit which is on the activist and on the people's side. They think:

We have enough resources, but very few believers who can understand that they can run Nature Schools regardless of spatial conditions. Nature School can be a concept or a mindset that flows and takes shape within any physical boundaries. You can practice Nature School at your grandma's house, just by living up to the fundamental values and objectives. Just by allowing the child free to play and fulfil their curiosity. Due to the lack of such deep and firm understanding of this idea, most people leave their projects halfway. For M the meaning of life is the survival of this idea wherever possible.

M continues with the shortcoming of Nature Schools that appeared important to him in his experience:

The very basic idea in Nature School is to embrace challenges and to enjoy problem-solving. However, we need to actively review and reflect on our progress and challenges in Nature Schools in an organized manner. We need to change the mindsets of the Nature School activists. Due to the load of the work and the tiredness of the activists, when an issue emerges it would be the end of the world. There is little work done on the relation between facilitators and with parents. The relationship between facilitators and the children are highly attended to and activists have a lot of experience with children but not with adults who are the audience of the Nature School and with their own colleagues. The Nature Schools don't have constructive and synergic relations with one another.

Replicating Nature Schools elsewhere?

What we know is that over time, especially after the legal constraints, the discursive aspect of Nature Schools has gained more weight and relevance than the physical dimensions (e.g. the land requirements and certain facilities) (Bashiri, 2020). The initiative has become partly informalized and diverse local strategies have been developed by activists based on the core values of the Nature School. As I have concluded in my research on Nature Schools (Bashiri, 2020):

Nature School was no longer treated as a place that children should go to for receiving service, but a concept that can flow in any space in society (households, yards, schools, neighborhoods) and based on capacities of people and spaces anyone can live up to the principles of Nature School and provide such services to children in any context.

In this regard, M adds:

This idea can be practices in every context with any resources. And this idea is already being naturally practiced by many people knowingly or unknowingly. We could either promote the idea, or just be a supporter of the idea wherever some aspects of it are communicated or lived up. Sometimes we see other initiatives that have similar values and practices, we could see, reinforce, and empower them as well.

Any hope for grand impacts?!

Based on my analysis of Nature School as a micro level initiative that aimed to create a transformation within the dominant regime of education and culture regarding children's early childhood learning, there are several reasons to say yes and no to this question. As a micro-level initiative, this initiative is benefiting from creative diverse strategies and a demand from the society for alternative educational models. However, the initiative, within its intricate contentious political context, has some big challenges to overcome. For instance, one is the broken network to be healed, and another is the learning exchange and knowledge production among activists to be addressed. These elements are deemed crucial for any initiative that wants to advance to higher levels of structural resilience.

For M it is difficult to tell anything about large-scale changes whether spatial or temporal. They ended our conversation with:

The macro politics create unexpected conditions for the world that any foreseeing is rendered impossible. This discourse, this idea, this initiative, to my belief, can calm and soothe people, can reduce competition and aggression. Childhood is an important period that can inform the social health in the future and if childhood is not cared for, it can create tensions in the family and society. If today's aggressive adults, who destroy and demolish, had a better childhood in a more enriched and cared for environment, maybe, they could find other meanings in their lives. If the Nature School can only calm people, that would be good enough for me.

Nature School seems to remind me of a lower tempo that is in tune with nature. Like the difference between tempo of life in the village and in the city. The closer one travels to a city the speeds increase and consequently the stress, competition, take overs. Even Nature School, with its promising message of a more peaceful world, is entangled in its larger rapidly-growing globalized context. And in this entanglement slowing down to reflect and review is not productive and of value for some Nature School activists. Entanglement does not mean to stop trying, but to acknowledge and work for transformation from within the system (See the Entangled Activist by Lawson, 2021).

References

- Azimi, M. (2020). مدرسه ی طبیعت، چگونگی آغاز فعالیت مدرسه ی طبیعت در ایران. [Nature School, how the activity of Nature School started in Iran]. *نشریه صنوبر [Senobar Magazine]*, 3 (9), 28-33. Available in Persian on <https://www.jaaar.com/kiosk/archives/Senobar>
- Bashiri, F. (2020). Walking a tightrope towards sustainability: a multi-level transition analysis of Iranian Nature Schools as an alternative educational initiative (unpublished master's thesis). Lund University, Sweden.
- Behruz, S.M., & Zarghami, E. (2018). یادگیری طبیعی، مطالعه‌ای بر مبنای مشاهده رفتار کودکان در مدرسه. طبیعت کاوی کنج مشهد [Natural learning, a study based on observation of children's behaviour in Mashhad Kavikonj Nature School]. *فناوری آموزش [Education technology]*. 13 (3), 387-401. <https://doi.org/10.22061/jte.2018.3953.1962>
- Burns, E. A., & Manouchehri, B. (2020). Context is Everything: Environment and Education Intersections in the Rise and Fall of Iran's Nature Schools. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 14(2), 156–173. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973408220978829>
- Kahn, P. H., & Kellert, S. R. (2002). *Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Evolutionary Investigations*. MIT Press.
- Lawson, A. (2021). *The Entangled Activist: Learning to Recognise the Master's Tools*. Perspectiva Press.
- Molania, S. & Arman, S. (2018). مدرسه سبز: مدیریت استفاده از گیاهان در مدارس و نقش آن در انسان‌گرا کردن مدارس مدرن [Green school: managing the use of plants in schools and their role in humanizing modern schools]. *journal of school Administration*, 6(1), 121-134. Retrieved on April 14, 2020 from http://jsa.uok.ac.ir/article_58080.html
- Paivandi, S. (2012). Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Perspectives on Democratic Reforms. Retrieved from https://www.li.com/docs/default-source/future-of-iran/iran_ed_paivandi.pdf
- Safari, P., & Pourhashemi, M. R. (2012). Toward an Empowering Pedagogy : Is There Room for Critical Pedagogy in Educational System of Iran? *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(12), 2548– 2555. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpis.2.12.2548-2555>
- Tillmann, S., Clark, A., & Gilliland, J. (2018). Children and Nature: Linking Accessibility of Natural Environments and Children's Health-Related Quality of Life. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 15(6), 1072. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15061072>
- Turtle, C., Convery, I., & Convery, K. (2015). Forest Schools and environmental attitudes: A case study of children aged 8–11 years. *Cogent Education*, 2(1), 1100103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2015.1100103>
- Vahabzadeh, A. (2016). Preface In Kahn & Kellert, (درسنامه ی مدرسه طبیعت) [Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Evolutionary Investigations] (3 ed., pp. 9).
- Wilson, R. (2007). *Nature and Young Children: Encouraging Creative Play and Learning in Natural Environments* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203940723>