**The Woods as an Educational Setting**

**“…**for the tree of the field is man's life…**”**

**Educational Rationale**

Human beings and creation are intertwined and interdependent. The purpose of our current initiative is to arouse and develop our students’ ability to observe nature, creation, and their natural environment and all its components, based on an ecological, environmental approach and on encouraging an informed, conscious connection between our learners and their environment.

This environmental approach will help learners develop awareness to all components of their environment and become attuned to them. We wish to emphasize that the focus on environmental issues is not the goal but rather an educational means to raise good people and for their benefit and that of their environment.

The woods as an educational setting is a unique model of learning where the forest is the classroom. The open space allows students and teachers to learn and expand their knowledge of the world by the many varied tools nature offers. They go into nature and, using nature, study the entire curriculum determined by the Education Ministry in arithmetic, language, English, Bible, and science. This setting enables curiosity-based learning and the development of creative thinking. Learning outside the four walls of the classroom allows thinking outside the box.

A world of rapid changes, of enormous and fluctuating amounts of information and knowledge demands innovation and flexibility of thinking. Learners need the ability to think creatively to succeed and to be and feel valuable at the personal and social level. The habit of thinking differently that becomes possible in an alternate educational setting allows students to develop these important skills.

But creative thinking is not just a collection of skills that can be developed by exercises. Teaching creative thinking and nurturing learners’ creativity are an extended process accompanying the learner in every aspect of life. To make sure this happens, it is necessary to create and preserve a learning climate that allows creativity over time and in a range of different contexts, and also to provide instruction on transferring these skills to contexts outside of school.

In the past, children in primitive societies participated in real life situations that provided them with education and learning (Barbara Ward, 1964). When theoretical knowledge the adults wanted to transmit to their children expanded, and especially when the number of children attending schools rose and the contemporary school system developed, educational activity contracted into the classroom and became almost solely theoretical. This severed the logical connection between the world of action and the process of learning and becoming educated. In recent years, the Education Ministry has begun to see the tremendous significance of promoting the exit from the classroom in order to develop children’s creative thinking. The trend of project-based learning has expanded greatly all over the world and serves as the foundation for the development of the program of the woods as an ongoing educational setting.

Here, in Merom Hagalil, leaving the classrooms for a day in the educational woods came about in cooperation with two elementary schools, Hemed and Bereshit, located near the Ecological Information Center. The pedagogical development was inspired by the Singapore math method and the spirit of the Rabbi Hiya Wellsprings approach developed in Israel.

At present, learning in the educational woods focuses on arithmetic. A day in the woods exposes the learners to a host of arithmetical examples through which children are guided to experience varied learning stations. Learning in the outdoors occurs when the children engage in experimenting and experiencing the many learning aids close to nature. The teacher and the students can repeat their experimentation during the learning as a means of gaining deeper understanding. The aids are available to the children also during their free time after the end of the school day.

Another principle of this method of learning is the belief that learning must be transmitted to children as an entire process relating to all parts of the children’s existence as a human being. This learning addresses the senses as the filters of human knowledge and goes through them – hearing, seeing, speaking, and touching – as well as through the children’s body parts. Such learning is internalized and integrated into the children’s consciousness as holistic learning.

Therefore, during the learning, both brain hemispheres – as representing two complementary parts of a whole – will be addressed, while using tasks and exercises that bridge the two to help children assimilate the knowledge in a more appropriate way than the one-dimensional frontal teaching method. As our experience with arithmetic has generated successes, we would like to expand the program to other school subjects.

This learning method and structured educational settings outside the classroom are an innovation unique to Merom Hagalil and, to the best of our knowledge, all of Israel. The two elementary schools near the woods are already using the method continuously as part of the weekly arithmetic curriculum (lately, language classes have also been started in this setting).

Already now, at the pilot stage, educators from all over Israel have contacted us, showing great interest and desire to learn the method. Our partners in the Education Ministry and Environmental Protection Ministry view the method as groundbreaking and are promoting professional in-service program as an presentational platform for teachers interested in developing such practical tools in their schools. In the future, we hope partner with an academic institution involved with elementary and high school education to institutionalize and disseminate the method.

**Background**

The Merom Hagalil Regional Council covers 50,000 acres (2,000 hectares) of the beautiful, green Galilee; some 79 percent of the area are nature reserves and forests. The connection to agriculture is obvious given the nature of the region. Agriculture is a major source of income, as is tourism (especially agricultural tourism, such as visits to vineyards and wineries), which developed in the last two decades. The communal ties among the 24 varied settlements (of Jews, Circassians, and Druse) are somewhat less obvious, and represent an issue we are working hard to address, in part via an excellent, unique educational foundation bridging communities and breaking down more than just the boundaries set by classroom walls.

In recent years, the council, with the help of many fine partners from government ministries and third sector organizations, established a regional educational and communal center located in the council’s geographical center (near Meron). The heart of the center is devoted to an early childhood center, representing a one-stop station for all that parents and children aged 0-9 need: a well-baby clinic, a developmental treatment unit, communal activities, and more.

Unique to the Merom Golan center is the Gan Galil Ecological Information Center. The center has an interior space that kindergarten children (from some 40 kindergartens a year) visit year-round for an enrichment program linking them to people, the earth, and the community. In addition, Gan Galil has a unique playground with varied experiential stations: an archeological tell with potshards, an experiential vineyard, a vegetable garden, an outdoor kitchen, and more. Activities have been held consecutively for eight years and have garnered success and appreciation in Israel and the world (groups from the United Kingdom, the United States, and even Japan have come to visit).

As is true in general of the world of education, we too have continued to innovate and renew our activities. This is how “The Woods as Educational Setting” came into being. The program was developed by the director of training programs at Gan Galil together with the pedagogical directors and teams from the two nearby schools, overseen by Education Ministry supervisors and the directors of education at the Environmental Protection Ministry.

The program invites children (students in the elementary schools) to the enchanted woods near the Ecological Information Center to engage in experiential learning of the core subjects. Learning takes place in the woods and uses the natural means the woods provide as well as means especially constructed from natural materials for the sake of this experiential learning.

The content of learning approved by the Education Ministry’s books leaves the confines of the classroom and bursts into nature, merges with it, and stimulates the natural curiosity of children to experience, play, experiment, and engage in significant learning. The curriculum is taught by the classroom teachers who are trained to use the innovating learning materials, thereby also empowering and enriching the schools’ educators.

This year, the first-graders got to experience the method in arithmetic. The responses, impressions, and results of the limited experience were very positive, which is providing us with the encouragement to ask for support to expand the initiative to more students, classes, and subjects.

We believe this is a ground-breaking project whose success can be studied and replicated all over Israel and the world: the integration of innovation in learning aids and the connection to nature and the earth, while staying close to the material required by the Education Ministry, come together to create a unique and successful initiative.

The attached document will give you a better and deeper sense of the method’s educational rationale.

**Objectives**

* To impart knowledge in line with the obligatory content of the Education Ministry in an experiential, ground-breaking fashion.
* To develop an innovative educational setting in the woods that will serve as a model for learning outside the classroom.
* To allow students a learning experience that uses their senses and inherent natural curiosity.
* To provide a significant learning experience for students through experience, play, and the use of all their senses.

**Work Plan and Budget Use**

We are proposing an annual work plan in arithmetic in two schools for grades one through six. The Hemed School has six classes in the environmental track, whereas the Bereshit School has a total of eight. The students would learn in the outdoors for two consecutive hours every week as dictated by the changing schedule of every class. The program would operate according to the schedule of the 2017-2018 school year starting September 1, 2017.

The pedagogical foundation is already complete. What is left to do is to work together with the schools’ teachers to adjust and fine-tune the curriculum so that it meets the requirements of the Education Ministry. To do so, we need 10 sessions of joint work and training in the outdoors classroom to be held during the months left of the current school year – a 3-hour training session once a month for 14 teachers and two school principals.

Indexes of success:

1. Full participation in the teacher training sessions.
2. Increased enrolment into the environmental track at the Hemed School.
3. Improved mathematical understanding of the students (to be tested used calibrated tests).
4. Increased use of the experiential learning method in other subjects.

**Financing**

The program’s pilot was financed by the Merom Hagolan Regional Council’s Education Division and the Environmental Protection Agency (through a ministry call for proposals). To date, the financing covered the salaries for the professionals who developed the program, the cost of the raw materials to construct the educational aids, as well as the cost in developing the site in woods to ensure it is both safe and adapted to the curriculum. We had NIS 60,000 available to develop the pilot; this money has been used in full.

Annual budget for the full arithmetic curriculum:

Manpower

1. Pedagogical developer: 10 weekly hours = NIS 4,000 per month x 10 months = NIS 40,000
2. On-site counselor: 35 weekly hours (28 hours of counseling + 7 hours prep) = NIS 7,000 per month x 10 months = NIS 70,000

Developing the physical infrastructure in the woods

1. Constructing educational aids: NIS 22,000
2. Educational signage: NIS 5,000

Training

1. 10 training session for the teaching staff x 3 hours = 30 hours x NIS 100 per hour for 16 participants; expenditures for training and learning materials = NIS 3,000
2. Producing a study booklet for the training (writing and printing): NIS 3,000

**Total budget required: NIS 143,000**

Sources of financing:

The Merom Hagalil Regional Council: NIS 73,000

Amount requested from the ICA Foundation: NIS 70,000