

Emergent Curriculum

by Carol Anne Wien

What is emergent curriculum anyway? In 2000, we had a spring conference in Halifax where we described emergent curriculum this way -

"Emergent curriculum is an approach to teacher planning that begins with listening. Teachers collaborate to watch for children's interests, worries, desires, understandings and misunderstandings and use these as the beginning points for curriculum. It is developmentally appropriate, and builds on well-developed observation skills of early childhood teachers. Once teachers select a focus, they plan provocations or interesting events that stimulate children's thinking and activity. Teachers document children's responses and think carefully about the next step. The intent of emergent curriculum is to slow down and deepen positive relationships among children, teachers, families and their environment."
(Wien & Stacey, 2000)

This is all very well – it sounds pretty fine – but what is it that teachers should do to create this so-called emergent curriculum? Early childhood teachers are accustomed to observing young children carefully for their developmental interests (was there ever a two-year old who did not enjoy a 'dump and fill' curriculum, for instance?) but what do more individual interests of young children look like?

How does a teacher recognize young children's interests? They seem so ephemeral, appearing one moment and disappearing the next. Carrie¹ thought she observed an interest in trains among her young three-year olds, and responded with train activities, such as playing trains with chairs lined up as boxcars and a drawing activity. But she thought she had been mistaken for these activities felt imposed, not authentic. The children talked more about travel in general, mentioning planes and visiting relatives, and what she thought was an interest quickly waned and turned elsewhere. Her colleague Suzanne commented some weeks later, "I am more lost than ever to find their interest." How does a teacher listen and observe for interests when what they see is quick movement, a word here and there, and when language itself is not yet fully developed?

The educators of Reggio Emilia went through a phase in their work with North American educators of saying they believed that they had emphasized projects developed out of children's interests too much (eg. Gambetti & Gandini, 2003). They thought we needed to be reminded of the importance of ordinary activities, "of encounters with materials". They recommended slow encounters to understand qualities of materials – the stickiness of tape or glue for instance, or the pleasures of sanding blocks or organizing coloured bits into jars for the classroom, the joy of watching the goldfish's sinuous motion, of rolling down the hill, planting pansies. They reminded us that much of early life is an exploration of people, of materials, of swift interactions with the immediate environment (Malaguzzi, 1998). Teacher preparation is having these interesting possibilities ready and at hand. They reminded us of the importance to young children of interacting with the world in a fresh way – unschooled and untimed.

So, for instance, the three-year olds in Janice, Suzanne, and Carrie's group have greatly enjoyed encounters with new hockey equipment and bulking up in pads and helmets to play outdoors, or molding orange play dough with little paper fins stuck into it to look like their goldfish, or adding Jell-O powder to baby food jars and water and observing the colours change as they stirred madly with a paintbrush. One moment of emergent curriculum grew out of Janice's question to a small group: "What could we do that is special?" "Ride the bus." "Go to the beach." "Fly kites." These ideas from the children led to some quick kite making and a trip two days later by bus to the beach of Point Pleasant Park where the kites were flown. The heart of the experience for the children was the fact they missed the bus on the way.

This emergent curriculum developed over three days, a brief but nonetheless genuine opportunity for the children's ideas and desires to be made real in the world, to realize an adult had listened to them, and stretched their three-to-four word images into life. Encounters with materials predominated – the missed bus, the beach, the kites all entwined together. The children's intentions were fulfilled, and enriched – that missed bus again.

¹ The early childhood educators whose work provides examples in this article are Janice MacKinnon, Carrie Smith, and Suzanne Singh, teachers in the Junior Preschool at Peter Green Hall Children's Centre.

But what about the teachers' intentions? While much broader – encompassing issues of development, inclusion, cultural diversity, social and intellectual stimulation, psychological safety, and so forth – when there is a match between teachers and children's intentions there seems to be a strong sense of fulfillment, satisfaction and enrichment in living together.

After one boy went for a ride on his uncle's boat, talk about boats and boat play spread spontaneously among these teachers' group of three- year olds. After several weeks there was more frequent mention of boats, enjoyment in playing with plastic boats in the water table, connection between boats and fish and movement – "fish swim, I swim, boats swim." Janice engaged a group of four children in building a "canoe", with wooden blocks, using a photograph as a reference point. Where will it go?

We don't know yet. Perhaps not far, perhaps it will surprise us. But it is the process of documentation, taking photos of children in activity, capturing what they say on tape or in notes, collecting sample work such as drawings or clay models, and teacher reflection on this documentation -- studying it for what it shows about children's understanding of the world -- that leads to the next step in planning. We ask ourselves, what are the children's theories about boats? What do they know about them, beyond the plastic tugs that float in the water table? We live in a port city with a busy harbour filled with boat traffic – container ships, freighters, tugs, the ferry to Dartmouth, naval frigates and destroyers, a ship museum, sailboats, the Bluenose schooner. Are they aware of any of this? Would they be interested in it? Could they make connections to this aspect of their city's life? We don't know. Would it interest us to find out?

Emergent curriculum then is also the teachers' inquiry into what children know and understand and how that understanding can be stretched and deepened. This inquiry goes beyond the early childhood classroom to encounter the landscape and community that surrounds the children in their child care centre. How can the teachers help the children participate in the life of their community as interested citizens, and how can that community be invited to take its youngest citizens into its midst so they and their educators are not isolated from its life?

The teachers' documentation traces the learning of the children around the topic of interest. It includes the children's theories, and the teachers' theories about the children's

understanding. The documentation of emergent curriculum makes teaching and learning visible to those both inside and outside the experience.

Possible Stages in Teacher Development in Emergent Curriculum

Let me say first that the "stages" that follow are my speculation only, are an interpretation of what happens, and are provisional – this thinking might change in several months. But I have been watching emergent curriculum carefully and with interest for a decade, and recognize that it is more difficult to put into practice than to adopt as a value. Here's what I see at this point in time, expressed as if the teacher in that stage were thinking out loud.

- *The Challenged teacher.* "I like the idea of emergent curriculum but I don't seem to be doing it. I don't know how to do this. What do their interests look like anyway? What would I do if I found one? What should I do that is different from the way I normally do activities?"
- *The Novice in Emergent Curriculum.* "Ah, there, I made something work for a moment. Caught the excitement. What did I do that was different? Was it the conversation? My response to the children's ideas? And why am I documenting? I either can't seem to do it or I can do some photos with text of children's words. It just seems I'm filling up their portfolios or my program binder to make it thick. And I can't seem to find time for it. And what am I supposed to do with it. Although the parents do like the stuff we put up for them to see."
- *The Practicing Teacher of Emergent Curriculum.* "Yes, I grasp how to have a conversation with children that gets at their ideas and theories. I know how to take an idea or theory and make it visible through documentation for children and parents, but there's so much going on I hardly know where to turn. I can't keep up with it. I get bits of documentation done but there's so much that intervenes – illness, lice, separation anxiety in new kids, its just endless – and those are part of our living together too. We don't have

enough time to share among colleagues, but we meet when the children are napping. We enjoy trying out some ideas of our own and predicting or hypothesizing what the children's response will be and seeing if that happens. And we constantly, I mean constantly, observe our environment to assess how it is shaping the children's behaviour and whether we can correct something that pulls down our functioning together by altering the environment: we assess materials, quantity of them and numbers of play spaces, whether to reroute traffic paths, whether sound quality is a problem, and so forth. Our program may fall apart for periods of time and coast on the traditional stuff: we get tired or have too many substitutes who don't know how to support this way of working and we then may rely on more traditional programming. But we always have long uninterrupted blocks of time in which many activities and possibilities blend."

- *The Master Teacher of Emergent Curriculum.* "We do all the things the practicing teacher does – careful documentation, working with our own inquiry into children's understanding, checking our understanding against both what we see in the children and in what we read. We work collaboratively, finding colleagues with whom to bounce our understandings about the children off; and we enjoy predicting together what the children will do and figuring out various directions in which this thinking and action might move. We try to prepare for those: if a child says "we need water," we want to have it close by. Our documenting habits are secure. We decide really carefully what to document – we let lots go – and we decide beforehand who will use the camera, who will capture their words, and when we will meet to go over what we have documented. We work with the environment a lot, and the organizing of time, keeping it open. We can sense possibilities in the children and find ways to draw them out so we can work with them, expand them."

I am learning from teachers who practice emergent curriculum that they consciously build many layers into their program to enrich the children's thinking. These layers include serious conversation to find out what children think, documentation, using many modes of expression (paint, clay, drawing, wire work, dance, music), generous expanses of time (and doing things many times), rich resources, parent involvement, carefully prepared activities, collaborative sharing, teacher study. Many layers in the programme enrich children's thinking so it moves among many reference points

and grows more complex and integrated. Emergent curriculum is deeply fulfilling to children and teachers because it is a creative collaboration, people coming together and co-designing their learning. It requires steadfast attunedness to children by teachers and it is not for the faint of heart or those who prefer learning to be on a timed schedule: it is softer, messier, and more uncertain. But when it works, it is so exhilarating it is both unforgettable and deeply joyful. One of my graduate students in Toronto, Noula Berdoussis, supported her grade one children's interest in shells and an empty aquarium, and this interest developed into a study of starfish. The class became deeply engrossed in finding out about starfish, saw live ones at a fish store, drew and painted and asked serious questions. As they worked, one child said, "The class is so excited! It's like a birthday party in here" (Berdoussis, unpublished thesis, p.35). It is this tremendous excitement about living and learning together that is the heart of education for those of us developing emergent curriculum.

Carol Anne Wien is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto. She is the author of "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in 'Real Life'" and "Negotiating Standards in the Primary Classroom" and many articles in journals on DAP, emergent curriculum, the influence of the Reggio Emilia Approach and teacher development. Her passion is to make the arts, inquiry, and a caring love for others a constant part of everyday life.

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Editor: E. Elaine Ferguson
Child Care Connections
100-1200 Tower Road,
Halifax, NS B3H 4K6
(902) 423-8199
1-800-565-8199 (Atlantic)
(902) 492-8106 (fax)
cccns@istar.ca
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