

First Things First

Early Childhood Summit

August 25, 2015



After Conference Slide Presentation
The following slides contain more text than would be advisable for a presentation. They are intended to provide both slide and verbal presentation content.

Emergent Curriculum in Practice: Stories & Inspirations from an Arizona Preschool

After Conference Slide Presentation

The following slides contain more text than would be advisable for a presentation. They are intended to provide both slide and verbal presentation content.

Foundations of Reggio Emilia

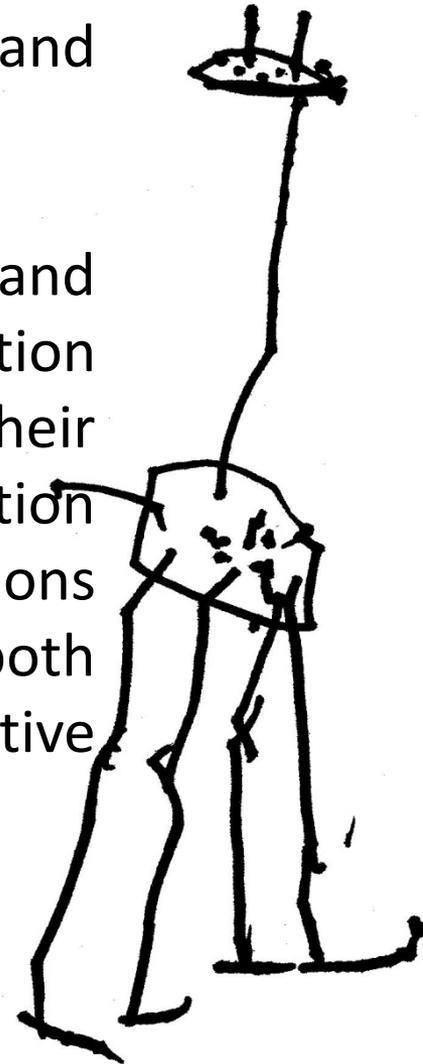
1. Children have rights rather than needs.
2. The child is a strong and powerful player in creating their own knowledge.
3. The teacher is a strong and powerful player in creating learning experiences, making learning visible.
4. Learning is dynamic and occurs through relationships with others and the environment.
5. The Hundred Languages of Children gives voice to what children know, what they wonder about.

1 Children have rights rather than needs.

“Children have the right to be recognized as the bearers of important rights: individual, social and legal.

They both carry and construct their own culture and are therefore active participants in the organization of their identity, their autonomy and their capabilities. The construction of this organization takes place through relationships and interactions with peers, adults, ideas and objects, as well as both real and imaginary events of a communicative world.”

Malaguzzi 1994



2

The child is a strong and powerful player in creating their own knowledge.

“What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught.

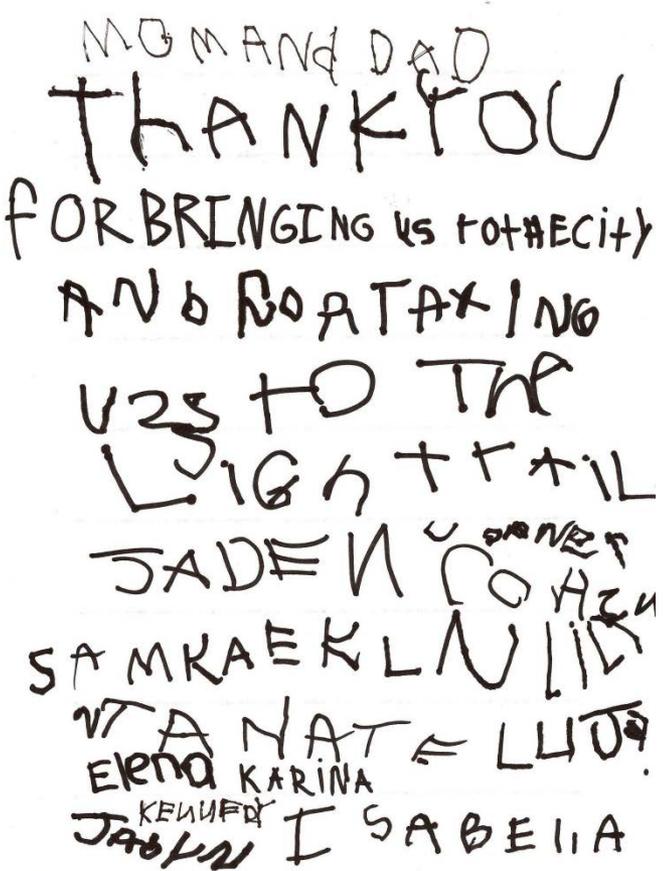
Rather, it is in large part due to the children's own doing as a consequence of their activities and our resources.”

Malaguzzi 1993



3 The teacher is a strong and powerful player in creating learning experiences.

The teacher should listen to the child in order to develop as a teacher, listen to the parents to further understand, and listen to each other to stimulate professional development.



MOM AND DAD
THANK YOU
FOR BRINGING US TO THE CITY
AND BOAT RIDE
US TO THE
LIGHT TAIL
JADEN ^{LOVER}
SAMKAEK LULU
WANAT LUTU
ERNA KARINA
KEWERT
JASHN ISABELIA

3 The teacher is a strong and powerful player in creating learning experiences.

Teachers listen to the children's interests and develop projects together, learning simultaneously during the process.

“We teachers must see ourselves as researchers, able to think, and produce a true curriculum, a curriculum produced from all of the children.”

Malaguzzi 1993

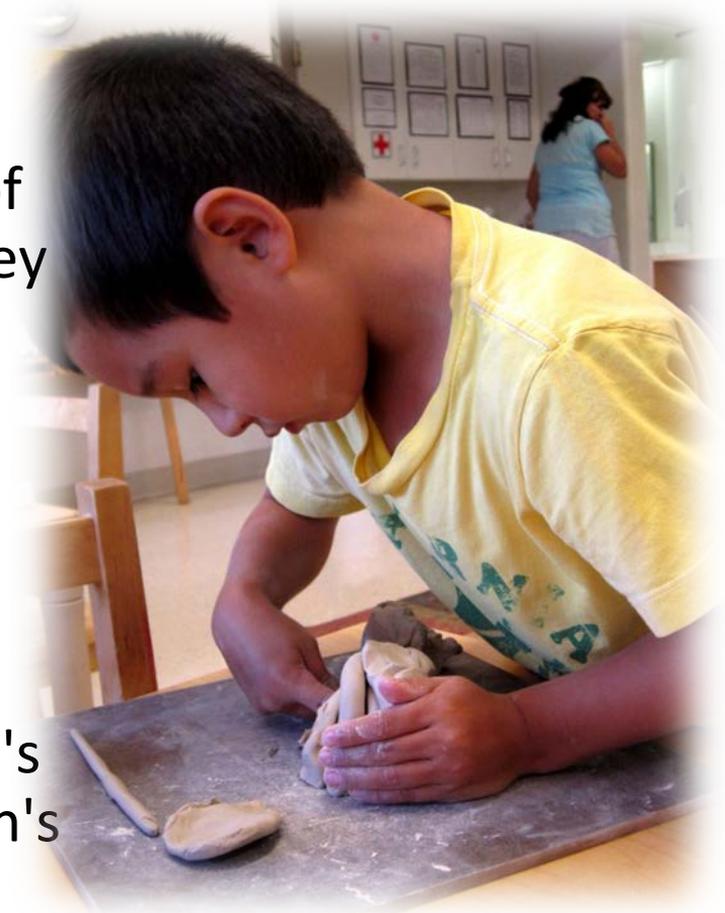


3 The teacher is a strong and powerful player in creating learning experiences.

A major focus of the Reggio approach is observation and documentation.

Teachers routinely take notes and photographs and make tape recordings of group discussions and children's play. They meet each week to focus on their observations. Teachers review the documentation and strive to hear the strongest currents of interest within children's flow of ideas.

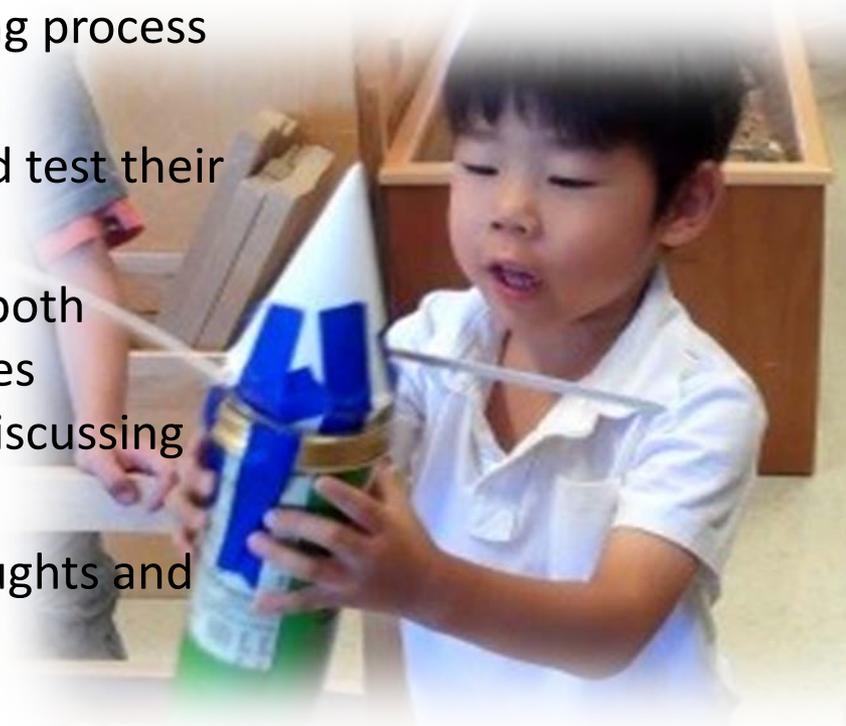
They then use what they learn to plan activities that are truly based on children's interests and to gain insights into children's individual personalities and into child development as a whole.



3 The teacher is a strong and powerful player in creating learning experiences.

The Reggio teacher is a partner in the learning process who allows the children to:

- Ask their own questions and generate and test their own hypotheses.
- Explore and generate many possibilities, both affirming and contradictory. She welcomes contradictions as a venue for exploring, discussing and debating.
- Use symbolic languages to represent thoughts and ideas about how things works.
- Communicate their ideas to others.
- Revisit ideas and work as an opportunity to reorganize concepts, ideas, thoughts and theories, and construct new meaning.



3 The teacher is a strong and powerful player in creating learning experiences.

Malaguzzi decided upon limiting class size to twenty as well as there being two teachers in every classroom rather than the customary one.

Teachers should work collectively and without hierarchy.



4 Learning is dynamic and occurs through relationships with others and the environment.

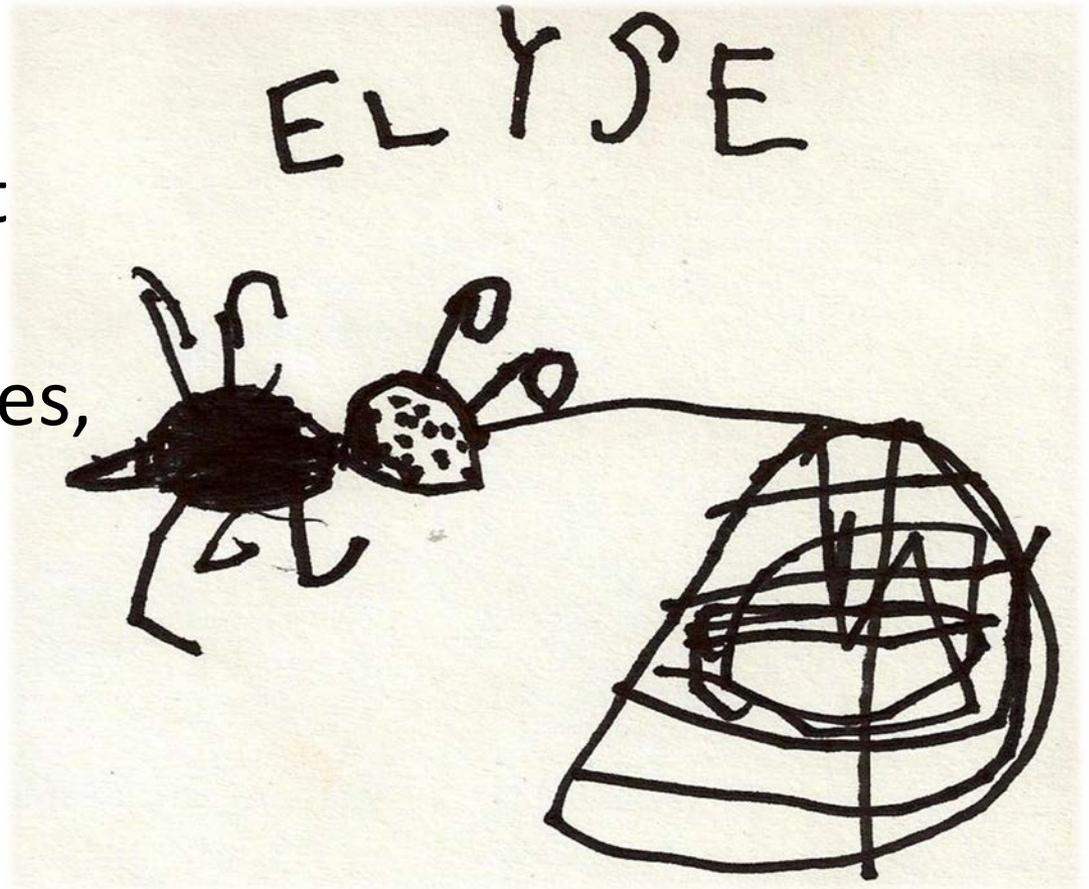
Lella Gandini explains that the environment must be flexible and must be adapted with the changing needs of the children. She remembers the words of Malaguzzi who told her that,

“We value space because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships among people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social affective, and cognitive learning.”

5 The Hundred Languages of Children gives voice to what children know, what they wonder about.

Gandini defines as:
“The many ways that children express themselves, tell stories, and experiment with situations.”

The Hundred Languages of Children, 2012 p.176



Foundations of Reggio Emilia

1. Children have rights rather than needs.
2. The child is a strong and powerful player in creating their own knowledge.
3. The teacher is a strong and powerful player in creating learning experiences, making learning visible.
4. Learning is dynamic and occurs through relationships with others and the environment.
5. The Hundred Languages of Children gives voice to what children know, what they wonder about.

Theories of Emergent Curriculum

- 1900's Psychologist **John Dewey** view that learning is an active process and not merely the transmission of pre-packaged knowledge. Dewey not only re-imagined the way that the learning process should take place, but also the role that the teacher should play within that process. According to Dewey, the teacher should not be one to stand at the front of the room doling out bits of information to be absorbed by passive students. Instead, *the teacher's role should be that of facilitator and guide.* Dr. **Maria Montessori** advocates for learning *environments that are beautiful and intentional.* Psychologist **Lev Vygotsky** called for highly engaging social interactions with his theories of *social situation development.*

Theories of Emergent Curriculum

- 1940's Child psychologist **Arnold Gesell** created child study laboratories at universities, taking detailed notes on children's physical and social-emotional development.
- 1950's Psychoanalyst **Erik Erikson** first published a theory of developmental stages that explained in depth the role of play at the stage of initiative - the years from age 3 -5.

All of these researchers focused attention on the young child as an active participant in learning, self-motivated and deserving of intensive study in a thoughtfully planned environment. There is no prescribed curriculum, rather the curriculum is emergent based upon the children's needs and interests.

Theories of Emergent Curriculum

- 1960's Psychologist **Jean Piaget's** theories of cognitive development dovetail into a national program designed to provide early childhood educational opportunities to the nation's poor – Head Start. Piaget considered *schemata* to be the basic building blocks of thinking – developing his theory of *constructivism*.

With increasing need for accountability, teachers are required to follow a curriculum and children are tested for mastery.

The commercial publication industry booms with development of curricula and the testing industry is born.



Where do ideas come from?

NAEYC Highly Effective Curriculum

A photograph of three young children sitting at a wooden table, looking through magnifying glasses at a clear plastic jar lid. The child in the center is wearing a grey t-shirt with the word 'KID' visible. The child on the left is wearing a red patterned shirt. The child on the right has long blonde hair. The background is a blurred classroom setting.

1. Learning is at the core. Teachers keep in mind the goals that support the development of children.
2. A rich classroom environment serves as another “teacher” for the children.
3. Teachers and other adults build strong, caring relationships with children through positive interactions.

Intentional thinking about BLOCKS

WHO DECIDES?

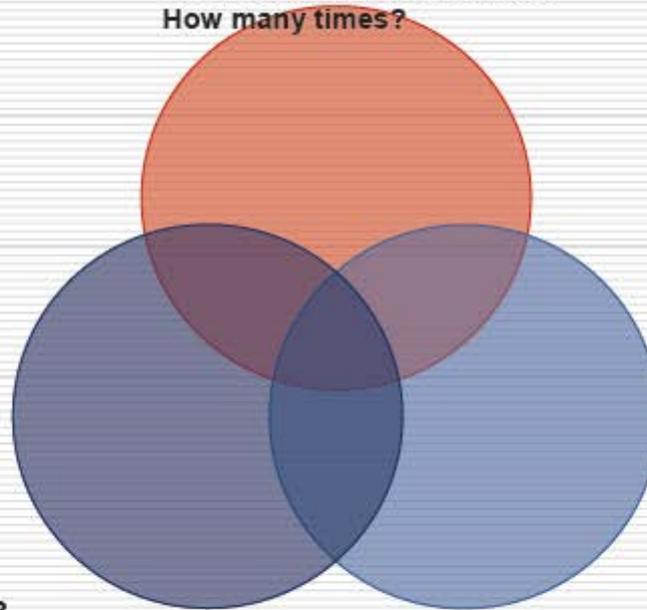
Role of Teacher:

How to enhance play?
When is activity observed?
How is activity documented?
When are materials rotated?

Collaborate with your
teaching partners or
director as you consider
each of your classroom
learning centers

Time:

When are blocks used?
How often? How long?
What part of each day?
How flexible is the schedule?
How many times?



Space:

Where?
How is space arranged?
What is the space size?
How many share this space?
Is the space safe?
Inside or outside?
Is it clear of pathways?

Materials:

What type of blocks?
Are they safe?
How many kids will use?
How many blocks per child?
What props needed?
How will children access them?
When will they be rotated?

Evaluating Learning Spaces

- Do the colors work together?
- How might you add softness, the feel of home?
- Is the lighting harsh? Is there enough light, shadows?
- What sounds do you hear?
- What scents are present?
- Do spaces fit well together? Is the flow working?
- Are materials inviting? How are materials presented?

Remember that children tell us whether the space is working or not by how they use the space!

Making Connections

Assessment is evaluating individual children's development toward specific learning goals.

Highly effective programs integrate assessment and curriculum development.

Teachers continually engage in observational assessment, modifying the curriculum to meet the learning needs of children.

The Teacher as a Researcher

Carlina Rinaldi:

“Experience and emotions that characterize “scientific” research... such as curiosity, the unknown, doubt, error, crisis, theory and confusion, are not usually a part of school work or daily life.”

When you think of the term “research” – what comes to mind? When you think of children’s curiosity – what do you visualize in your mind? Can you change your perspective about yourself?

- 
- This slide presentation does not include classroom video and photos presented at the 2015 Summit.
 - Please visit: <http://www.pinnaclepres.org/inspire/>

For additional information on Emergent Curriculum in Practice

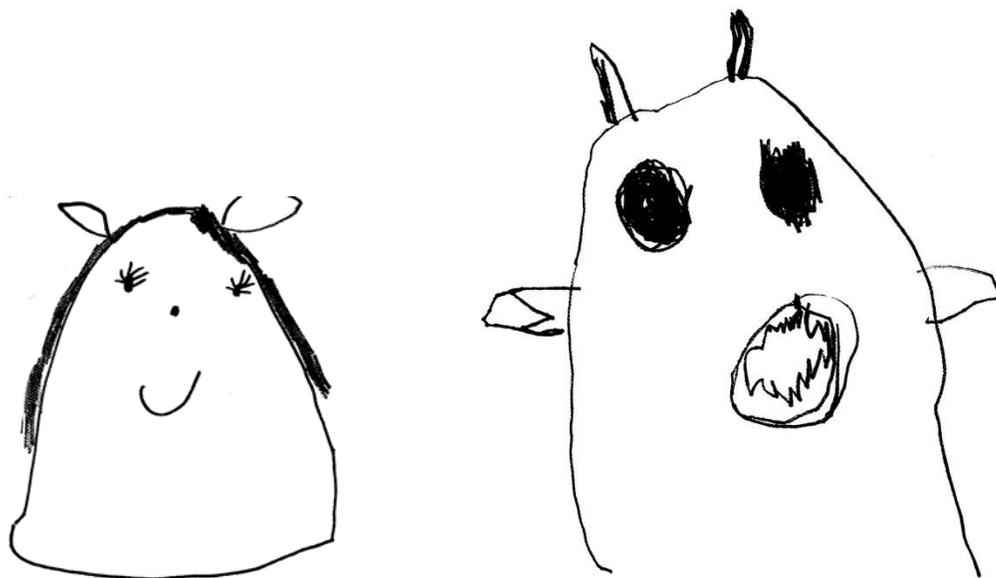
What is Emergent Curriculum?

Emergent curriculum develops from exploring ideas that are socially relevant, intellectually engaging and personally meaningful to children. Ideas can initially come from just about any source: teachers, parents, chance events and of course, the interests of the children. Regardless of the source of the idea, it is an idea that captures the interest and imagination of the children.

It responds to children's immediate interests rather than focusing on narrow or thematic topics.

It is process rather than product driven.

It connects learning with real experiences and prior learning.



Monsters in the Atelier

Theories on How Children Learn

Traditional teaching is rooted in behaviorist theory which places emphasis upon subject matter and how to communicate information to children. Teachers of the behaviorist theory see their role as transmitting information to children to be remembered (Bancscombe, et.al., 2003). As such, the teacher spends classroom time instructing through sequencing content, drilling, correcting and testing.

In contrast, Piaget's social-constructivist theory implies, "the preoccupation is not the teacher's *'instruction'*, but the child's *'construction'*," (DeVries, et.al. 1990) Constructivist teachers see their role as providing creative opportunities for children to have realistic experiences related to content, guiding the learning and clarifying ideas. The focus is not on the subject but *on the process of learning*. Constructivist teachers understand that learning occurs within the context of the classroom environment and the ideas of people (peers and adults) within the life of the child. The desire of the constructivist teacher is to scaffold the child's learning in such a way that the teacher becomes a *co-creator of knowledge*, creating a partnership between the child and the teacher.

What is a Project?

A project is an in depth investigation of an emergent topic. An investigation starts after the children have demonstrated sustained interest in the topic. Projects typically have three phases:

PHASE I – Kick Around Phase

Teachers act as a guide by providing information, personal experiences and activities. Teachers provide experiences not answers. Teachers observe and document what children are saying and thinking about the topic. Children hypothesize about how things work.

PHASE II – Investigation Phase

Teachers ask children what they already know, what questions they have about the topic.

Teachers ask open-ended questions to guide the children in how the class might find answers to their questions.

Teachers and parents work together to provide learning experiences.

Adults with knowledge of the topic are invited to share expertise with class.

If appropriate, a field trip is organized.

Children use representational art to communicate knowledge.

Children are asked to work in small groups, dividing responsibilities.

Teachers use the investigative process to teach to standards.

Teachers document the work and words of the children.

Teachers communicate classroom experiences to parents.

Throughout Phase II teachers are reviewing questions with the children, often new questions emerge. Teachers remain flexible as tangent topics may emerge.

PHASE III – Reflection and Celebration Phase

Teachers review and evaluate the project.

The class shares their findings and understanding with others, often other classrooms and parents.

Teachers provide opportunities for children to see (through documentation & group time) the learning process and review their work.

The project culminates with a celebration, often with parents.

Inspired by the REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH

Emergent Curriculum: Grounded in the powerful image of the child, emergent curriculum is one that builds upon the interests of the children. Topics for study are captured from the talk of the children and known interests of children (puddles, shadows, dinosaurs, and so on). So children learn to count dinosaurs, read about dinosaurs, to draw dinosaurs if that is a topic of interest to them. Curriculum is standard based and developmentally appropriate.

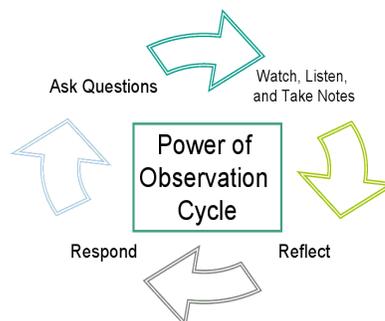
Project Work: Projects, also emergent, are in-depth studies of concepts, ideas and interests which have been expressed within the group. Considered as an adventure, projects may last one week or the entire school year. For example, if a group of children are interested in pets then the class may visit a veterinarian. They may open a pretend pet store. The class will read pet stories and so on.

Representational Development: The Reggio Emilia approach calls for the integration of the graphic arts as tools for cognitive, linguistic and social development. Learned concepts are represented in many forms – print, art, construction, clay, drama, music, puppetry and shadow play – all are viewed as essential to children's understanding of experience.

Collaboration: Collaborative group work, both large and small, is considered valuable and necessary to advance cognitive development. Children are encouraged to dialogue, critique, compare, negotiate, hypothesize and problem solve through group work. Within Reggio Emilia approach there is high emphasis on the collaboration among home, school and community to support the learning of the child.

Teachers as Researchers: Working as co-teachers, the role of the teacher is first and foremost to be that of a learner alongside the children. Teachers carefully listen, observe and document children's work and the growth of the community in their classroom. Teachers are to provoke, construct and stimulate thinking. The teacher is a resource and a guide as she/he lends expertise to children. Teachers are committed to reflection about their own teaching and learning.

Documentation – Making Learning Visible: Documentation of children's work in progress is viewed as an important tool for parents and teachers. The room is filled with the children's work, photographs and their words as they discuss what they are learning, doing, feeling and thinking. Documentation boards and personal portfolios are used as graphic representation of the dynamic learning experiences occurring daily in the classroom. Time is provided to revisit children's work and ideas – discussions which often drive new investigations.



Howard Gardner

In Reggio, the teachers know how to listen to children, how to allow them to take the initiative, and yet how to guide them in productive ways. There is no fetish made about achieving adult standards, and yet the dedication exemplified by the community ensures that work of quality will result.

As an American educator, I cannot help but be struck by certain paradoxes. In America we pride ourselves on being focused on children, and yet we do not pay sufficient attention to what they are actually expressing.

We call for cooperative learning among children, and yet we rarely have sustained cooperation at the level of teacher and administrator.

We call for artistic works, but we rarely fashion environments that can truly support and inspire them.

We call for parental involvement, but are loathe to share ownership, responsibility, and credit with parents.

We recognize the need for community, but we so often crystallize immediately into interest groups.

We hail the discovery method, but we do not have the confidence to allow children to follow their own noses and hunches.

We call for debate, but often spurn it; we call for listening, but we prefer to talk; we are affluent, but we do not safeguard those resources that can allow us to remain so and to foster the affluence of others.

Reggio is so instructive in these respects. Where we are often intent to invoke slogans, the educators in Reggio work tirelessly to solve many of these fundamental—and fundamentally difficult—issues.

The Hundred Languages of Children
The Reggio Emilia Approach - Advanced Reflections
Second addition
1998 Ablex Publishing Corporation:Greenwich, CT
Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, George Forman

Howard Gardner is the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The author of twenty-nine books translated into thirty-two languages, Gardner is best known in educational circles for his theory of multiple intelligences.

During the past two decades, Gardner and colleagues at Harvard's Project Zero have been involved in the design of performance-based assessments; education for understanding; the use of multiple intelligences to achieve more personalized curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy; and the quality of interdisciplinary efforts in education.

**Emergent Curriculum in Practice: Stories & Inspirations
Reading List & References**

- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Edwards, C. P., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. E. (2011). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experience in transformation*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Forman, G., & Gandini, L. (2006). *The amusement park for birds* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rLpM06lR1c&list=PL16816EF171DBAC1E&index=1>
- Fraser, S. (2006). *Authentic childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom*. Toronto, Ontario: Thomson/Nelson.
- Fraser, S., & Gestwicki, C. (2002). *Authentic childhood: Exploring Reggio Emilia in the classroom*. Albany, NY: Delmar/Thomson Learning.
- Gardner, H. (1998). Forward: Complementary perspectives on Reggio Emilia. In *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia - approach advanced reflections* (2nd ed.). Greenwich, CT: Ablex.
- Giudici, C., Rinaldi, C., Krechevsky, M., Barchi, P., Gardner, H., Filippini, T., . . . Municipal Infant-toddler Centers and Preschools of Reggio Emilia. (2001). *Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners*. Cambridge, MA: Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Jones, E. (2012). The emergence of emergent curriculum. *Young Children*, 67(2), 66-68.
- Rinaldi, C. (2003). The teacher as researcher. *Innovations in early education*, 10(2), 1-4.
- Stacey, S. (2011). *The unscripted classroom: Emergent curriculum in action*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Wein, C. A. (1995). *Developmentally appropriate practice in "real life": Stories of teacher practical knowledge*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Wellhousen, K., & Crowther, I. (2004). *Creating effective learning environments*. New York, NY: Delmar Learning.

The Emergence of Emergent Curriculum

Elizabeth Jones



© Julia Luckenbill

In the late 1960s, Laura Dittman, professor at the University of Maryland's Institute for Child Study and NAEYC's last volunteer editor of *Young Children*, invited me to contribute to a collected work on curriculum planning in early childhood education. I was interested, but also confused, as I had always been by the concept of *curriculum*. In my experience, curriculum was what elementary teachers rather than preschool teachers were supposed to cover, using prescribed textbooks and worksheets.

My own introduction to working with children was in a 1950s university lab preschool where adults "set the stage" for children's exploration in a

rich learning environment, and teachers focused their energy on observing children's play and recording anecdotal notes on notepads kept in their smock pockets (Jones & Reynolds 2011). We made plans from day to day in response to our observations and reflections on children's needs and interests. The curriculum was set down only after it had taken place, not laid out in advance except in broad terms.

These two focuses—creating the physical environment and studying the child—characterized the development of early childhood education in the first half of the twentieth century. Maria Montessori pioneered the focus on materials in the physical classroom,

which were designed with great care to support children's cognitive and aesthetic development. In the 1940s child psychologists such as Arnold Gesell created child study laboratories at universities, taking detailed notes on children's physical and social-emotional development. In the 1950s psychoanalyst Erik Erikson first published a theory of *developmental stages* that explained in depth the role of play at the stage of *initiative*, the years from 3 to 5. Each of these thinkers focused attention on the young child as an active, self-motivated learner, deserving of intensive study in a thoughtfully planned environment.

And so I offered Laura the title "Curriculum Is What Happens" for the book. She liked it but insisted on adding "Planning Is the Key." That was OK with me, as long as we were clear that planning is done all along the way by program staff and not in advance by expert strangers who have never met the program's children.

In the last half of the twentieth century and today, the pressure to teach a prescribed curriculum has intensified in early childhood education. Across the United States, the 1960s discov-

Elizabeth Jones, PhD, is faculty emerita, School of Human Development and Family Studies, Pacific Oaks College, in Pasadena, California. She began teaching young children in Pacific Oaks Children's School in 1954 and participated actively in the growth of the college, where she goes on thinking and writing.

Our Proud Heritage is published in the March and November issues of *Young Children* and features contributing writers who offer insights on past practice, knowledge, and leadership in early childhood education. For submission guidelines, go to www.naeyc.org/yc/columns/ourproudheritage or contact one of the coordinators: Edna Runnels Ranck at edna.ranck@verizon.net, or Charlotte Anderson at charli@charlottephd.com.

This column is available in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

Curriculum Is What Happens

Curriculum is what happens in an educational environment. It may be prescribed, emergent, or accidental and unidentified. Elementary education commonly has been characterized by prescribed curriculum, in which specialists rationally determine what first or fourth graders should be taught. Curriculum in preschool education more often has been accidental and unidentified. Because preplanned curriculum may be merely arbitrary for the individual child, and because accidental curriculum lends itself neither to evaluation nor to teacher education, the importance of developing emergent curriculum models has been increasingly recognized. Our knowledge of how to implement this middle way, in which a curriculum emerges from each teacher's planful interaction with the individuals comprising a particular group of children, is limited. Those who are skilled at such teaching are often unable to communicate to parents, colleagues, or the public what intuitively they are doing superbly well (Jones 1977, 4).

ery of Piaget and cognitive development dovetailed with the national concern for social equity that led to the creation of Head Start in the mid-1960s and an increasing demand for accountability. The public asked, "If all this public money is being invested in programs for young children, how do we know they're learning?" Preschool teachers were expected to follow a curriculum, and children were tested for mastery. Commercial publishers of curricula and tests eagerly expanded their product lines.

My previous interest had been casual; it was the writing that got me started on serious investigation of early childhood curriculum. At Pacific Oaks College, I created an adult class, still in existence, and called it Emergent Curriculum. It let me talk, listen, write, and coconstruct an early childhood education curricular theory that made sense to me.

This journey generated a new NAEYC book in 1994, *Emergent Curriculum*, written with my colleague John Nimmo, who had pursued his doctoral research in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Created in the 1960s by Loris Malaguzzi, the Reggio Emilia preschool ideal had become by the 1990s a world-renowned model of the documentation of children's active learning at play and work and

an emergent curriculum built on the strengths of the child. Like the Reggio educators, we collected stories of emergent curriculum in practice wherever we traveled as consultants working with teachers in their classrooms. Teachers, we reasoned, learn from each other's experiences.

The goal of emergent curriculum is to respond to every child's inter-

ests. Its practice is open-ended and self-directed. It depends on teacher initiative and intrinsic motivation, and it lends itself to a play-based environment. Emergent curriculum emerges from the children, but not only from the children (see "Sources of Emergent Curriculum," p. 68).

Curriculum emerges from the play of children and the play of teachers. It is coconstructed by the children and the adults and the environment itself. To develop curriculum in depth, adults must notice children's questions and invent ways to extend them, document what happens, and invent more questions. The process is naturally individualized.

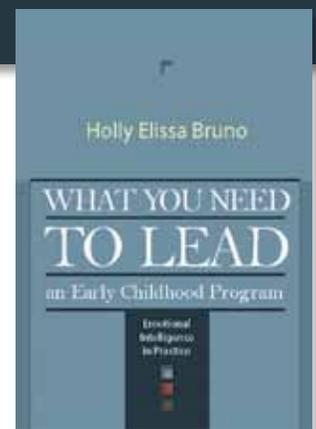
In contrast, standardized curriculum comes from unknown experts outside the classroom. It relies on generalization rather than on an individual teacher's creativity and attentiveness to individual learners. Indeed, standard curriculum may squelch teacher thinking. What it permits is linear planning and assessment that is responsive to bureaucratic needs in a large nation with large educational systems. In this approach, responsive

NEW FROM NAEYC!

What You Need to Lead an Early Childhood Program: Emotional Intelligence in Practice

by Holly Elissa Bruno

To become leaders, early childhood education students must understand how to build dynamic relationships with staff, families, and the community, as well as learn all the facts and figures about early childhood administration. Bruno skillfully breathes life into previously dry topics like regulatory legislation, facilities management, and budgeting. The author infuses every chapter with vibrantly engaging authentic case studies. *What You Need to Lead* is a text students will want to read.



ISBN: 9781928896807 • Item #363
\$38.00 • Members: \$30.40 20% savings

naeyc®



Order online at www.naeyc.org/store
or call 800-424-2460 option 5 (9:00 A.M. - 5:00 P.M. EST, Mon.-Fri.)

teaching is sacrificed to efficiency, and only outcomes are measured.

In 1986 NAEYC published the first edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredekamp), which acknowledged the importance of accountability while continuing to emphasize child-initiated learning. However, the pressure for standardization continued to escalate. Passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 began a decade of overwhelming focus on test-based measurement and test-compatible instruction, with reliance on behaviorist learning theory rather than developmental theory (Kamii 1985).

Behavior modification approaches to teaching use the metaphor of the marketplace, a system based on payment rather than giving. These methods “inevitably produce a dichotomy between work and play, or—more broadly—between doing something



© Julia Luckenbill

because one has to, and doing something because one wants to” (Franklin & Biber 1977, 8). In a society focused on technology and consumption, the popularity of this view is understandable (Jones & Reynolds 2011, 91).

Emergent curriculum focuses on the process of learning. The more standardized the curriculum, the less children’s individual needs are met and the more likely it is that many children will fall behind. Children have diverse strengths. Early childhood educators, granted the flexibility to do so, can build on those strengths and on passionate interests as they help children construct genuine knowledge for themselves and practice empathy and respect for their fellow learners. In no other way can the inhabitants of a diverse world learn to share it peaceably.

References

- Bredekamp, S., ed. 1986. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth to Age 8*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Franklin, M.B., & Biber. 1977. “Psychological Perspectives and Early Childhood Education: Some Relations between Theory and

- Practice.” In Vol. 1 of *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education*, ed. L. Katz, 1–32. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Jones, E. 1977. “Introduction: Curriculum Planning in Early Childhood Education.” In *Curriculum Is What Happens: Planning Is the Key*, ed. L.L. Dittman, 4. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Jones, E., & J. Nimmo. 1994. *Emergent Curriculum*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Jones, E., & G. Reynolds. 2011. *The Play’s the Thing: Teachers’ Roles in Children’s Play*. 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kamii, C. 1985. “Leading Primary Education toward Excellence: Beyond Worksheets and Drill.” *Young Children* 40 (6): 3–9.

Resources

- Curtis, D., & M. Carter. 2011. *Reflecting Children’s Lives: A Handbook for Planning Your Child-Centered Curriculum*. 2nd ed. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.
- Jones, E., K. Evans, & K.S. Rencken. 2001. *The Lively Kindergarten: Emergent Curriculum in Action*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Stacey, S. 2009. *Emergent Curriculum in Early Childhood Settings: From Theory to Practice*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.
- Wien, C.A., ed. 2008. *Emergent Curriculum in the Primary Classroom: Interpreting the Reggio Emilia Approach in Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Copyright © 2012 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.

Sources of Emergent Curriculum

- Children’s interests
 - Teachers’ interests
 - Developmental tasks
 - Things in the physical environment
 - People in the social environment
 - Curriculum resource materials
 - Serendipity—unexpected events
 - Living together: conflict resolution, caregiving, and routines
 - Values held in the school and community, family, and culture
- (Adapted from Jones & Nimmo 1994, 127.)

The Plan

Building on Children's Interests

During outdoor playtime four-year-old Angela discovers a loose metal nut about half an inch in diameter. She shows the nut to her teacher.

Angela: Look what I found. It looks just like the big one on our workbench.

Teacher: Yes, it sure does, Angela. It's called a nut.

Angela: I wonder where it came from.

Teacher: Where do you think it may have come from?

Angela: Well, actually it is the same as the ones in the workbench inside.

Teacher: This nut looks very similar to the nuts and bolts inside. I think this nut might be bigger than the nuts and bolts we have inside.

Angela: Maybe it came off of something out here.

Teacher: What do you think it is from?

Angela: Umm, I don't know—something out here.

Teacher: Maybe you should check.

Angela: Okay.

Holding the nut tight in her fist, Angela walks around, stopping to examine the play equipment, the tables, the parked trikes, and anything else she thinks might have a missing nut. She can find only bolts with nuts on the trikes. She spies a large Stop sign, puts her special treasure in her pocket so other children cannot see it, and sets up a roadblock for the busy trike riders so she can check the nuts and bolts on their trikes.

Edmund stops and asks her what she is doing, and she explains. Edmund says he needs to see the nut. When Angela shows it to him, he gets off his trike and starts helping her inspect the other trikes. They eventually find the one that is missing the nut. Other children, curious, crowd around.

Hilary Jo Seitz, PhD, is an assistant professor at University of Alaska, Anchorage. She has worked in early childhood settings for the past 18 years as a teacher, administrator, and instructor.



WHILE INCIDENTS SUCH AS THIS ARE COMMON in early childhood settings, teachers may not listen for them, seize upon them, and build on them. When teachers do pay attention, these authentic events can spark emergent curriculum that builds on children's interests. This kind of curriculum is different from a preplanned, "canned" thematic curriculum model. In

emergent, or negotiated, curriculum, the child's interest becomes the key focus and the child has various motivations for learning (Jones & Nimmo 1994). The motivations are intrinsic, from deep within,

meaningful and compelling to the child. As such, the experience is authentic and ultimately very powerful.

This article outlines a plan that teachers, children, and families can easily initiate and follow to build on children's interests. It is a process of learning about what a child or a class is interested in and then planning a positive authentic learning experience around and beyond that interest. Teachers, children, and parents alike are the researchers in this process. All continuously observe and document the process and review the documentation to construct meaning (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). Documentation is the product that is collected by the researchers. It may include work samples, children's photos, children's dialogues, and the teacher's written interpretations.



Illustrations © Marti Betz. Photos above © Kathy Sible.

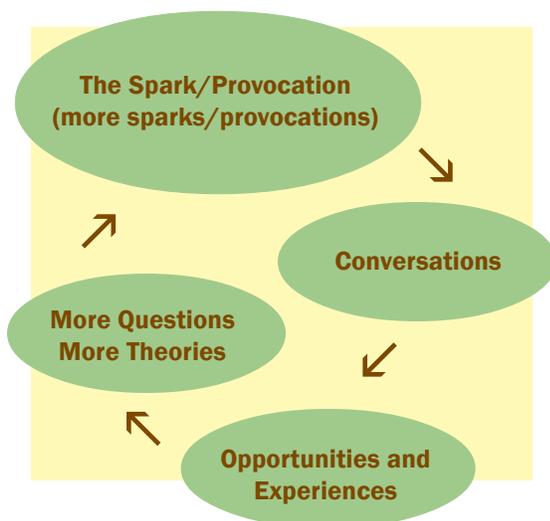
The Plan

“The Plan,” as it became known in my classroom, is a simple four-step process of investigation, circular in nature and often evolving or spinning off into new investigations. (See diagram below.) The Plan consists of

1. **Sparks** (provocations)—Identify emerging ideas, look at children’s interests, hold conversations, and provide experiences. Document the possibilities.
2. **Conversations**—Have conversations with interested participants (teachers, children, and parents), ask questions, document conversations through video recordings, tape recordings, teacher/parent dictation, or other ways. Ask “What do we already know? What do we wonder about? How can we learn more? What is the plan?”
3. **Opportunities and experiences**—Provide opportunities and experiences in both the classroom and the community for further investigation. Document those experiences.
4. **More questions and more theories**—Think further about the process. Document questions and theories.

In other words, teachers, children, and parents identify something of interest; we discuss what we know about it or what we want to know about it; we experience it or have opportunities to learn about the idea; and then we discuss what we did and either ask more questions or make new theories. We document our understandings throughout the whole process.

The initial spark can come from anywhere or anything. For example, we might overhear children talking about the lawnmower at the park. The class, or sometimes a smaller group of children, then sits down and devises a plan with the help of interested adults.



Sparks can be things, phenomena, conversations—anything that provokes deeper thought.

Step 1: Sparks

Sparks can be things, phenomena, conversations—anything that provokes deeper thought. The sparks are what trigger a child (and adult) to want to know more, to investigate further. These sparks can occur at any time.

They can be as simple as finding a pebble in one’s shoe, grabbing an idea or story line from a book, or finding a nut on the playground. Young children have these sparks of interest all day long.

How do teachers see/catch these sparks?

I often hear teachers say, “How can I learn what the children are interested in?” or “How do we find out what the children want to know?” My response is always,

Talk with the children, listen to them, and observe. For some teachers, it can be difficult to sit back and trust that ideas will naturally emerge. But once teachers become familiar with the process, they begin noticing how easily sparks appear.

Teachers in preschools, Head Start programs, and public school classrooms are expected to meet state standards or curriculum content goals. It is possible (although sometimes challenging) to integrate these standards and goals into emergent themes. Teachers who know and understand the “big picture” of standards and goals are more likely to *fit* a topic or emerging idea/plan into the curriculum. They document the process of The Plan (through photographs as well as descriptive narrative) to provide evidence of meeting standards and content goals.

Can we provoke the sparks?

Triggering sparks is sometimes helpful and can have exciting implications. Teachers can provoke children’s thinking by suggesting ideas through stories, specific items, or experiences. Again, when a teacher is knowledgeable about standards and content goals, she knows when to provide appropriate sparks. For example, reading a book such as *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*, by Laura Numeroff, may trigger thinking and conversations about several different ideas (moose and what they eat and where they live, baking, puppet shows, painting, and others) as well as support literacy development. Owocki, in discussing teachable moments in literacy development, says, “Teachable moment strategies involve knowledgeably observing children and seeking out relevant opportunities to help them extend their understandings” (1999, 28).

Introducing an item into the classroom is another way of triggering sparks of thought. Watch children’s eyes light

up when you place a large beetle on a table or pluck an unfamiliar stringed instrument.

Finally, we can trigger sparks by offering experiences such as a neighborhood walk or a visit to the grocery store. Authentic experiences with meaningful things interest children (Fraser & Gestwicki 2001). The following is an excerpt from an observation from an early childhood classroom.

A small group of four-year-olds and their teacher prepare to visit the park across the street. The teacher locks the gate and turns toward the children. She leans down and says, "Please stay on the sidewalk." Pointing to the nearby intersection, she adds, "We are going to walk over there to the crosswalk." The teacher holds hands with one child while the others pair off and walk behind her.

Kayla: What's a crosswalk?

José: It's over there.

Teacher: At the corner, we are going to walk inside the lines of the crosswalk. The lines show people where to walk. That way, cars know to stop. It is safer for us to cross in the crosswalk than in the middle of the street.

Tiana: My mom and me always cross over there by our car.

José: That's the middle of the street.

Michael (motioning): See that red sign? It says STOP, so you gotta stop at it.

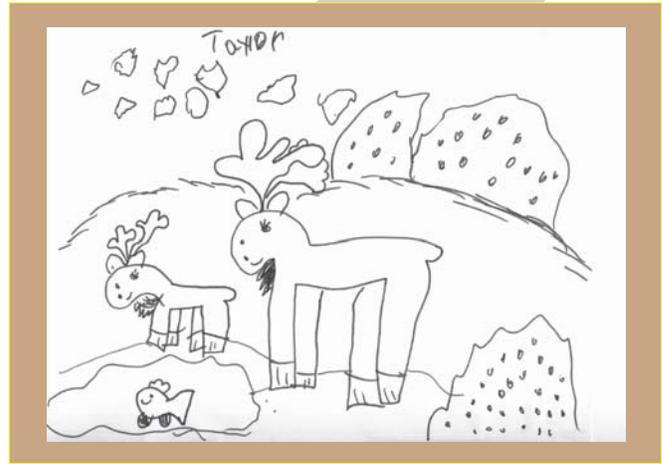
As the small group negotiates the crosswalk and heads down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, José points out three more signs (a No Parking sign, a street name sign, and a Caution sign). The children are puzzled by the Caution sign and stop to try to figure it out.

The teacher documents this interest in street signs and crosswalks in writing and by drawing a sketch of the situation. Later, back in the classroom with the whole class, she brings up the subject of signs. The topic stirs interest and lots of conversation—triggering a new classroom investigation and the beginning of a new plan.



© Hilary Seitz

Teachers can provoke children's thinking by suggesting ideas through stories, specific items, or experiences.



© Subjects & Predicates

Step 2: Conversations and writing a plan

Formal meetings, built into the daily classroom routine, are ideal times for children, teachers, and family volunteers to have large group conversations about forming and writing a plan. In these routine meetings, children already know what to expect; they understand the process as well as the expectations. Our class meetings generally include a variety of fairly predictable experiences (reading stories, singing songs, conversations). Depending on the time of the meeting, we always discuss what has happened earlier or what is about to happen. While one teacher facilitates this meeting, another adult (teaching assistant or parent) writes down ideas, questions, and thoughts about the conversations. The adults later review this documentation to help plan and provide appropriate experiences.

Conversations also take place in settings such as activities or mealtimes. Small group conversations can be very

meaningful to children and adults alike. Here is one snack time conversation:

Five girls, ages three and four, are seated at a small table, eating crackers. One child mentions going to the state fair the night before with her family. Two of the other children had been to the fair the previous week, so the teacher considers where to go with this spark of interest.

Kamie: It was cold at the fair, but the animals weren't cold 'cause they got fur on them.

Stacy: I touched the goats and the baby pig!

Kamie: Me too!

Karla: I went on a ride, but next time I'm gonna see the animals.

Teacher: Where are the animals?

Stacy: They are in this big tent, and you gotta wait real long to go inside. But you can put a penny or a dollar in the machine to get food, then you can feed the goats and pigs.

Teacher: What do they eat?

Kamie: They eats lots of stuff.

Karla: Yeah, like rice and leaves.

Stacy: The pony has big teeth and a tongue. It gets your hand sticky.

Teacher: Do all the animals eat the same food? (*Kamie nods yes.*) Maybe we could go to the petting zoo and feed the goats and sheep.

All the girls: Yes!

Teacher: Let's make a plan.

Karla and Stacy jump out of their seats to get a big sheet of paper and markers. Kamie reminds them to bring a clipboard too.

The teacher writes THE PLAN at the top of the paper. She prints the five girls' names under it. Then she begins writing a list, speaking the words at the same time she writes them.

1. Goats and pigs and ponies eat food.
2. What do they eat?

Karla: Where do they sleep? (*The teacher makes this No. 3.*)

4. Go to library to get books.
5. Go to petting zoo and talk to zoo keeper.

The Plan is set and displayed on the wall. As a form of documentation, it is revisited frequently and adjusted to meet the needs of the children (Project Zero & Reggio Children 2001). Children, teachers, and families continuously reassess The Plan to guide inquiries. Often children and teachers add revisions to the plan.



© Hilary Seitz

Formal planning

Teachers should also prepare a more formal lesson plan. This planning process works best when teachers, teaching assistants, and parents have opportunities to discuss ideas together. The teacher, who usually assumes the role of facilitator, needs to be prepared. She should know and understand standards and content goals; gather documentation, including photographs, observational records, and work samples; and guide the process of creating the formal plan.

The group discusses why the emerging ideas are important and how to further the investigations. Lesson plans should include the children's questions or inquiries as well as the teacher's; both are integrated into a formal plan.

Step 3: Opportunities and experiences

Essential in a good plan is providing, facilitating, and initiating *meaningful* and *authentic* opportunities and experiences to help children further understand ideas. The word *meaningful* is the critical element here. Significant experiences create a sense of purpose for the child. John Dewey cautioned, "Attentive care must be devoted to the conditions which give each present experience a worthwhile meaning" (1938, 49).

One way to promote meaningful experiences is to find opportunities for authentic experiences that allow young children to see, negotiate, and participate in the real world. The experiences should be based on ideas that emerge from conversations or the written plan. For example, when the children initiated the conversation about street signs, their authentic experience of seeing and learning about street signs prompted a written plan for deeper understanding. The class began to take walks to explore different signs. Several children created a map showing where the street signs were located. Another group drew all the street signs they saw. Back in the classroom, everyone shared their information. Two children created signs and posted them in the classroom. There was a Stop sign and

One way to promote meaningful experiences is to find opportunities for authentic experiences that allow young children to see, negotiate, and participate in the real world.

one that looked like a stop sign but read Quiet in the Library. At the sink, a yellow sign said Wash Hands.

The children also decided they needed road signs on the trike paths in the outdoor play area. Some confusion arose during this phase of the experience. Children began arguing about where signs should be placed and if they had to follow the direction on the signs. This discomfort led to the next phase of the plan (see Step 4).

Several content goals were acknowledged in the above experience. Children drew and created maps of a familiar setting; they practiced writing letters and putting together sounds; they used their knowledge of street signs to create classroom rules. In all, the children experienced authentic, meaningful learning.



During this phase, the teacher carefully outlines the theories and documents new questions. As children raise new questions, they are forced to deepen their thinking about the situation. These thoughts become new sparks or provocations for future plans.

In the continuing sign investigation, the teacher called a large group meeting when the arguing about the trike signs and rules persisted. She posted a large piece of paper on the wall and said, "I noticed some confusion on the trike roads today. Jacob, tell me your plan with the signs." She was careful to focus the conversation on the plan rather than encouraging a blame game ("So-and-so went the wrong way"). Jacob expressed his concern of following the sign rules for safety. The teacher wrote on the paper, "If we follow the street signs, we will stay safe." Kayla added

another theory: "People who make the signs get to make the rules, but they have to write them out." Another child brought up additional safety issues, such as wearing helmets and keeping the trikes on the path. The children and teacher decided to post several signs on the roadway to direct traffic in a clockwise pattern.

Summary

Young children learn best through active participation and experience. When helped, allowed, and encouraged to follow an interest and construct a plan to learn more, children are empowered and become intrinsically motivated. They fully engage in the experience when it is their own (Jones & Nimmo 1994). Meaningful ideas are intrinsically motivating.

A caring, observant teacher can easily promote motivation by facilitating the planning process. As the four-step process described here becomes more familiar to children, teachers, and families, The Plan gets easier. Through collaboration, they document, reflect, and interpret ideas to form deeper meanings and foster lifelong learning.

References

- Dewey, J. 1938. *Experience and education*. New York: Collier.
- Edwards, C., L. Gandini, & G. Forman. 1998. *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach—Advanced reflections*. 2nd ed. Westport, CT: Ablex.
- Fraser, S., & C. Gestwicki. 2001. *Authentic childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom*. Albany, NY: Delmar.
- Jones, E., & J. Nimmo. 1994. *Emergent curriculum*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Owocki, G. 1999. *Literacy through play*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Project Zero & Reggio Children. 2001. *Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners*. Reggio Emilia, Italy: Project Zero.

Copyright © 2006 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp.