Setting the Stage for Emergent Curriculum

by Laurie Fuleki and Gretchen Reynolds

Do you ever plan the curriculum for a week, and by Tuesday afternoon you've changed it because something more interesting has happened? Some teachers feel guilty when they do this. They believe good teaching is about predicting what children will learn, and how and when they will learn it. But active children rarely fit preconceived ideas about what our days together will be like. Children are busy and energetic. They often arrive bursting with ideas and questions — the cat almost scratched their eye; the fire truck that blared its siren through their neighbourhood; the new baby brother they will have; the Tarzan movie they rented.

Has this ever happened to you?

At circle time, I sit observing my student teacher Dianne try to get six 4-year-olds to sit still for her lesson. She has been working on an "our bodies" theme, and this week's lesson is about the mouth. She has a wonderful activity planned: the children will make their own fresh apple juice and compare it to concentrate. But will we ever get to the activity. She is desperately trying to get them to pay attention to a small Barney alphabet book ("a is for apple, b is for banana...").

What was I thinking when I okayed this book in her lesson plan? I observed the children. One was trying to leave to go get her favourite book, while another was watching to see if she succeeded so he could do the same. Another stared off into space and a non-verbal child was furiously signing. The student teacher thought he was signing happy and he became frustrated. His attempts to communicate became the focus for both of us, and by then, we'd really lost the other children. When I finally understood that he was signing Barney, he was happy, but we are still struggling to maintain "control."

How did we get here?

It happens often. The teacher's work becomes a struggle to maintain control, with serendipity practically gone from teaching because there is little time or energy left to notice a child signing "Barney."

Teachers are responsible for curriculum. There are many approaches to planning curriculum, and teachers, like children at play, can make decisions about the options. But no matter what you choose, how can you tell whether your curriculum is working?

The answer is in the children. Watching children, teachers know when they are thriving — they are curious, active, social and playful. Sometimes the planned curriculum is not a good fit. In my story about Dianne, the children were being asked to attend to a teacher-directed lesson that did not interest them. As a result, the lesson was more about compliance than content.

Theoretically Speaking

What are your goals for children? What do you believe about how children learn? Do you agree with Piaget, who says that young children learn through play? "To understand is to invent," he wrote in 1973. "Young children learn the most important things, not by being told, but by constructing knowledge for themselves in interaction with the physical world and with other children — and the way they do this is by playing" (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Both Piaget and Vygotsky (1978) describe how children at play express meaning by symbolizing their experiences. Children represent their experiences and their cultural knowledge in a "hundred languages"

(Malaguzzi, 1993). They learn in deep and meaningful ways by expressing themselves in drama, dance, sketching, drawing, gesture, clay work, painting, puppetry, singing, construction, sculpture and writing. Vygotsky and Piaget agree that involvement with materials and tools in the environment allows children to wrestle with problems about real things. Through social interaction with peers, children learn to exchange ideas, to think critically, to cope with and solve problems, and to work cooperatively with others. These are values we hold for our growing children. In environments where adults emphasize compliance, teacher control, right and wrong answers, and restrict opportunities to play and engage with friends, children have fewer opportunities to practice critical thinking skills.

Piaget's theory of development is fundamental in early childhood curriculum. Behaviourist practices have also influenced how we teach. Focusing on each child's current stage of development, teachers assume they know what children need to learn, what they will be able to learn and how they will best learn. The result has been widespread use of preplanned curricula such as themes and units. Children's interests become secondary to teacher-directed learning opportunities such as circle, small group time and teacher-planned activities. Play, even when children are involved and learning, is interrupted to make way for experiences the teacher considers more important. Good teaching reflects Piaget's perspective that children learn by constructing knowledge — but it also recognizes the theory's limitations.

Vygotsky's take on development does not focus on developmental stages. His interest is emergent development, the "zone of proximal development," the child's growing edge, which is scaffolded by social pretend play and thoughtful adult interventions. Vygotsky has a dynamic view of human development, and an emergent curriculum is the best match because it responds to children's ongoing growth and learning.

By observing play, teachers know children's zones of proximal development. They listen to children's ideas and interests, and connect their curriculum goals with those of the children in responsive and creative ways (Cadwell & Fyfe, 1997). Planning emerges from the children's daily life in the program, particularly from their interests.

Teachers extend the child's thinking and learning within child-initiated activities. They can pose problems, ask questions, make suggestions, add complexity to tasks, and provide information, materials and assistance as needed to enable a child to consolidate learning and move to the next level of functioning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). "Curriculum" conveys that there is teacher planning in such settings, and "emergent" reminds us that spontaneity always has a place where young children play and learn (Jones & Nimmo, 1994).

Emergent Curriculum and Preschoolers

In our preschool program at Algonquin's Early Learning Centre in Ottawa, emergent curriculum began with a desire to have children's passions be the source of weekly programming. Instead of arbitrarily designating one person responsible for preparing the room for the week, we decided to work on it as a team.

Because we observe the children on a regular basis, it was a natural transition to link programming to our observations of their interests. We collect information about children's passions — recording their language while they play, taking photos of them engaged in play — and we talk about programming possibilities that capitalize on these interests and that maximize learning.

Laurie's Story
One Monday morning, the environment was set up to expand on the children's play from the previous week. On Friday, our team had decided to continue to support baby and kitty-cat play, to support children's interest in Tarzan, and to add sensory material to the house area. Everything else in our environment was left "as is" from the previous week.

The children had been dancing and singing to Raffi songs for weeks. That morning, I brought in the soundtrack to the Tarzan video, which had been a huge topic of conversation among the children. Sophie[1] and Matthew arrived and were eager to listen. Jaya, who was pushing a stroller around the room, came over to listen to the music. Matthew's brother Jacob was visiting before returning to the toddler room. I sat back with my pen and notebook to jot down children's conversations as they danced and sang:

Sophie: "He doesn't wear any clothes just his underwear."

Matthew: "I pretended we were Tarzan at our home. We just weared our underwear."

Jacob, raising one arm in the air: "Aah....,aah, aah," he says, several times.

Jaya: "He's Tarzan." I realize she is right.

Matthew: "This is Sabor. He kills the baby. Tarzan kills Sabor."

As children arrived, many gathered around the music player. The number of children who know the lyrics amazed me. I documented the children's play, as I scanned the room, greeted parents, took a photo and finally grabbed the Dictaphone to record play that was happening more quickly than I could write.

Transitions were smooth since many children were excited to hear Tarzan. But not everyone was at the tape player. Tressa wanted to tell a story into the dictaphone, which she did in a quieter space. [Later in the week I listened to the tape and recorded her version of "The Three Little Pigs" in our preschool documentation book.] Alison wanted to write some words in my book. I retrieved a pen and another similar book for her. She wrote letter-like forms, which she informed me was a letter to her grandmother.

Across the room, superhero play had escalated and I approached to diffuse the situation. I asked the children to tell me a story about what happens to the superheroes. Graham started a story about Tarzan: "Jane is in the jungle with Tarzan. You know what happened, the tiger came. Because that's my favourite movie. He's a strong boy. He can fight tigers."

I wrote down his words, speaking them aloud as I recorded. Alison joined us with her notebook and asked Graham, "Then what happens?" She too wrote Graham's words in a cursive symbol-like form.

Setting the Stage
By the end of the week, I had a pile of children's pictures, scrap pieces of paper with written observations of children's words in their play, written stories they had shared with me, a roll of film to develop, two samples of tape-recorded play, and three stories on the Dictaphone. Enough material to pull together a

[1] The names of the children in this article are pseudonyms.

snap shot of the week's play.

I entered Friday's team meeting with a few typed notes. We looked at and talked about the photos from the week and recorded in a web what the children had explored. This first web was a "recall" web. It served as a document of the children's play, and a springboard for conversations about future play possibilities.

We asked many questions: How can we complicate play to enrich children's understanding? What environmental changes can we make to support their play? What are the possibilities for the direction of next week's play? What themes are emerging that we might develop as a project?

We recorded our ideas in a separate "web of possibilities"; our ideas about how to support and extend the previous week's observations of the children. One observation was of Shelley, Rebecca and Carolyn building a stage together using large hollow blocks and using a pretend microphone to sing along with the Tarzan music. We decided to investigate building a "real" stage with the children. We agreed to ask the children lots of questions during circle, snack and lunch to elicit how we could do this. We decided that if the timing was right, we would walk to Home Depot to look at materials.

As teachers, we were aware that we couldn't become too attached to these activities. We wanted the children to decide how they would use the available materials and guide us through the week's activities. After all the sharing and brainstorming was finished, we planned the environment for the week ahead. Because team time is precious, we decided to post our "web of possibilities" in the hall for parents and the Ministry instead of the usual environment web.

Building the Stage

Three weeks later, a project had emerged in our room!! Although the number varied from day to day, many children were interested in building the stage. But everyone was interested in going to Home Depot. We did our best, but space in the "bye, bye buggy" is limited to six.

At snack one morning, we asked the children what they thought we needed to build a stage. Shelley thought cement, rocks, and oil might work. Tressa suggested chairs, paint, and wood. William said we needed nails. We took many walks to Home Depot to ask questions and buy materials. We looked for the big orange "LUMBER" sign when we entered the front door. We read the prices of many, many items. Using clipboards with paper, the children made sketches of things they thought interesting. We delivered thank-you notes.

We selected a sheet of plywood, which Jeff, from Home Depot's lumber department, delivered. Home Depot gave us orange child-sized aprons, with pockets. The children spent several days painting the stage. The colours and designs were as varied and interesting as the children's ideas: there are blues, purples, reds, pinks, and whites, and there are swirls, fingerpainting, a rainbow design with a shooting star affect and many blue handprints. Painting the wood was very popular.

Shelley was interested in figuring out how to build steps and a ramp so that a wheelchair could get onto the stage. One day a group of children were together on the floor, using markers to draw designs on a large sheet of mural paper. Carolyn was working nearby with her own sheet of mural paper. She made a brown border all around the paper's margins. When asked about her work, she replied, "It's a stage." We

brought over the container of miniature people, and Carolyn and Rebecca animated “the actors” on the drawn stage.

We explored many ways to attach the sheet of plywood to the foundation of our stage. The children initially thought tape and glue would work. After a roll and a half of masking tape, and two days to let the glue dry, they realized we needed to try something else. The day we tried to use nails, the number of involved children was incredible. The children used toy hammers to nail the wood and skids together and it actually worked! But, when we moved the stage, the nails separated from the wood, so we went back to Home Depot to purchase wood screws. A teacher suggested this. We decided teacher input was needed to ensure the stage’s safety.

Walking the Boards

The stage project is still emerging. We plan to take a trip to see a real stage. “Trashin' the Camp,” a song from the Tarzan soundtrack, is the number one hit single in the preschool room. We have observed the children drumming — on playdough, rocks, blocks. William pretended to trumpet using a small orange pilon and Matthew used the trunk of an elephant puppet on cue to the elephant sounds in the song. Another day, listening to “Trashin’ the Camp,” William used the typewriter to make the “ding” sound in rhythm to the typewriter bell in the song. Our newly built stage is the perfect vehicle to support and expand on the high interest in this song.

Our team’s current curriculum “web of possibilities” is focused around our emerging stage project and the heightened interest in the Tarzan movie and music. There may yet be a performance of the song for other children and families. We will continue to document and build on the children's energy for this until their interests move in different directions. Who knows where?

Documenting Children’s Play

There are unlimited ways to observe and document observations of children. Collecting data is simple. Watch children play, listen to them express themselves and find inventive ways to record what you observe. A few suggestions:

- Photograph children at play
- Tape record conversations
- Take notes
- Save children’s art
- Journal
- Ask children questions and record their answers

Take your observations and reflect on what the children have investigated. You may see an emerging theme that has the potential to be a project. If you do, create a web of possibilities about where the project might go. Ask the children for input. Perhaps they could draw their ideas.
If you notice an interest, build curriculum around it.
Document what happens using any of the above suggestions or your own.
Create a visual representation of what is happening by posting photographs, artwork and verbal descriptions of how the play is emerging around the project.
If interest in the project seems to dissipate, attempt to find creative ways to restore it. There may be limited activity on the project for days, and then interest is renewed.
Most importantly, take your cues from the children.

Switching Gears

Teachers may be uncomfortable with what may seem like a lack of preplanning in a curriculum that is emergent, particularly if their habit is to chart a tight schedule of new activities for each day. But it is amazingly simple to switch gears. The environment and the teacher make something possible in the moment. Children and teachers together decide what happens next — children, through the direction they take in their play and the questions they ask, and teachers, taking children's perspectives, brainstorm possible next steps.

Teachers do not teach in a traditional sense. Teachable moments that allow children to construct understanding occur when the adult, instead of telling the answer or solving the problem, allows children to explore their own hypotheses about what might work. Like adults, children learn from their mistakes as well as their successes. An emergent process allows children to acquire a more meaningful understanding of a topic.

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