Debunking the Myths: Creating a Shared Understanding of Emergent Curriculum

WEBINAR BY SUSAN STACEY, M.A.
Context: A little about myself and my connection to Emergent Curriculum

- A British education – hands-on experiences as a learner, leading to...
- A belief in constructivist, experiential teaching and learning, and
- A belief in the power of play
- The influence of Pacific Oaks College and Betty Jones
- Now, teaching curriculum courses, presenting workshops & seminars for adults....
What are the common myths about Emergent Curriculum?

- ‘There is no planning in Emergent Curriculum’
- ‘It’s all about the children’s interests’
- ‘We have to respond to all of their interests’
- ‘There is always project work going on’
Clarifying what Emergent Curriculum is: A working definition

- **Beginning** with observations of children in action; then a thoughtful response

- “Child-initiated, teacher framed”; both teacher and child have a voice – therefore curriculum is a collaboration

- Plans are developed frequently in response to children’s ideas, questions, play, needs

- Creative rather than prescriptive
What emergent curriculum is not....

- Prescriptive or linear
- Predictable or thematic
- Rarely repetitive
- Tedious; neither for teachers nor for children.
- NOT unplanned! Emergent Curriculum is *intentional*
POLL
How does Emergent Curriculum unfold? The Big Picture

A Cycle of Inquiry

Whatever the age group, this cycle remains the same

- What intrigues or puzzles me? What do I wonder?
- Continued observation and formulation of questions
- Reflecting with others on observations & experiences, anecdotes & narratives
- Specifically, what are the children trying to find out?
- What does it all mean? Search for patterns, insights
- What do we offer as an invitation? As support?
- How are the children responding?
- Next steps?
Observing: what and how?

- We are observing for curriculum purposes

- Observing also includes listening

- We need tools, and a system for organizing observations, e.g. camera, notepads, clipboards, post-it notes… anything that we will use consistently and can return to for reflection purposes
What to observe for; some considerations

- What are the children playing at?
- Do they have a repetitive idea that they keep coming back to?
- What is their underlying agenda?
- What are they understanding and what are they misunderstanding?
What are they saying? Listen carefully to their conversations with other children, their questions, arguments.

Write these down, verbatim!

Think about what these conversations tell us...
Watching for how the children demonstrate what they know....
- Watch for how children use materials.
- Are they sticking with one approach? Do they experiment? Combine materials in unexpected ways?
Pause to reflect: why do this?

- We are trying to make sense of what we have seen
- Others may hold a different perspective. It is useful to hear everyone’s point of view
- Reflection leads us to a direction for next steps – a direction that will be meaningful to the children
Responding to our first observations:
Several choices

- Dependent upon:
  - What we think is happening for the child
  - Whether this involves one or two children, or many
  - The resources we have available
  - The age group we are working with
  - The way our team works together
Provide an initial invitation to ‘test the waters’
Can be a simple addition – always with open ended materials – that scaffolds
Can be a small change in the environment
Or, further conversation with children
Revisiting documentation with the children
Having children represent their understandings
Then pause again to reflect

- What were the children’s responses to the invitation?
- What are their understandings and misunderstandings?
- What does this tell us?
- What are our next steps? Do we need to take this further?
Possibilities?

- A short or long term project
- A larger change in classroom environment
- An ‘expert’ to help scaffold children’s knowledge
- Reaching into the community
A short term project: Cleaning our Water

- Began with exploring pipes & water during play
- Naturally occurring questions engaged children’s curiosity – how were these questions addressed?
- How did teachers scaffold learning through play?
Beginning with play...

When left-over pipes and fittings were brought into school as an invitation to explore; the children immediately understood that they were pipes for carrying water.

They explored how the pipes fit together and how water moved through them.

Teachers asked “Where does the water go after being in our pipes?”
The children checked under cabinets and inside the toilet in order to figure out where the water was going...
The children understood that water leaves our homes or classrooms through pipes.

But, then what happens?

‘It goes to the ocean,’ they told us, but how does it get cleaned before it gets there? This is a puzzle for them....yet they have prior knowledge of water treatment plants due to the local news reports & parent conversations....
During play, the children make ‘dirty water’

As the dirty water, full of sand, beans, paper etc., ran through a set of rocks, it came out looking different.

Then, we tried pouring the water through gravel, and it looked different again....
The children offered ideas about why this had happened. They said that ‘the rocks catch the junk’ and the water can pass through the small holes into the container.

‘Now, we have to figure out how to get the water even cleaner!!’
Linking to home...

The children mentioned that their parents used coffee filters to catch coffee grounds in their machines.

We offered coffee filters as a way to further filter water and make it even cleaner....
In the studio, and at small group time, the children continued to draw their theories of how water travels from home to ‘factory’ and then into the ocean...
After noticing what dissolves in water, or doesn't, the children fished out the 'pollution' in order to clean up the water....this led to discussion about what living creatures need in order to live in water....
After reviewing documentation, the children began to think about animal habitats, and how we can protect them. In order to reinforce what kinds of things living creatures need, we created a ‘frog pond’ and new investigations began....
Documenting the work

- One of the most valuable uses of documentation is for children to think about where they have been in terms of investigations, and what they would like to find out more about.
- Do they have something more to say?
Teachers can document their curriculum path as it happens....
If you're busy...

Waterproof fabric was stained in the process of the painting. A gust of wind created a small splash on the fabric. The paint runoff was unexpected, and it caused the fabric to shrink. The students were busy exploring at various points, and they didn't notice the mishap.

The students were amazed by the results as they painted. The fabric absorbed the colors beautifully, creating a unique texture.

Optional: Add decorative elements like flowers or butterflies to the painting.
Resources:

- Emergent Curriculum in Early Childhood Settings
- Unscripted: Emergent Curriculum in Action
- Pedagogical Documentation (coming in September)

All available through Redleaf Press or Amazon. In Canada, distributed by Monarch Books (Early childhood catalogue)

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Questions?