

Emergent Curriculum

in Early Childhood Settings

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From Theory to Practice

Susan Stacey



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For my children, Michael, Jennifer, and Matthew,
who taught me about childhood,
and my devoted parents, Dorothy and Lewis,
who find joy in being in the company of children

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Foreword

As a child—or as a teacher—have you ever been bored in school?

For many of us, school was a same-old, same-old experience—a daily routine to be gotten through. True, as children we did learn the things that grown-ups thought were important for us to know. But the classroom wasn't often a place for learning about ourselves, our friends, or what really interested us in the world. That was more likely to happen at recess, in our neighborhoods, and at home—places where there was space and time to make choices, and friends to negotiate problems and enjoy solutions with.

As a teacher and caregiver of young children, are you ever bored? Life with the children can be pretty routine. Is your job just a schedule to be tolerated each day—for you, and perhaps even for the children?

Many children now experience child care from infancy on. For some of them, child care may be simply an earlier beginning of “school”—of doing what you're told, in a group. But that's not how young children and teachers learn best. In a well-ordered environment, young children are highly active, fascinated explorers of a world so new.

The children choose what to do, do it with great energy, and move on to the next challenge. The caregiver, watching the children, is an active learner too. She's asking herself: Who are these children? What do they care about? What are their skills? What are they practicing? What should I offer them next?

Teaching, at its best, is a creative act. Susan Stacey has written *Emergent Curriculum* to remind us of that fact. She offers, through real-life stories from her own experiences and from those of her colleagues, a framework for practicing the art of emergent curriculum.

There are two basic approaches to curriculum planning and development: preplanned and emergent. The lure of preplanned curriculum is strong; it's so easy to follow the directions somebody else has made up. And maybe you've been handed a fat book of activities and learning goals and told by your supervisor, "This is our curriculum." Maybe you've been told your lesson plans need to be written down and turned in ahead of time, so the center can demonstrate it's doing its job.

Young children know better. They don't learn just because we teach them. They learn when their interest is caught. They may not pay attention to your lesson if something else, in their heads and bodies or in the environment, is more interesting. Their bodies demand action; the world calls out for exploration. Children are wired to construct their knowledge of the world through constant practice.

If we want a world peopled by intelligent children and adults, we need to respond to children's inherent motivation to learn, which is at its height in early childhood. Teachers and caregivers of young children are at their best when they follow the children as models for their own adult curiosity, learning with them and about them. We watch the children, we think, we respond, and that's how curriculum emerges.

You can't write an emergent curriculum and package it for sale. Emergent curriculum is invented by its participants, which is more work for teachers and caregivers, because it requires continual alertness. It's also more fun and more educational, because it's full of surprises and new challenges. It can't really be written until after it's happened; emergent curriculum is *ex post facto* curriculum, which can be a problem for you if you're required to produce lesson plans in advance. In this book Susan Stacey deals helpfully with this dilemma, especially in a detailed look at the process of *documentation*, in which teachers take notes, pictures, and examples of children's work to create visual representations of children's emergent learning.

Many of the books college students and on-the-job teachers are asked to read are full of principles and best practices and theories and lists and lesson plans and study questions. They demand: "Are you learning what we're teaching you?" "Memorize it; it will be on the test." "If you're a good teacher, you will do it in your classroom." Strangely enough—or perhaps not so strangely—many early childhood practitioners *don't* do it in their classrooms (even though they passed the test).

As a college instructor in early childhood education, I frequently find myself in conversation with colleagues at other colleges, and their repeated lament is "How can we get them to do what we've taught them?" My response is that mostly, we can't. Teachers and other grown-ups, I've noticed, don't change their behaviors just because they've learned the principles of why they should adopt developmentally appropriate practice or

any other theoretical model. We go through the effort of changing our behaviors if we're anxious about getting in trouble, if we're bored and looking for something new to try, or if we're inspired by a life-changing experience—which could take the form of stories about someone else's work with children.

Emergent Curriculum is a collection of stories about someone else's work with young children. Enjoy them—and as you do, ponder some of the explanations of *why* the teachers and caregivers worked with the children in these ways. If you were to try something similar, what would happen? Would your children run wild? Would you get in trouble for changing the lesson plan? Would you have new stories about the children to share with their parents? Would you learn new things about the world, about children, and about yourself?

Reading the manuscript of this book in preparation for writing this foreword was an interesting challenge for me. Every time I thought of something I could say and made a note of it, I'd read a little further and discover Susan had already said it. She really knows this stuff. And she hangs out with others who are working on it, too, and she's shared many of their stories in this book, as well as her own. We are not all alike; different voices are needed to create dialogue.

I got to visit Susan's program in New Hampshire and to see firsthand some of the stories she shares in this book. She was really doing it. So can you.

Elizabeth Jones
Pacific Oaks College

Acknowledgments

Early childhood educators need mentors—to cheer them on in their professional work and to help them remember the joys and inspirations in our field. I've been fortunate to have several: Carol Anne Wien, who continues to stimulate my thinking, Hilary Marentette, who many years ago encouraged me to follow my heart, and Elizabeth (Betty) Jones, who introduced me to Pacific Oaks College and has followed my career with joy, steady support, and a flow of thought-provoking questions that keep me in a welcome state of disequilibrium.

We also need colleagues with whom we can think, question, argue, and problem solve. Liz Hicks has filled this role for many years, as have Margie Carter and Deb Curtis, John Nimmo, Susan Hagner, Barb Bigelow, Gretchen Reynolds, Liz Rogers, and Teresa Cosgrove. Over the years, conversations with these thinkers have contributed hugely to my professional growth and have helped me keep passion in my work.

Many early childhood educators have shared their teaching in this book. This in itself is an act of generosity, for they have taken the risk of sharing their work, their struggles, and their successes with a wider audience. For me, they've taken the time to reflect, to engage in correspondence, to dig out and send hard-to-find files and photos. In short, they have been willing to do whatever it took to help bring this book to completion. Those educators are Bonnie Morin, Lori Warner, Katie Lugg, Carrie Dupell and Karen Felch at the New Hampshire Technical Institute Child and Family Development Center in Concord, New Hampshire; Susan Hagner and her staff at Emerson Preschool, also in Concord; the teaching staff at Jubilee Road Children's Center in Halifax, Nova Scotia; and the teachers at the Peter Green Hall Children's Center, also in Halifax, including Elizabeth Conrad, who bravely participated in the case study of removing clocks from the classroom

when she was a member of my staff some years ago. Likewise, the early childhood students at New Hampshire Technical Institute have given me the opportunity to think through what does and what doesn't work for teachers in the classroom. Engaging in discussion with them, and with all the students I've worked with in both the United States and Canada, enabled me to articulate my thinking about emergent curriculum. I thank them all, whether students or seasoned professionals, both for their continuing openness toward generating curriculum with and for young children, and for their dedication to our field.

My editor, Beth Wallace, guided me through the process of creating a book and did so with admirable patience and good humor. She walked me through technical glitches, rewrites, and confusion. Beth knows about early childhood, and her work shows in this finished product.

I am thankful to the children whose work appears in this book. They continue to fill me with wonder for their insights and to astonish me with their capabilities. Finally, thank you to Brian, who hasn't seen much of me this past year as I worked through evenings and weekends. The laptop was a huge gift, but an even bigger one was his constant support for and pride in what I do.

Introduction and Invitations

This book is an invitation for you to think deeply about curriculum for young children. Doing so is crucial, because the early childhood curriculum you provide has a profound and long-term effect on how children learn and, just as important, on how much they enjoy the process.

Perhaps you're an experienced early childhood educator who has heard and thought about emergent curriculum but you haven't yet had the opportunity to explore it in the classroom. Or you've studied the theories surrounding emergent curriculum and are wondering how to translate theory into practice. Maybe you are new to early childhood education and are wondering how to start the process of generating curriculum. Or you are required to follow a prescribed curriculum and wonder how to include more child-centered practices. Whatever your circumstances, you will have the opportunity throughout this book to reflect on what you believe about curriculum, what you want in your classroom, and what alternative choices there may be.

Your own values and beliefs—blended with your training and experiences and then translated into classroom practice—directly affect children's love of learning, their problem solving, and their engagement with materials, investigations, and people. We early childhood professionals have a tremendous responsibility to provide the best possible environments and experiences for children to construct both knowledge and relationships. And doing so takes careful thought, a willingness to explore and practice, and ongoing dialogue with other professionals.

Of course, your own education, experiences, and professional training also affect how you think about and generate curriculum. There are many choices to make. We teachers

are surrounded by information from journals, workshops, professional development seminars, in-service training, and our own reading. We work with all ages from infants to school-age children, in half- or full-day programs, in homes or centers or public schools, in commercial or nonprofit settings—all with differing levels of autonomy and therefore with different opportunities for decision making.

Regardless of the setting, however, what is central to quality early childhood education is play. Self-chosen and directed by the child, it provides ample opportunities for learning. When children explore through play their own theories about how the world works, they become deeply engaged. Montessori teaches us that children learn best about that which they are interested in, and Dewey reminds us that children love to be engaged in real work; that is, they find out about the world by being in it, by constructing their knowledge through community projects that are meaningful to them. And Vygotsky teaches us much about social learning, between the children themselves and between the child and the teacher in the role of facilitator. This role is important, since teachers who value children's ideas want to support those ideas and take the children's learning to higher levels without interfering in their play—a delicate balance.

Children, of course, need no extrinsic motivation to play. In an interesting environment, they can play happily for hours. (Notice that I use the word “interesting” rather than “richly provisioned.” Given the opportunity and extended time, children will engage in complex play using such materials as cardboard boxes, rocks, and sand.) In your own experiences, you may have seen play-based curriculum in action, or, on the other hand, observed play, being treated as something quite separate from curriculum. In my experience, when play is treated as separate from curriculum, it is limited to brief time periods, watched over for safety rather than for interesting occurrences, and, rather than becoming an opportunity for teacher reflection, is seen as an interruption in the “real” curriculum.

Perhaps play seems to be undervalued or forgotten because of the general erosion of childhood. When you think back to your own childhood, what do you remember playing at or with? How much time was there for daydreaming, relaxing, playing with found materials, being outdoors, inventing games with other children, and just “messing around”? My guess is that compared with today's child, you had more opportunity for those kinds of pastimes. Today's child is likely to live in a much more regimented environment, with play that is scheduled, after-school activities that require enrollment, car pools, and regular attendance, and much time spent in front of a computer monitor or a TV screen. In fact, it sometimes seems as if children do not know how to play in unstructured settings with an array of natural materials and lots of time. In such an environment, they are often at a loss.

When curriculum in early childhood settings comes from books of prescribed activities, or when teaching methods are held over from previous teachers and remain

unexamined, curriculum becomes stale. Such a situation serves neither the children, who want and deserve interesting things to do and explore in order to construct knowledge, nor their teachers. Limited to a repetitive, mundane curriculum, a teacher finds it almost impossible to maintain energy and enthusiasm—much less passion—for her work. Rather than being something to look forward to, the teaching day becomes something to get through.

Sometimes teachers are required by a higher authority to teach in a particular way and feel they have no power to challenge that authority or to make changes. Other teachers, thrust into the practical demands of the field, feel overwhelmed or simply have no time to reflect on what they are doing. The children in their classrooms are safe and appear to be happy. Unless these teachers are provided with an alternative approach, they may feel this is enough. In such circumstances, we have to remember the potential of the child. In their early years, children are full of wonder and curiosity, as well as interesting ideas and theories. They are also extremely competent, an ability that is sometimes underestimated. For a young child, the day is full of possibilities to learn through play—to explore how a pulley works while acting out a construction site, to interact with print and money while playing restaurant, to problem solve while helping a disabled friend get onto a platform outside, or to develop fine-motor skills through combining playdough with scissors. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to harness children's willingness to investigate and to tap into their inborn curiosity to create a love of learning through interesting curriculum.

However willing a teacher may be to try interesting approaches that benefit children, other obstacles can get in the way of generating meaningful emergent curriculum. For instance, many educators are expected (by their supervisors as well as local or national authorities) to prepare curriculum well in advance. After all, teachers are accountable to those authorities as well as to families. How do teachers prepare somewhat in advance while also remaining open to the possibilities of what might occur day by day as children explore, discover, negotiate, and create worlds of their own through their play? How do teachers show in their curriculum development that they value the child and the child's ideas?

Now add to this puzzle the plethora of standards that have developed over the past twenty years—standards that guide teachers in developmentally appropriate practices, help them define and strive for quality care and education, and set guidelines for quality pre-service teacher education—and the dream of attaining a truly child-centered curriculum becomes more complex. All over North America and around the world, early childhood educators are more and more frequently required to link their programs to learning standards set by government departments or school boards. Whatever the reasoning behind these standards, and no matter how individual teachers feel about them, it is critical to value and protect learning through play in child-centered programs, while at the same time keeping the required standards in mind. If we in the teaching profession neglect these basic values

about play or fail to articulate these values clearly and often to policy makers, we risk losing play as a vehicle for learning. In its place we may find ourselves surrounded by ever-increasing requirements that are not age or stage appropriate, and that fail to address the child's need to construct knowledge through hands-on, thought-provoking experiences.

An Invitation to Dream

Dream for a moment about being in a position of complete freedom in terms of what kind of curriculum you can provide for the young children in your care. You have access to research, to models of promising practices and awe-inspiring physical settings, to good-quality literature and professional development. And since you're dreaming, you needn't concern yourself with money. What type of curriculum would you create, and why? Where would you begin? Where do you believe curriculum comes from?

Emergent curriculum begins with the child. Specifically, it begins with one particular group of children, who being young, are curious, energetic, intelligent, full of potential, and bring a wealth of prior knowledge to a classroom. The infant already knows much about relationships, the toddler is a blur of activity while figuring out how the world works, and the preschool child is beginning to learn about inquiry and problem solving on the path to becoming the ultimate researcher. When teachers work with a group of children over a period of weeks and months, they come to know those children well. They know their personalities and their quirks, their interests and their fears, their successes and struggles. Thus knowing the children and their families, teachers are given a tremendous opportunity to generate curriculum from the interests and questions of a particular group of children. This knowledge, coupled with frequent observations and carefully considered responses, allows emergent curriculum to begin unfolding.

Dreams need not be only dreams. Keeping yours in mind as you work through the day enables you to see events and routines through a different lens—one that zeroes in on what children are really trying to uncover or demonstrate in their play. It can also make you wonder what you can do in response and how you might do it.

An Invitation to Explore an Alternative

Children have a right to a responsive curriculum that is designed just for them. Deserving such a curriculum, they respond to it with engagement and delight, for it belongs to them as well as to their teacher. If you consider how much children have to offer in terms of directing curriculum, you'll be able to see a way toward a true collaboration. For instance, perhaps there is a child in your group who is full of good play ideas and leads other children. Can you help the group develop those ideas further? Or maybe you can facilitate

for the children an opportunity to investigate an obscure question. Two real examples of such questions from preschool classrooms offer a glimpse of children's thinking: How does a nose know what the smell is? What is the difference between a hole and a space?

Seeing the children curious, excited, and engaged will ignite your own passion for teaching. Your job as a teacher is not to know all the answers. Rather, you must be willing to investigate alongside children, to collaborate with them as you learn together.

Emergent curriculum allows you to respect the voice of the child as well as meet standards across learning domains, and to honor unique learning styles and talents in both children and educators. If you truly believe that learning takes place during play, then you recognize that learning standards are met through relationships with materials, people, and environments—that learning is embedded in meaningful, engaging play. In your daily work, you can practice recognizing, recording, and communicating this learning. Through careful documentation, you can combine the language of play with the language of standards and articulate exactly what is taking place in your early childhood program.

For some teachers, the idea of collaborating with children in generating curriculum is not new. Those who are familiar with emergent curriculum are putting together their dream of collaborative, responsive curriculum while staying true to our society's standards for high-quality care and education. They are demonstrating that the pieces fit and the dream is possible. Within emergent curriculum, all perspectives are taken into consideration, and all players—children and adults—have a voice.

Emergent Curriculum Defined

When teachers are keen observers, when they notice not only what children are doing and playing at, but also *how* they are playing and what they are saying as they play, they are in a strong position to develop curriculum based on their observations. Throughout this book we will see how observations, transcripts of dialogue, and traces of children's work can be gathered, we will explore the process of reflecting on them to find meaning, and we will think about what the possible responses might be. Underlying these discussions are my own assumptions about emergent curriculum:

- While framed by the teacher, it is child initiated, allowing for collaborations between children and teachers, and giving everyone a voice.
- It is responsive to the child, thereby allowing teachers to build upon existing interests.
- In its practice, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, taking what she sees and hears, and bringing to children the opportunity to discover more, dig deeper, and construct further knowledge.

- It is flexible in that curriculum planning, rather than being done well in advance, is constantly developing. Curriculum is dynamic, neither stagnant nor repetitive.
- It enables children's learning and teachers' thinking to be made visible through varied forms of documentation.
- It builds upon the theories of the recognized theorists in our field: the work of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky supports the philosophy of emergent curriculum. Practices embedded in emergent curriculum make visible the work of these theorists—no longer is it contained only in early childhood texts.

An Invitation to Examine Your Practice: An Overview of This Book

As we examine what emergent curriculum means in terms of our daily practices, we will also consider the values we hold dear. When we actively consider our values about what constitutes quality curriculum for young children, we are more likely to be able to translate those values into reality in our classrooms. All too often, teachers who leave college with a set of ideals become dispirited after entering the teaching world with all of its complexities. Sometimes, even deeply held values become submerged by the practicalities of getting through the day with a group of active three- and four-year-olds.

Upon entering an organization, even seasoned teachers can be tempted to follow what's been done before. For every aspect of daily life, there is a script, a way that we commonly proceed. In this book, we will examine scripts for teaching, and ask whether we are blindly holding onto old scripts or are instead constantly developing as professionals. We will also think about how scripts for teaching can be challenged or changed, rethought or renewed, in order to provide an alternative to stale practices.

In chapter 1, we look at starting points for teachers who are beginning to explore emergent curriculum. We will meet a teacher who carefully considered her own values and then went through the process of change. She describes the challenges of rethinking her practice, and how she eventually found a good fit in terms of her workplace, thereby renewing her passion for teaching young children.

Chapter 2 considers observation as a starting point. What are you looking for as you observe, and how do you efficiently record what you see? Teachers are busy practitioners, and this chapter discusses the practicalities of observing children with curriculum in mind.

As teachers develop early childhood programs, they need to pause and think carefully, rather than blindly follow what came before. Values become a part of this careful thinking.

In chapter 3, we examine the aspects of early childhood programs that are often taken for granted: daily routines, the role of time, circle times, large- and small-group activities, diversity, and the culture of the school.

Only after some *deconstruction* can teachers think about how to reconstruct what they do in light of their values. Because most early childhood educators work in teams, they are in close relationship with each other. Decisions become collaborative, and teams must listen to each member, carefully consider, and engage in dialogue in order to make satisfying decisions about what should happen next. Such teamwork is examined through stories from teaching teams in chapters 4 and 5, as individual teachers discuss the push and pull of generating curriculum.

Chapter 6 addresses the important issue of accountability through documentation of children's learning. Early childhood professionals are responsible for developing the best possible early childhood programs and for making children's learning visible. Educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy, have introduced teachers around the world to the wonderful tool of documentation, which demonstrates the learning taking place by showing children's thinking through narratives, anecdotal notes, learning stories, tape recordings, artifacts, and teachers' interpretations. This chapter examines the many ways that teachers can make learning visible, including how to link learning to required standards.

One of the delights of emergent curriculum is that it provides an avenue for teachers to engage in classroom research. Since this approach requires consistent observation from teachers, observation and reflection soon become habitual, a way of being in the classroom. This disposition enables teachers to become researchers in their own environment. In chapter 7 we examine the stimulus of action research and how this cycle of inquiry can inform our teaching practice.

As we continue exploring the many pieces of emergent curriculum, we will reach a point where we must put all the pieces together. Chapter 8 takes an in-depth look at a long-term project, examining the starting points, the decisions that were made, the project's development over time, and how it was documented.

Chapter 9 discusses the idea of emergent curriculum as a creative act, a way to keep the passion in your teaching and to maintain collaboration with children. This chapter contains several invitations for you from the teachers in this book and from me. It is our hope that these invitations will inspire you to try something new, to step out of old scripts and into reflective practice.

An Invitation to Meet Teachers Who Use Emergent Curriculum

The Teacher's Voice stories within this book are about teachers who use emergent curriculum with varying levels of expertise or comfort. Some learned about the theories of this approach during their training and are now putting those theories into practice for the first time. Some who learned nothing about emergent curriculum during their coursework found themselves in settings where they were expected to practice it. All of them strongly believe that emergent curriculum allows them the freedom to be truly child centered while meeting the needs of their community, and they all value play as an essential vehicle for children's learning.

The teachers are employed in the following early childhood settings in the United States and Canada.

- The Child and Family Development Center (CFDC) in Concord, New Hampshire, is a laboratory school for New Hampshire Technical Institute's (NHTI) two-year associate degree program. With a capacity for forty-five children between six weeks and five years of age, the program has been in existence since 2001 and is housed in a state-of-the-art purpose-built facility. The staff at the CFDC have varied backgrounds, including training in both associate and baccalaureate degree early childhood education (ECE) programs. This lab school strives to demonstrate emergent curriculum as it is taught within the early childhood program at NHTI.
- The Ralph Waldo Emerson School for Preschoolers in Concord, New Hampshire, is a half-day preschool program serving forty families. Children are between three and five years of age, and the school is situated in a small portion of a church building. The director here is also a teacher, and the teachers have been with the school for many years. They are inspired by the practices of Reggio Emilia.
- The Peter Green Hall Children's Center in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is a full-day program that is part of a university's family housing. It serves ninety families with children from four months to ten years of age. Staff here are comfortable with emergent approaches. They are also inspired by the practices of Reggio Emilia, and some teachers have visited the Italian schools.
- The Victoria General Child Care Center, also in Halifax, was once a workplace child care center for the staff of the Victoria General Hospital. Now closed due both to restructuring of the hospital and to budget

struggles, the child care center served infants through five-year-old children, with seventy-five families using the center for extended hours. Many of the staff were trained in High/Scope curriculum.

In all of these stories—some of which come from student teachers in the programs described above—we will see both struggles and successes as teachers think and collaborate with children and so grow in new directions. We will hear the perspectives of teachers, teacher educators, and directors as they journey through inspiration, struggle, reflection, and renewed passion for their work.

An Invitation to Know the Author

My own experience of emergent approaches began with a childhood in British elementary school classrooms that used hands-on methods no matter what the content area. Until I began my own teacher training, I didn't realize that not everyone receives a box of buttons to work with while doing math, or that all children don't have a bin of clay in the classroom, or that every class doesn't work in small groups in which everyone is encouraged to talk! In my days in those schools, the news from the community newspapers was discussed each day, and activities were drawn from those events. I now understand that Dewey and Piaget may have had something to do with those approaches. Back then, I simply loved school and loved to learn.

When I began to work in early childhood settings as a teacher educator, consultant, and director, I soon despaired of approaches that seemed stagnant, repetitive, and certainly not centered on the child. Where was the creativity, and how did teachers display their passion? Why did activities for children have to come from books? It was in reading the works of Elizabeth Jones, John Nimmo, and Gretchen Reynolds that I experienced a moment of recognition. They discussed play-based and emergent approaches that embodied what I wanted to accomplish in working with both children and teachers: I wanted to put the children, their ideas, and their play back into the curriculum.

In working with teachers over the past twenty-five years, I have come to understand that emergent curriculum is both challenging and exciting. In my roles as college instructor and practicum supervisor, I have encountered the challenges of introducing emergent curriculum to beginning teachers who are grappling with simply surviving in the classroom. My colleagues and I have had to ask ourselves which aspects of emergent curriculum a beginning teacher could use. As the director of a lab school, I have worked with seasoned teachers who, though hired for their knowledge of emergent curriculum, still struggled with certain aspects of this approach. I am thankful for all of these experiences. Through the struggles and successes of these teachers and students, I have been able to grow in my own understanding of emergent curriculum.

An Invitation to Follow a Teacher

Occasionally during our teaching life, a moment or a set of circumstances causes us to rethink what we are doing and how we are doing it. The moment may arise as an “aha” moment while we are reading, or in a workshop or seminar, or through dialogue with other professionals. How the moment arrives is less important than what it does. For it effects change, and although change is hard (it produces disequilibrium!), it can also lead to following one’s heart, to finding a good fit for one’s own beliefs and values.

In chapter 1, we join Bonnie, who decided that she wanted to try an alternative approach in order to give children a voice—and did just that.

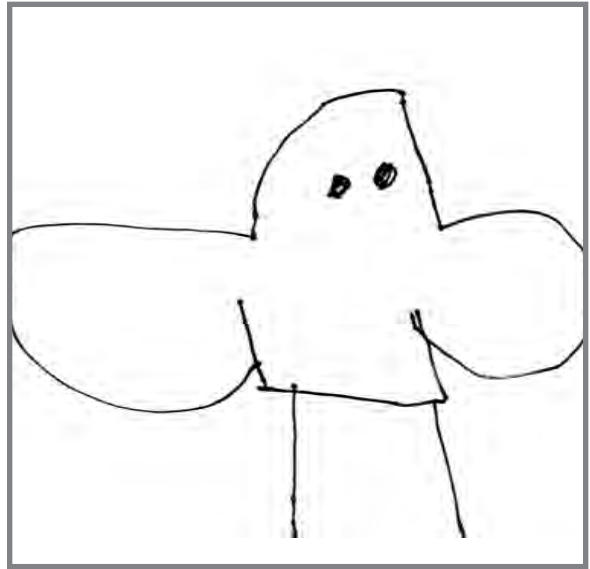
Suggested Readings

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I



Emergent Curriculum and Your Teaching Journey

When exploring a new teaching practice, it is helpful to examine your own beliefs about early childhood education. Only then can you consider how those beliefs affect your daily work, or whether in fact they are all but invisible within the classroom.

For example, over time, early childhood professionals have coined such phrases as “play is the child’s work” and “learning through play.” Yet in many early care and education settings across North America, the value of play is not apparent. It is not unusual to see short time frames allotted for play or physical settings that resemble schoolrooms rather than learning environments for children under six years of age. Instead of play-based curriculum planning, one is likely to see top-down curricula designed by an authority disconnected from the particular group of children and to be implemented by following prescribed themes.

When visitors enter your classroom or center, how do they perceive your values as a teacher or director? If you want children to be able to imagine and to problem solve, to engage in complex play in order to enact their ideas and understandings, and to have a sense of agency within the classroom, you might begin by examining what your early childhood program is presently like. Then think about what you would like it to be and

how you would protect and value play as a vehicle for learning within your early childhood setting. How does your curriculum for your particular group of children reflect your values, your training, and your beliefs? How does it build upon children's ideas? In what ways does it address children's developmental stages? Is it possible for you to hold on to your vision of what early childhood curriculum should be while still meeting the requirements of both society and your administration?

After many years of visiting unfamiliar classrooms as a consultant, coach, or practicum supervisor, I can gain a sense of a center's philosophy and the values its teachers hold by observing factors such as:

- **The value placed on the children's work.** This is sometimes made visible through the ways in which the work is shown, the commentary accompanying the work, and its accessibility to the children in order that they may reexamine it, add to it, or talk about it.
- **The children's engagement.** A classroom where children are truly engaged in play and exploration will not be quiet; it will be noisy and messy in a purposeful way. There will be the busy hum of active children, the sounds of materials being used, the occasional shout of joy or surprise (and yes, also of frustration or anger as children learn to negotiate), and the murmur of adults who are working with children.
- **The role of the teacher.** A child-centered classroom will have teachers who are busy, not with housekeeping tasks—although some are necessary, and hopefully will include the children—but with assisting children in finding props, chatting with them about what they're doing, quietly writing observations or taking photographs, scaffolding children's ability to work together, and problem solving with children.
- **The work itself.** An observer looking at the walls and shelves will see the kinds of investigations under way, the art, the available materials, and the accessibility of those materials, all of which tell a story—the story of what happens in this space.

Of course, any program has invisible subtleties, and a parent or other visitor would need to talk with you at length to fully understand your program. Using the preceding list, you can begin to examine your own space and decide whether or not your values are being made visible. Do you believe that open-ended materials are valuable in fostering creativity? Then your shelves should reflect this, and be stocked with interesting materials such as boxes, string, tape, and recyclables. What about respecting children's work? To examine your own values about this, look at how you displayed their work. Are the child's words

included? What would happen if a child in your program wanted to build something complex and leave the structure standing? A play-based program is not without rules or structure. Rather, its structure respects the rhythms of the children as well as their interests, and fosters a sense of both order and flexibility.

Through my own experiences in early childhood classrooms, as well as through observing and collaborating with teachers and student teachers in action, I've found that emergent curriculum offers an opportunity to work with the ideas of both children and teachers, to address children's developmental needs, and to keep play-based curriculum at the forefront. It is a balancing act, certainly, and it is challenging. But challenge can be a positive and refreshing stimulus for teachers.

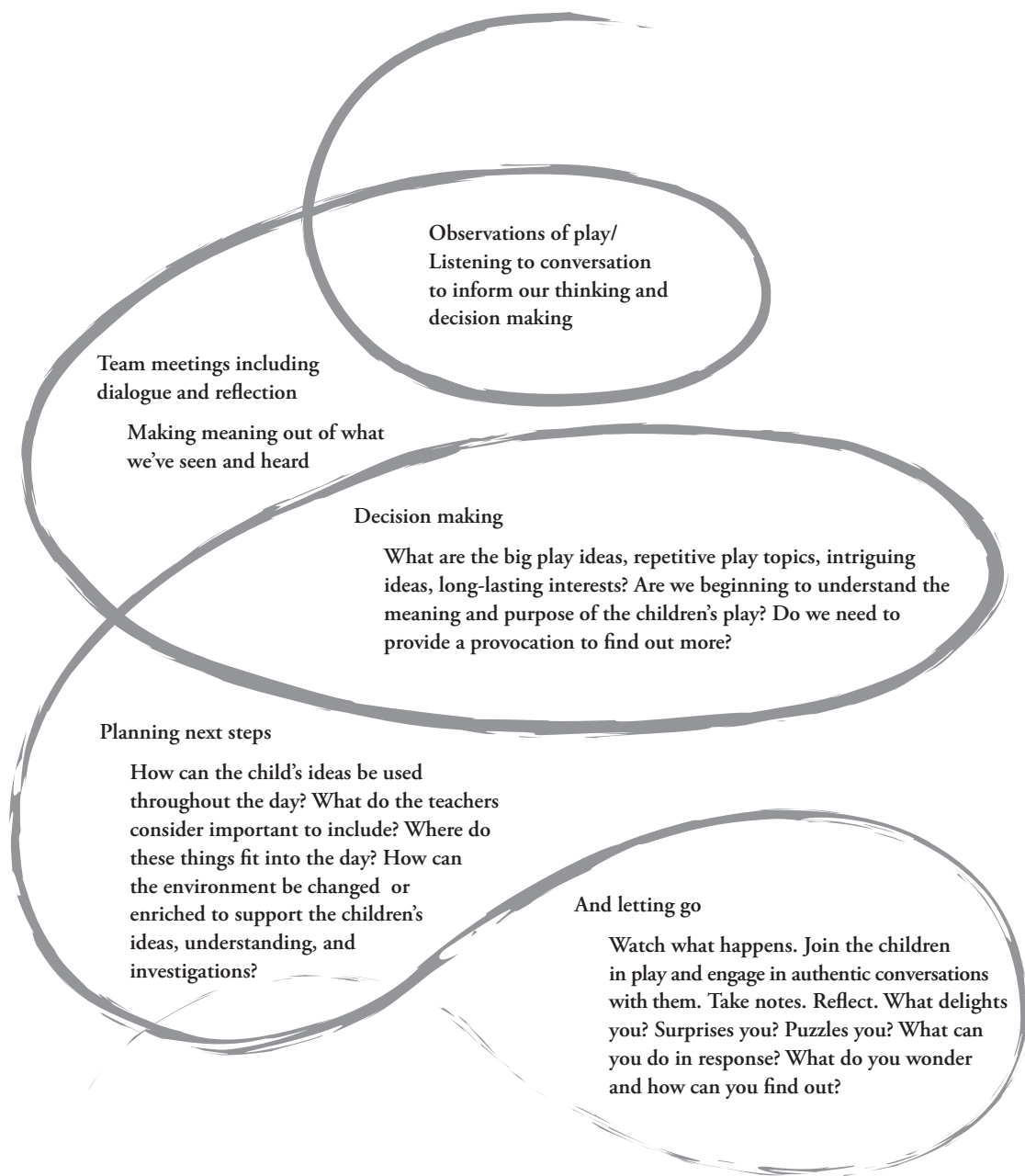
An Image of Emergent Curriculum

Emergent curriculum is not linear—it is organic, constantly growing and evolving. Sometimes it is even circular, as we observe, discuss, and examine documentation, raise questions, and observe again.

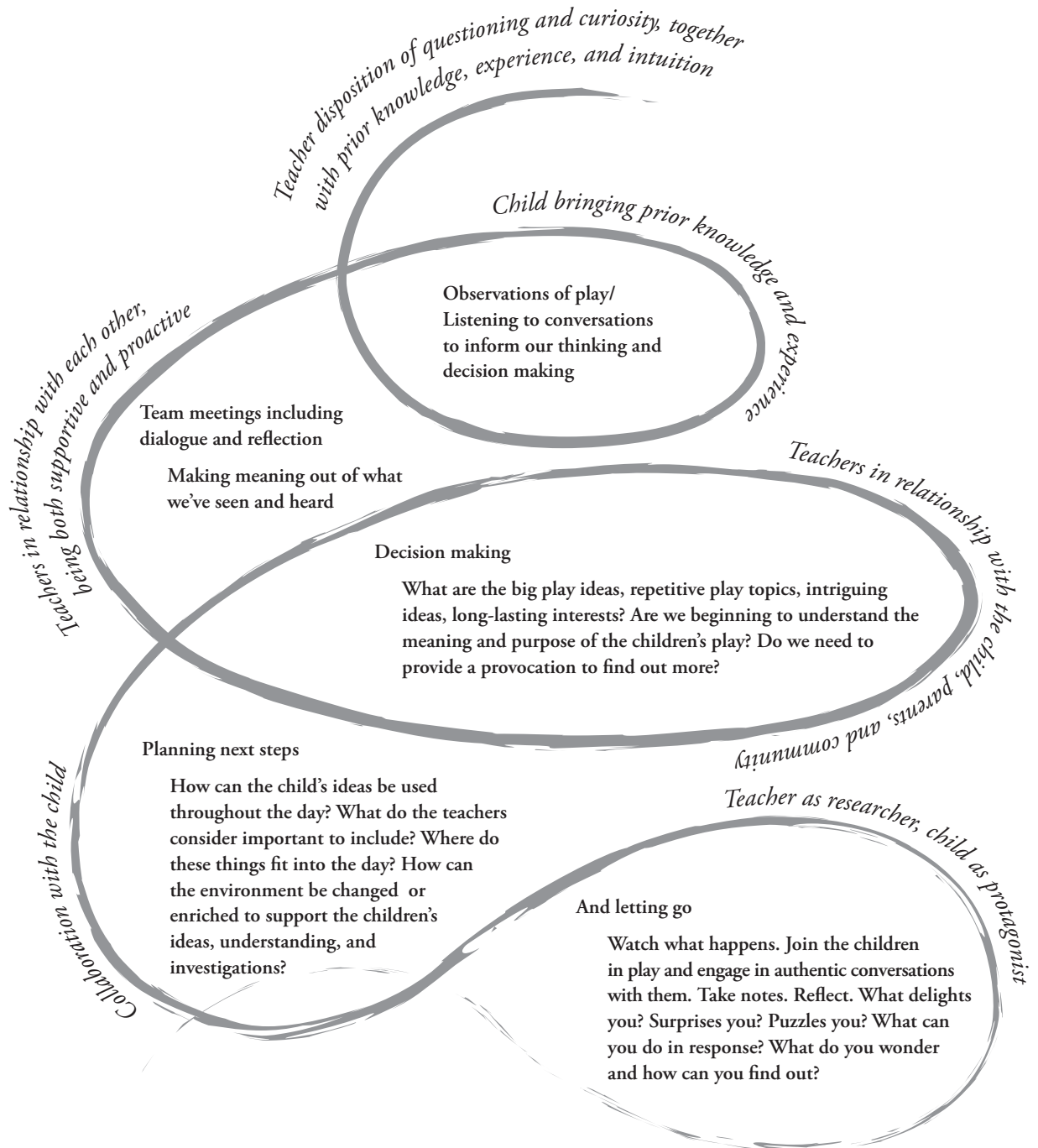
Unlike emergent curriculum, a book is linear in its design. We start at the beginning and move through to the end, encouraging us perhaps to think that things should happen in this particular order. Writing coherently about the process of generating emergent curriculum is difficult. The reader is likely to ask “What next?” and the answer is almost always “It depends.”

Since we have as yet no device that allows us to read in a circle or a spiral with multiple entry points, an image may help us visualize the unfolding nature of emergent curriculum in order to recognize some possible beginnings for teachers. And since emergent curriculum is formed by relationships—among children, between teacher and child, within the community, and among teachers—we can wrap prior knowledge, dispositions, and relationships around the various processes of emergent curriculum, so that a more complete representation emerges.

Putting It All Together



By examining all the parts of this image, you can see that both teachers' and children's dispositions, relationships, and areas of prior knowledge have an effect on emergent curriculum. At the same time, you can also see the processes of generating emergent curriculum—observation, reflection, documentation, and changing the environment—and recognize that here, too, there are possible entry points for teachers.



Dispositions

Since, in early childhood education, we think of ourselves as being child centered, let's think further about the disposition of the child. She is a researcher, an explorer of her world. She constructs her knowledge as she handles real objects, ventures into the

The term *disposition* refers both to a person's qualities of mind and to a tendency to act or respond in a certain way.

community, collaborates with her peers, and represents her ideas through play. Different children, of course, have different dispositions. For instance, one child may try out his ideas in a solitary way, quietly using materials over long periods of time until one day he finally makes a statement about his ideas and discoveries. Another child might be a very social learner, using the ideas of others to build upon in play, or enticing other children

to help her play out her own ideas. We've all encountered the child who dives into sensory experiences, as well as the one for whom the "touch with one finger" approach feels safer. When designing curriculum, all these dispositions must be taken into account.

The disposition of the teacher also has an enormous effect on what happens in the classroom. Emergent curriculum requires the disposition of genuine curiosity about children and their play. A teacher who is curious, who wonders why children are doing a particular thing in a particular way, will be genuinely interested in finding a meaningful response.

The tendency to engage in lifelong learning is another important disposition. A teacher who is willing to try different approaches, to keep abreast of new developments in the profession, and to take risks in terms of testing which teaching approaches work best is more likely to be open to the give-and-take of planning curriculum from children's interests and questions.

The disposition of the reflective practitioner is one of keeping an open mind and examining one's own practice, of taking a frequent and hard look at why things are done in a certain way, of always questioning and always thinking.

A teacher who recognizes feelings of disequilibrium as a sign of growth is likely to feel enlivened and stimulated by the process of generating emergent curriculum.

Your teaching team may include teachers who each possess one or more of these dispositions. This makes for a wonderful collaborative journey, with teachers each lending their strengths to the process. You are likely to find diversity in all teaching teams, and diversity can lead to a stronger and livelier curriculum.

Prior Knowledge

Within the image of emergent curriculum, you will also notice a reference to prior knowledge. Both teacher and child possess prior knowledge; we all come to the classroom

with previous experience and knowledge of the world. The child expresses her knowledge and experiences through her play ideas, whereas the teacher demonstrates his professional expertise—and previous training—through the decisions he makes and the scaffolding he provides. Part of his professional expertise also includes his knowledge of these particular children: their development, their interests, their families, and their culture. He knows about their previous play, questions, misunderstandings, and investigations.

For example, when a five-year-old recently drew a series of straight lines and told me, “This is a phoenix,” I would have been confused had I not known that she was learning Chinese characters at home. Knowing both this child and her family, I could work with her family to support this exploration at school.

Where children’s and teachers’ dispositions and prior knowledge meet with teachers’ observations of children’s interests, emergent curriculum can begin to take shape.

There are many starting points for emergent curriculum. Depending on your previous training and experiences, you may want to begin by practicing the art of observation, thereby refining that skill. Or you might reflect on your practice by keeping a journal of your own teaching and then examining how you make decisions about curriculum. To effect a change in practice, it’s helpful to think about your own comfort level, the differing talents within your team, and the practicalities of how you will begin. Somewhere in the chapters that follow is the starting point that will best suit you. As you will see, the journey toward exciting curriculum is not always straightforward, but it is always engaging—for both the child and the teacher.

Describing Emergent Curriculum

Part of exploring a curriculum approach and finding a good fit for your own beliefs is to examine the important attributes of the curriculum, while keeping in mind possible starting points for your entry into the approach. Read again the list of assumptions about emergent curriculum that appeared in the introduction:

- While framed by the teacher, it is child initiated, allowing for collaborations between children and teachers, and giving everyone a voice.
- It is responsive to the child, thereby allowing teachers to build upon existing interests.
- In its practice, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, taking what is seen and heard, and bringing to children the opportunity to discover more, dig deeper, and construct further knowledge.
- It is flexible in that curriculum planning, rather than being done well in advance, is constantly developing.

- It enables children's learning and teachers' thinking to be made visible through varied forms of documentation.
- It builds upon the theories of the recognized theorists in our field: the work of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky supports the practice of emergent curriculum.

Consider, as we expand upon each point, which of these aspects you already practice, which you would like to try, and which ones you feel you could develop further. Are there approaches here that make you feel uncomfortable? If so, think about why this might be. Perhaps there will be one that raises your curiosity and makes you wonder if that's where you could begin.

Beginning with the Child

Because emergent curriculum is child initiated, observation plays a huge role. It is through observing the children at play, noticing the details of what and how they're playing, that teachers begin to uncover the children's thinking, intentions, and understandings or misunderstandings. As you discuss the play with other professionals, you attempt to find the meaning, intentions, or explorations within it. You can also plan for collaborations between children and teachers in terms of the direction of curriculum. In this way, everyone in the classroom community has a voice—the children's interests are validated and respected, while the teacher brings expertise and experience to the situation.

SOMETHING TO TRY

As you observe children playing out their ideas, try also to listen carefully to the dialogue they use with each other, and write it down for further discussion. Doing so provides an important clue to the children's understanding or misunderstanding, and to what prior knowledge they bring to the play, thereby helping you decide how to support it.

Responding to Children's Interests

Emergent curriculum is responsive to the children, thereby allowing teachers to build upon existing interests. And there are many, many interests within any group of young children. With practice and dialogue, teachers using this approach become adept at distinguishing between what may be a passing moment and what may turn into a long-term endeavor. Both small moments and long-term work are valuable, and at times you may find yourself following up on several interests at once. Some will fall by the wayside, while some will continue for the long term and become deep investigations. When we succeed in uncovering deep interests, we also learn something about teaching—we learn, over time, how to make

curriculum decisions more easily, how to recognize children's big play ideas, and what kinds of ideas recur over and over again, reminding us that for the children these topics are important ideas.

SOMETHING TO TRY

When you are first attempting to respond to all of the activity of children, it can be challenging to decide what to respond to. Try coordinating your team so that each of you is paying particular attention to just one area of the room during play. For instance, if you're in the art area for the morning, you could concentrate on noticing which materials were used, how children used them, and what they were trying to represent. Then, when you return to this area after some discussion with your peers, you could focus on just this particular exploration, rather than on the whole room.

Facilitating Children's Deep Exploration

When a teacher takes on the role of facilitator, she takes what she sees and hears and offers children an invitation to discover more, dig deeper, and construct further knowledge. When a child engages in further exploration, the teacher scaffolds. That is, she brings her knowledge and experience to the situation, thinking deeply about where the child is and how she as a teacher might further the child's interest, knowledge, and engagement with the topic. Rather than telling the child what the next exploration will be, the teacher facilitates learning around what interests the child.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Think about your own experiences, knowledge, and interests. Keep these in mind as you watch children trying to understand something new or beginning an investigation of something that fascinates them. Can you match your expertise to theirs in order to more deeply engage them in the topic? For instance, if you enjoy baking bread, this would be something to share with children who play repeatedly at cooking during dramatic play. If you are handy with tools and wood, think about using this expertise in helping children to construct items they need for play.

Planning Flexibly

Emergent curriculum is flexible. Rather than being done well in advance, planning is constantly developing. Curriculum is dynamic, neither stagnant nor repetitive. Flexibility is important because the teacher must have the ability to "plan and let go" (Jones and Nimmo 1994, 12). That is, plans formulated by teachers sometimes need to be set aside in

order to address what really interests the children. Children learn best through what they're deeply interested in. Routines, rather than being regimented by the clock, also need to be flexible. If children have a wonderful idea that is being played out at length, they will need extra time to negotiate, problem solve, and express that idea through play. If circle time needs to be pushed back to allow time for a complex play idea, so be it.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Try counting the number of transitions during a morning in your program. Begin with the children's arrival as the first transition and count each time they're required to change activities. It can be surprising to note how many times we interrupt play. What must this feel like to the children? How do you feel when you're interrupted in the middle of something that is important to you? With your team, examine transitions and routines, and try to reduce them to what is absolutely essential. See what happens.

Documenting Learning and Thinking

Children's and teachers' thinking within an emergent curriculum can be made visible through varied forms of documentation. Through graphic means, documentation shows the process of children's investigations and learning, enabling teachers and children to revisit the work, reflect upon it, and uncover meaning and future directions. In addition, many teachers find documentation to be a way of entering into teacher research. That is, it helps them find answers to their own burning questions regarding what children are doing and thinking and how the children might learn best. It also helps teachers see how they should proceed in response.

SOMETHING TO TRY

Next time you meet with your team or are conversing with another educator, try examining a photograph or two of children at play. If you have a question about the play, write it down, and continue observing to see if you can find the answer. If you had to describe why this play was significant, what would you say and how would you say it? Try mounting one of the photos on cardstock, together with a short narrative. Share it with the child's family, and notice how they respond.

Applying Theory to Classroom Experience

Practices embedded in emergent curriculum make visible the work of theorists such as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky. Their work no longer is contained only in early childhood texts. Instead, their theories come to life within our classrooms—we begin to recognize what “constructing knowledge” and “scaffolding” really mean.

For instance, imagine a child who is struggling to keep train cars connected as he wheels a train around a track he's made out of blocks. You can see that he's becoming frustrated as the train repeatedly falls apart. When speaking of social learning, Vygotsky put forth the theory that children can learn from more experienced peers. Keeping this in mind, you could suggest to the struggling child that an older child nearby might be able to help. When children show each other what to do or assist younger children, they are scaffolding for the less experienced child.

Remembering the work of Piaget, you might use the idea of constructing knowledge through experience and hands-on work, by providing many opportunities for joining things together and using trial and error until the best method becomes clearer to the child.

Thinking of Dewey, on the other hand, you might choose to take the children out into the community to study trains in real life, to ask questions of those who work with trains, and then to represent those real experiences in classroom work. Any of these responses could be appropriate, depending on the child and the program, and all of them make use of learning theory.

SOMETHING TO TRY

When you next observe a child struggling with a material or activity, watch carefully and notice the details. What strategies does the child use to try to find a solution? As you consider how to support the child's efforts, think about the theorists you are familiar with and what they suggested about how children learn best. If Piaget were in your classroom, what might he suggest you provide in the way of materials that would allow the child to discover his own solution to a problem? What would Dewey provide in the way of real work that would support the child's learning? What would Vygotsky say you should do in your role as a more experienced partner who can extend the child's knowledge?

Recognizing Types of Play

During their training, most teachers study play in depth. Can the theories we all study be connected to what you observe children doing each day? Understanding play and the teacher's role within it helps you understand what might be happening within the play, and therefore how you might respond. Do you recognize what you're seeing in terms of different kinds of play? In a mixed-age group of children, you might observe several stages of play:

- **Exploration.** Direct knowing through exploring the physical world with the senses, physical action, and the beginnings of language.

- **Socio-dramatic play.** Constructing knowledge through dramatic, socio-dramatic, and constructive play: the self-initiated re-creation of one's experiences in order to understand them.
- **Investigation.** Experiencing and representing the world through classification, imagining with materials, structured dramatization, and developing literacy (Jones and Reynolds 1992, 3–5).

During just one morning in a preschool classroom, you are likely to observe all these stages of play. The three-year-old who is experimenting with mixing sand and water and then tries to pour the goopy result through a funnel is experiencing directly what works and what doesn't. His senses are involved, as is trial and error, and he is engaging in exploratory play. The teacher might offer other sensory materials to work with, include some language that supports the play, and give the child some tools that may work differently from the funnel: sieves, tubing, or sponges, for instance.

Meanwhile, in the dramatic play area, a four-year-old girl is taking orders for pizza. Using her own form of cursive, she writes another child's order on a clipboard, assembles a tray full of dishes, and balances the tray on one hand as she approaches the table. She's making sense of a recent restaurant experience by reenacting it in socio-dramatic play. Many props could be added to this experience (pizza tools, for instance, or menus from pizza restaurants), but there's also opportunity here to take this a step further and expand the child's knowledge of the real world through a field trip to restaurants where she can watch the people who work there.

In another area of the classroom, a five-year-old is engaged in investigating quilts. With the teacher's support, he notices that some have squares that are sewn side by side, while others are appliquéd. He is also able to pick out similar patterns in individual quilt squares, and begins organizing these similar fabrics into stacks. He is engaged in investigation, using classification and very specific language to help make sense of what he's seeing. If this interest continues, fabric squares could be offered for classification during play in a quiet area or in the dramatic play corner. If the children are specifically interested in quilting, a quilter could be invited to share her expertise in the classroom.

What you see in your own classroom during play can depend upon numerous factors: the age group you're working with, the variety of open-ended materials available to the children, the amount of time available to them, their levels of social skill, their problem-solving abilities, their creativity. How you respond to their play, however, will have much to do with your own disposition.

This journey through the processes of emergent curriculum will involve reexamining your beliefs about why you do what you do in the classroom and how you can work in collaboration with both adults and children. It will undoubtedly involve change, and

change can be uncomfortable. It requires that you examine yourself and your practices, and the result can feel like a dive into uncharted waters. But the ensuing journey is likely to be exciting; it will provide you with renewed energy for doing your very best for young children. Let's step out of the box together and examine the journey of an educator as it proceeds, in all its complexity, toward a more emergent practice.

The Teacher's Voice: Emergent Curriculum and Child-Centered Practice

Before joining the staff of the Child and Family Development Center (CFDC) in Concord, New Hampshire, Bonnie worked for several years in classrooms that used a thematic approach to generating curriculum for preschool children. She had never learned about emergent curriculum in theory or used it in practice. She began her work at CFDC in a toddler classroom, and now works with preschool children. Bonnie tells the story of how she began working with emergent curriculum with toddlers, and what it felt like. She first describes working in a theme-based classroom.

We had preplanned themes—that is, planned by the teachers—but we never talked about how the *children* felt about what we were doing or how they reacted to what was happening in the classroom. We didn't even ask ourselves if the children were enjoying what they were doing. The curriculum wasn't cocreated. It wasn't a collaboration at all. We spent all our time trying to do *what everyone else thought we should do*: letters and calendars for the parents because that's what they'd experienced in their own childhoods, or trying to please our administrator, who wanted everything planned weeks in advance, and so on.

Notice that Bonnie pays attention to her own feelings of discomfort. She identifies what did not feel right to her and why. Such self-awareness is a part of the reflective process. Teachers can pause from time to time to examine their practices and where they came from, noticing whether they are a good fit for their own values and whether they need to be tweaked or subjected to large-scale change. Bonnie decided she needed major change in order to make her teaching practice fit with what she believed about how children learn and how teachers should and could respect the child's voice.

This huge decision felt right to Bonnie. Like many teachers who change their practice, however, Bonnie experienced feelings of disequilibrium as she went through a period of transition in her new workplace.

In the first classroom I worked in at CFDC, with toddlers, I was struggling, not understanding it yet. Working in collaboration with the team during planning meetings really helped. I began to understand how they came up with a plan

by examining observations and then talking about those observations until as a team we felt we understood what we were seeing as we tried to uncover the children's true intent. We weren't very sure of ourselves, because the toddlers were interested in exploring *everything* around them! Then one day when the director joined us, we tried to explain what was happening. I find that when I try to articulate a struggle to someone else, the answer starts to appear. There's something about talking it through that helps me to think.

What Bonnie describes is the feeling of disequilibrium that comes with change. Notice, however, that she gave herself some time. She was able to take the time to reflect with peers and a supervisor, to learn through dialogue with others. She was also able to learn some new skills through a workshop on observation. Here is Bonnie's description of "what was happening" at that time. As you read her words, think about the many directions one could take in responding to what the toddlers were doing and about those two perplexing things happening at the same time.

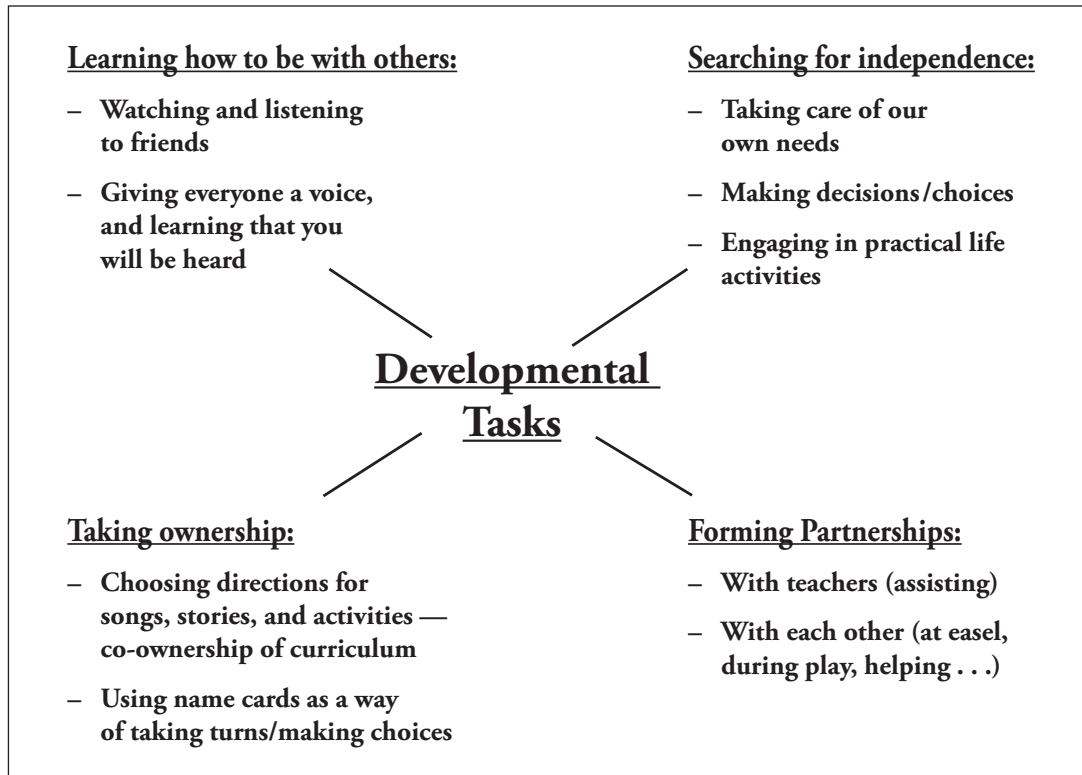
There's a funny thing going on right now. When I try to sing with the children a song that another teacher previously sang, they tell me: "No! That's Miss Lindsay's song!" and get very upset. And the same thing happens when I ask *them* to pick a song. If another child picks one they know, they'll say: "*My* song!" and almost come to blows over it. Also, they're into a very toddler-like trend of wanting to be *so* independent, and yet they still need plenty of nurturing. Some days they want to do everything themselves, and on other days they want us to do everything for them!

A first response to this story might be to think about toddler notions of ownership and independence, and this would be valid. The team, however, decided to step back and ask themselves some questions: "What is their developmental task right now? What does this anecdote show us about that? What are they longing for? What can we do in response?"

We began thinking about the developmental work of toddlers. It seemed to us that four things were under way: the search for independence (including routine things during the day that children would like to do for themselves); working on partnerships; cooperation and community (that is, learning to be with others in a group); and issues of ownership—always a toddler topic! If we thought of *these* things as the toddlers' curriculum, what would happen to our classroom environment, to our routines, and to the kinds of activities we were doing? With some brainstorming, we were able to come up with some ideas, such as using practical life activities (borrowed from Montessori), working side by side at the easel, and partnering throughout the day with the teachers doing routine tasks. At the same time, I started using cards with drawings (which represented songs) for making choices at circle time. We kept them in a special decorative box. The

children reacted *really* well to these, perhaps because it gave them some feeling of control.

From here on, the teachers were able to construct a web of ways for making choices available to the toddlers and for allowing varying degrees of independence.



Can you see how far Bonnie has come? With the team, she is reflecting not only on what the toddlers want to do, but why. Team members asked themselves a question that relates back to theory—what is the children’s developmental task right now? From this question, and from uncovering the answers, curriculum ideas emerged.

And then, just as she began to feel a little more comfortable, a teacher left the center and Bonnie was transferred to the preschool classroom.

I felt like a duck out of water. There were so many loose parts around! I know that this kind of equipment is essential to emergent curriculum, but I had to find my way around the room, figure out the routines, observe closely, and get to know the children before I felt that I could contribute anything at all to the team.

Bonnie found herself back in disequilibrium. She felt out of place, a little lost in this busy environment stuffed with interesting, open-ended materials for children to use. But

maintaining good humor and a wait-and-see attitude, she took the time to observe and to build relationships with the children.

For Bonnie, contribution began in the art studio—an engaging, stimulating area at the end of the room that was full of enticing materials for children—from beautiful junk, to clay, and a wide variety of art materials. Bonnie was very comfortable with art, but she hadn't realized what the children were capable of doing. She watched, supported the children when needed, and brought in some of her own ideas. It was during this time that she experienced an “aha” moment of connection with emergent curriculum.

Invitation, in this context, refers to a set of materials or an activity that is set up in response to a demonstrated interest. The materials may or may not be taken up and used, depending on the level of interest. Setting up such an invitation enables the teacher to test the waters, to see if the idea is worth pursuing further.

Alexandra never slept during naptime. So one day I arranged for her an attractive array of natural materials, plus some clay. Through literature, the children had already become interested in fairy houses. I'd noticed some interestingly shaped flower petals outside and brought them in as an invitation to the children, not because of any idea about how they might use them, but to see what would happen.

Alexandra and I spent a long time together as we explored the natural materials. When I asked her, “How do you think we could join these materials together?” she decided to use clay as a way of fastening them. Soon, as she added eyes, hair, and limbs made from petals, twigs, and pods,

a fairy evolved. Other children awoke from their naps, and before long they were all making fairies, then whole fairy families. In the end, a long-term project emerged.

After observing, Bonnie brought her own voice to an existing interest—fairies—and contributed something she thought might be enticing to children. She collaborated with the children, and she scaffolded Alexandra's thinking by asking a question. Not, in this case, a closed question with a correct answer, but a thought-provoking question—“How do you think we could . . . ?”

As with any in-depth project, the teaching team talked a great deal on a daily basis about what was happening, and this, too, was new for Bonnie.

Our discussions, sometimes . . . wow! They are so deep. It's a very different kind of work, very cerebral compared to what I was used to. Sometimes I jokingly tell the team that my head hurts! I'm definitely thinking a lot more, and it feels really

good. It makes me feel proud of how we research, stand back and look carefully at what the children are doing, and really think about it. For instance, how can we change things? If something doesn't work out, we can't attribute that to the children. It's for *us* to think about. What can *we* change or try differently? It's so reversed from what I was used to, and it works so much better for the children and the adults, in both a practical and an intellectual sense. Thinking back, I can see that this was what I always wanted to do, but I didn't know it!

The thing is, now that I'm in an environment that is comfortable with emergent curriculum and child-centered approaches, I'm convinced that the children I'm working with in this school are so much more engaged in learning. They are really *interested* in what they're doing. They write about it, and represent their learning with many kinds of media. They're learning about *everything*, because their interests are so diverse, and we follow up on what interests them. We have very few behavior issues, because the children are too busy with meaningful work—meaningful to *them*, and supported by *us*.

As Bonnie talks about how she now approaches her work, we can easily perceive her enthusiasm. Her disposition—an openness to change, a willingness to try new things, a commitment to learning, a tendency to engage in child-centered practices—and her curiosity led her to reflect on her original teaching practice. It also helped her understand that she needed a different approach and permitted her to follow her curiosity about how children's voices could not only be heard but made visible through curriculum.

What can we learn from Bonnie's experience? She began teaching in settings that didn't feel like a good fit for her. Her natural tendency as a teacher was to allow children to explore and create with a wide array of materials, and to collaborate with them. When the opportunity arose, she sought out a better fit for her philosophy. We can understand from her story that it's natural to feel nervous or uncomfortable with change, but that change can be very much worth the effort. It is clear that Bonnie has grown, feels more confident, and has renewed passion for her work, perhaps due to the feeling of being able to create curriculum in response to her children. Bonnie feels that she has found a good fit for her own philosophy about how young children learn; she now describes herself as a deep thinker, a researcher, and a contributor to the team. She has learned to observe along with her team and to *use* those observations to plan further steps. In order to think deeply and find meaning, we need to collaborate and engage in dialogue with other teachers (Rinaldi 2006). It is easier to "think hard" when thinking with others! And sometimes, if we notice and listen carefully, the children lead us to what to do next.

The Child's Voice: The Mapping Project

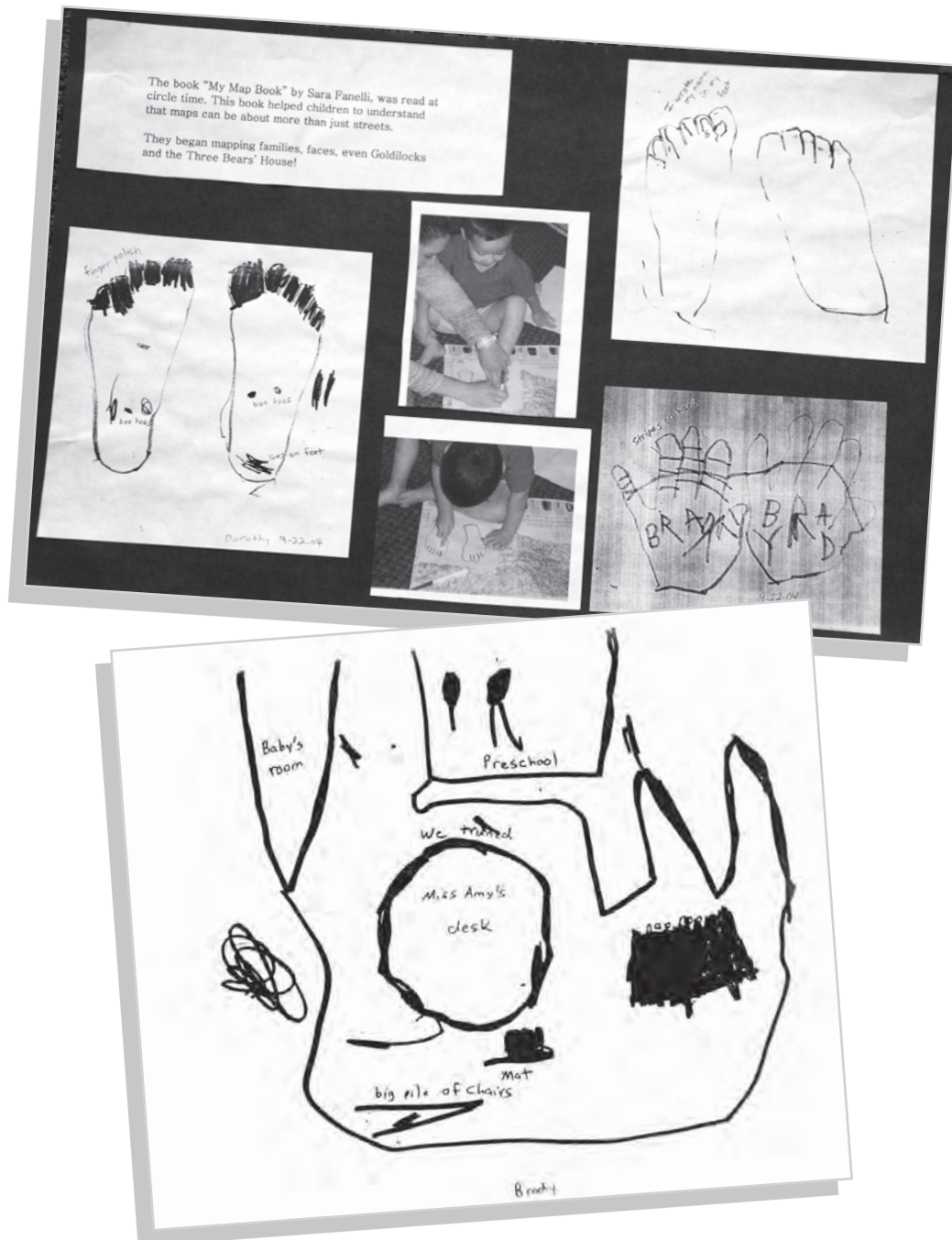
Earlier in this chapter, you read about the importance of observation, facilitation, and collaboration in creating emergent curriculum. The following project demonstrates all of these, including the teachers' tendencies to be curious about children's understandings, and to scaffold. In the preschool room, teachers notice, note, and follow up on a small beginning in the midst of a busy morning.

During a long play period in the preschool room, Sam, Norman, and John, each with a rolled-up paper in hand, approach Miss Karen. Sam says, "Miss Karen, I have a map." He unrolls the map to reveal an X, and tells her, "That's where the treasure is." As Miss Karen watches, the children walk to a small cabinet nearby, open a drawer, put their maps inside, and close it again. Then, opening the drawer with wide eyes, they say, "We found the treasure!"

Later, Karen and the other members of the preschool teaching team wondered, "What do children know about maps? Why is playing at finding treasure a recurring theme in childhood play?" As they asked the children more about their maps (What are maps for? Who uses a map? Why?) the children told them, "A map is how you find things." This gave the teachers a direction to follow in terms of what to offer the children. Could they map where to find things in their classroom? Find and represent the path to the front lobby of the school? Map their playground? These were genuine questions on the part of teachers; they didn't know the answers. So they offered several invitations to the children in the form of mapping activities to try. The children's responses would tell them what to do next.

Beginning with familiar areas of the school and working with individuals or in small groups, children and teachers began to work together on mapping. What began with a handful of children in one area of the room soon engaged the majority of the children in different ways. After discussing where they lived, some of the older children were able to represent their streets with drawings of houses or apartments. Other children, with scaffolding from a student teacher, mapped what they saw around them as they walked along the bike path in the yard—the sandbox, the rocks, the flowers. After a teacher asked, "How can we find the way to Miss Amy?" others mapped their way to the front desk in the lobby "where Miss Amy works." Familiar stories supported their thinking as they drew maps of how to get to the house of the Three Bears. And finally, after reading Sarah Fanelli's *My Map Book* with teachers, the children realized that just about anything can be mapped, and proceeded to map their hands, feet, and faces.

This project emerged humbly. It required no major event, long formal observation, or developmental milestone in order to generate curriculum. It took only an observant teacher who noticed a small moment, reflected with peers about what to do in response, and was willing to find creative ways to sustain the children's interests. Emergent curriculum doesn't have to come from complicated beginnings, but it can lead to wonderfully complex play and learning.



What Are They Learning?

Through play within the map project, children learned

- **Spatial relationships.** What is in front, behind, beside their houses? Children had to be able to represent this mentally before they could represent it graphically.
- **Mathematics.** The children had to consider distance, and how they would represent “a long way away” compared to “nearby.” Here teachers had an opportunity to include measurement in many forms.
- **Representation.** How do children represent familiar routes and pathways? Do they prefer graphics, construction, or sculptural means (for example, clay) to represent what they know? These children preferred to draw maps, even though they used clay frequently in their classroom. Eventually, they were able to represent the real world in a symbolic format.
- **Emerging literacy.** Can children connect concepts from familiar stories to their own lives? This group of children understood the concept of finding things with maps. Therefore, they were easily able to draw the way to the house in the story of the three bears, a story they knew well. They also used information from a nonfiction source (*My Map Book*) to extend their knowledge about mapping, and they tried some new approaches.
- **Social learning.** This project began with play in a small group. The children continued to work with others throughout, but they also had the opportunity to do independent work (for example, mapping the playground according to what they themselves noticed). Through documentation panels, children were able to examine the work of others.
- **Language development.** New words and verbal expressions are naturally introduced throughout any project. In this case, new words often were related to spatial and mapping concepts concerning what the children were drawing: *trail*, *surrounded*, *narrow*, *wide*, *near*, *far*, and, of course, *X marks the spot!*

Looking back, we can connect this project to the aspects of emergent curriculum we’ve talked about in this chapter. A simple idea from children was noticed during play (observation) and a teacher made a short anecdotal note about what had happened (documentation). The event was then discussed and reflected upon with the team (reflection and dialogue). Exploration of maps was allowed to develop over an unprescribed period of time and was supported by teachers, who continued to watch and offer support as needed (flexibility and responsiveness

to children's ideas). And throughout the whole enterprise, teachers were watching, making notes, talking, collecting artifacts, and taking photographs (documentation).

This approach is quite different from the prescribed themes that Bonnie described earlier in this chapter. We know the children were interested in this topic, since it came from their play idea. Teachers and children collaborated, and tangents that the children wanted to explore (mapping hands and feet, for example) were respected and supported. And yet, through play, learning was always present and made visible through the teachers' observations and documentation.

It is clear that in order for curriculum to be responsive to children's ideas, teachers must notice small events during play. When we're paying attention to children's play ideas and writing them down, we have many choices of directions to take.

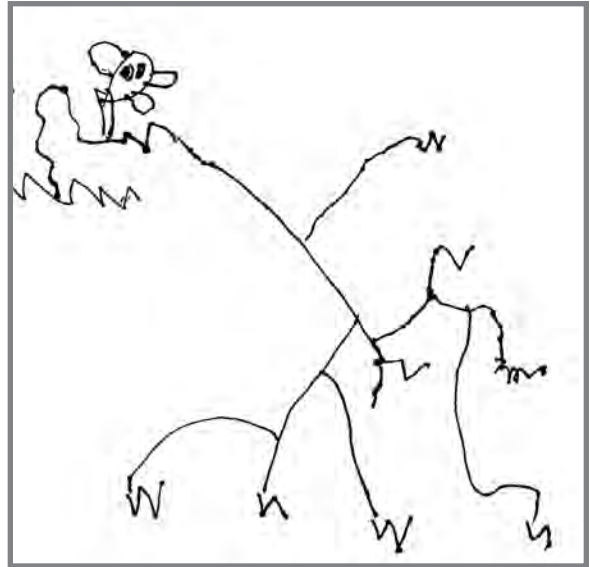
How will this observation take place, and how do we know what to observe? What will we use and what might we safely ignore? In the next chapter, we will see that there is a point at which we begin to make decisions that reflect our values and philosophy, a place where the child's voice is protected, and where the thinking of the child and the teacher come together.

Suggested Readings

Jones, E., and J. Nimmo. 1994. *Emergent Curriculum*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.

Jones, E., and G. Reynolds. 1992. *The Play's the Thing: Teachers' Roles in Children's Play*. New York: Teachers College Press.

2



Observing to Capture Children's Ideas

As we begin thinking about the big picture of how emergent curriculum can come together, we also need to think about real classroom life. How does emergent curriculum unfold, in the practical sense, every day? When I asked classroom teachers where they begin when thinking about emergent curriculum and where their ideas come from, they shared the following thoughts on observations as a source of curriculum:

We observe play, social interactions, misinterpretations, and then we teachers work together to come up with a creative response.

We use a cycle of observations/dialogue/brainstorming/reflection and then interpretation.

We provide a rich environment, and then watch and listen.

(Stacey 2005)

Many early childhood educators are keen observers of young children. Teachers are fascinated by children, and they're trained to watch carefully, for many purposes.

Observing for the purpose of curriculum development, however, requires that we take on a particular perspective. If we want our programs to be child centered, developmentally appropriate, and responsive, we need to try to see the world from the child's point of view and take on the stance of wondering.

What do you wonder about in the following example? From the child's point of view, what do you think is going on? Can we understand, or do we need more information?

When I had my little school on my own we used to go to Diefenbaker Park just over the border to play on the playground, walk, and feed the ducks. There was a small bridge over a stream created when the waterfall above it was turned on in the summer. One winter day, when there was no water flowing, the kids started running toward the bridge as soon as they saw it from the footpath. All but one of them were hanging over the rails to look. They were shouting about something. I was listening to the child who held back as we approached the bridge.

I wondered aloud if he was afraid and he said he was. "Is there a troll under it?" he asked. I said that I didn't think so and invited him to hold my hand as we crossed the bridge. He took my hand and we started toward it. As we reached the middle, the other children begged us to look over the rail with them at the men's black dress sock they'd been clamoring about. When I asked where they thought it had come from, one of them said that John, a classroom assistant who'd recently left, had forgotten it there on one of our walks. The boy who'd held back said maybe the troll had left it.

When we got back to school, I read *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and the children decided to act out the story. Needless to say, they took great pleasure in knocking the troll into the water, having him run away, of course leaving behind one sock. We looked for that sock every time we went for a walk, and we continued to act out and draw the story of how the sock got there. One spring day, after the waterfall was turned back on, we were surprised to discover that the sock was no longer under the water. Although we wondered where it might have gone, somehow that wasn't as intriguing a question as how it got there. I never thought I'd actually miss a sock!

Teresa Cosgrove, college instructor, Port William, Oregon

Teresa's story shows us that she and the children wondered about several intriguing ideas. Teresa wondered about a child's fears, while the child wondered about trolls. The whole group was puzzled by the appearance of the sock, and this became a continuing topic for them to think about and to combine with their prior knowledge of a traditional tale. The children's perspective is respected in the generation of this minicurriculum, and the adult has plenty to think about as she reflects on their theories.