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From theme-based to emergent curriculum

Four teachers change and learn about themselves, the children, and authentic practice

by Diane Kashin

If nature has commanded that of all the animals, infancy shall last longest in human beings — it is because nature knows how many rivers there are to cross and paths to retrace. Nature provides time for mistakes to be corrected (by both children and adults), for prejudices to be overcome, and for children to catch their breath and restore their image of themselves, peers, parents, teachers, and the world.

(Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 80)

Introduction

For those who are tired of old images and practices, Malaguzzi suggests that there is time for mistakes to be corrected. New paths of practice can be forged by being willing to consider another way of teaching and learning with young children. And as with any change in professional practice, teachers face cognitive dissonance when they try to reconcile their current practice with new ideas. This is the story of what happened when four teachers abandoned their theme-based approach in favor of the uncharted territory of an emergent curriculum, and how this act impacted their practice and their self-image.

It is also the story of a personal journey. I spent years as a preschool teacher struggling with the theme approach. I knew

that there was a better way, but in spite of purchasing numerous books and attending conferences and workshops, my curriculum practice was not innovative. My practice was run-of-the mill and commonplace. When I became a director, I had the opportunity to work with a teacher who adopted an innovative approach to curriculum planning. Themes could last more than one week and the ideas for themes did not just connect to holidays, the weather, and preschool concepts such as colours, numbers, and the alphabet. I vividly recall how, for one month's time, her classroom became the Hundred Acre Wood inspired by the children's favourite literary character, Winnie the Pooh. However, I was dismayed and frustrated with the inability of the other teachers to abandon their own theme-based practice.

When I left my position as director to become a teacher educator, I left the opportunity to practice a curriculum that was not run-of-the-mill and commonplace, but innovative and authentic. Unfortunately, I was not aware of emergent curriculum when I was working with children. As a result of my experiences, I decided to focus my doctoral research on four teachers implementing emergent curriculum so that I could better understand how it could impact teaching practice.

Past practice

The four teachers in question — Felicia, Rose, Mary, and Layla — described their past practice in this way:

- Themes were the preferred approach.
- The curriculum was routine and tightly scripted.
- The routine provided a level of comfort to those who were using it.
- A tightly controlled time frame of one-week intervals was used.
- The teachers controlled the curriculum; children had little input.



Diane Kashin, EdD, is a professor at Seneca College in Toronto. She completed her Doctorate of Education degree from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Her thesis, "Reaching the Top of the Mountain: The Impact of Emergent Curriculum on the Practice and Self-Image of Early Childhood Educators," was published in 2009 and is available from amazon.com. Her first textbook, *Playing and Learning In Early Childhood Education* (co-authored with Beverlie Dietze), will be published by Pearson Canada in 2011. Diane is currently the president of the Association for Early Childhood Educators of Ontario and is a consultant with the Acorn School, the site of her summer experience with emergent curriculum.

The theme approach to curriculum planning is described as linear, lock-step, and segmented by subject (Wien, 2004) or what Felicia referred to as 'filling in the boxes.' A matrix of activities guided the week's activities and there was little opportunity for discovery or emerging directions if they conflicted with the 'theme of the week.' In this approach, there is no opportunity to "revisit children's work to incorporate principles of editing" which Clemens (1999) calls "the permission to start wrong" (p. 2). Rose's observation that "by the end of the week your theme is done even if the children want to know more" shifted the teachers' attention to what was happening in their classrooms.

Themes are based on the assumption that "all children will benefit and be interested." Themes do not acknowledge each child's uniqueness and they do not "empower children to become part of the planning process" (Crowther, 2003, p. 40). Mary agreed, saying, "[Themes were] more structured, more teacher directed. This is what we are doing today, this is what we are doing tomorrow and this is what we are doing next week." As Fraser (2000) suggests, in the field of early childhood education sometimes . . .

Experiences that happen in the classroom have little relationship to the written plans. . . . [Children] come up with more interesting ideas than the teachers had thought of. . . . [Teachers] "find themselves caught in the dilemma of sticking with the theme or abandoning it and following the children's interests" (p. 124).

As Felicia recalled:

"When I was transforming from filling in the boxes to emergent curriculum, the boxes couldn't hold everything, only one physical activity, one cognitive, one social. This is the limitation."

The need to change

Except for Felicia, the others had not questioned or deliberated on the practice of themes. However, increasingly Felicia had difficulty reconciling the emerging, expressed interest of the children with the prescribed theme-of-the-week and began to reflect on her teaching practice in a way that questioned the use of themes. Felicia recalls feelings of frustration and a lack of authenticity in implementing themes. For Felicia this was the driving force in seeking alternative approaches. Felicia contends, "If you are following the traditional curriculum, it gets in the way of real meaningful learning." Felicia's perception was that themes "did not feel right." Wien (1995) refers to theme-based practice as reflecting a 'teacher dominion orientation.'

In this practice, teachers choose the activity, its purposes, and its design, and then implement it. Ownership of the activity belongs to the teacher: part of the activity is persuading children to her purpose, motivating them (p. 8).

Wien's (1995) case study of a teacher whose program planning was based on themes offers some insights. This teacher found the "traditional content she has been using for themes: shapes, colours, alphabet, and numbers (which is remarkably similar to the content of traditional kindergarten and primary classrooms) increasingly boring" (p. 24). The teacher saw part of her role as familiarizing children with material they will encounter in school. Themes are based on a school model. Early childhood teachers feel it provides an academic focus especially with the use of worksheets. "The teacher controls the agenda for action" and "there is a prescribed range of possible responses that the children are permitted; activity outside the range is corrected" (Wien, 1995, p. 8).

Wien's characterization of the limitations of the theme-based approach fit with what Rose had been observing. She described

how she had seen teachers reacting to children colouring outside the lines while completing worksheets. "Mommy is not going to like it because you are colouring outside the lines." In trying to duplicate a school model, early childhood programs use instructional group experiences, construction paper cut-outs (e.g. turkeys at Thanksgiving, pumpkins at Halloween, and shamrocks for St. Patrick's Day) and worksheets to 'teach' the children.

Abandoning themes

When I began my study, Mary, Felicia, Layla, and Rose had all abandoned the use of themes. The focus of curriculum planning for each participant had become project work and all were attempting to implement an emergent curriculum with varying results. Project work and emergent curriculum, it appears, do not always go hand-in-hand.

- Projects can become predetermined by the teachers once an interest has been established.
- While projects are labeled 'emergent curriculum,' once there is an expressed interest in the topic by the children, the teachers take over.
- Teachers respond to children's initial interest by collecting related resources and provide connecting activities, and the project becomes teacher directed.
- The direction of the project is pre-determined and teacher controlled.

Layla, Felicia, and Rose engaged the children in class meetings to make group decisions about the direction of the project. In this way:

- The children had the opportunity to decide how they would make decisions; "would it be consensus or majority rules?"
- The children were presented with topics representing the emergent

interests of the group and a decision was made about the project that would unfold.

- The children reacted to waning interest and the development of emerging topics.
- The children expressed and transcribed ideas and theories about the project and determined its direction.

In contrast, Mary determined the activities that were presented every day which related to her project on animals. Interestingly, Mary is the only one of the four teachers who was not transformed by the change to a project approach. Even though the centre she had worked in professed to be 'Reggio-inspired,' she was dissatisfied with emergent curriculum and admitted to not knowing what is meant to 'do Reggio.' Mary struggled with children's behavioural issues in her classroom and felt the need to maintain control. What was missing for Mary that was there for the other three? My research suggests that the following components are necessary for a successful practice of emergent curriculum:

- On-site support
- Access to professional development
- An intrinsic desire to change
- A collaborative approach to curriculum that includes parents, teachers, and children

By sharing control of the curriculum and letting go of the belief that a teacher has to have all the knowledge and make all the decisions, a classroom can actually appear more in control. Neither Rose, Layla, nor Felicia had daily issues with children's behaviour. All of the participants viewed their projects as an opportunity for children to acquire knowledge on their respective topics, but also to provide children with active involvement in the emerging curriculum:

The children in Layla's class were able to identify common weather patterns as well as speculate upon cause and effect. They

were encouraged to explore, discover, inquire, predict, and theorize. The teachers had to work hard to pique and sustain the children's interest in this topic.

In Felicia's classroom, the children were able to identify artistic elements and characteristics of the great masters of the art world. By limiting the number of artists for the children, she allowed for more in-depth study than would have been possible with a larger number.

When the children in Rose's program arrived after attending school for a full day, they encountered resources and activities that engaged their sense of wonder and discovery about snakes.

In Mary's classroom, the children seemed to have an abundance of knowledge related to the *Lion King* movie.

Teachers' reflections on the process

Becoming a teacher of emergent curriculum is not easy. Layla recalled the experience of losing control of the curriculum when she began to implement an emergent curriculum. She recalls the experience as being traumatic. She felt vulnerable. Layla was in the vulnerable position outside of the "teacher dominion" (Wien, 1995, p. 5). By stepping out of this comfort zone to a place of cognitive discomfort, Layla experienced the colliding of past and present practice. Layla recalls that it took considerable time for her to accept emergent curriculum to define her practice. Now she claims "it has given me more confidence in what I do." Rose also recalls being initially resistant. Felicia took to the practice immediately, accepting the discomfort as the impetus for growth and development. She now views emergent curriculum as being 'instrumental' in keeping her in the field.

Mary is less than enthusiastic about emergent curriculum, but acknowledges

that with the practice she is "more alert to what the children are talking about and showing interest in." When asked whether she is satisfied with emergent curriculum, she answers with a qualifying, "pretty satisfied." She says, "I don't know how far to go when doing emergent curriculum. How much is going to be too structured? I need a balance between structure and completely emergent."

Layla, on the other hand, asserts that she is "extremely satisfied" and it is the "best curriculum we ever had." Rose claims she is "very satisfied" with her approach to curriculum even though she was initially resistant. She asserts, "Now I cannot comprehend pre-cut" and proclaims, "I wouldn't know how to go back." Felicia believes that if it were not for emergent curriculum she would not be working in the field. Emergent curriculum has lent authenticity to her practice.

Final thoughts

For me, this journey of discovery has shed much light on the practice of emergent curriculum. I discovered that emergent curriculum has transformational possibilities such as depicted in Reggio Emilia's *Hundred Languages of Children* Exhibit. Having multiple opportunities to visit the exhibit during its tenure in Toronto has made me a believer.

It has been the stories of these four teachers, coupled with the inspiration from the marvelous documentation panels of the exhibit, that have motivated me to once again seek the experience of working directly with children. For two months during my summer holiday, I worked in a Reggio-inspired program. I relished the possibilities inherent when learning with and from children on a daily basis. I appreciated the opportunity of establishing reciprocal relationships with children, parents, and other teachers. I cherished the chance I had

to practice documenting a project. For me, I had finally lived first-hand emergent curriculum within a Reggio-inspired environment. At the end of the summer I felt confident to stand before another new succession of pre-service early childhood education students in my classroom having practiced what I preach.

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Additional resources on emergent curriculum

Carter, M. (2006). *Giving children more languages*. CD-ROM. Mechanicsburg, PA: Harvest Resources.

Carter, M. (1999). *Thinking big: Extending emergent curriculum projects*. DVD. Mechanicsburg, PA: Harvest Resources.

Carter, M. (2004). *To see takes time: Growing curriculum from children's theories*. DVD. Mechanicsburg, PA: Harvest Resources.

Forman, G., & Gandini, L. (2006). *The Amusement Park for Birds DVD*. Amherst, MA: Videatives, Inc.