



Following Children's Lead in the Dance of Real Learning

by Elizabeth Lightford

How do you plan curriculum for your group of children? Do you plan by theme, weekly program plan, the seat of your pants, or the interests and development of the children? Most early childhood educators plan around a theme that corresponds in some way with a monthly event, season or holiday that is supposedly "of interest to the children." We assume that "doing the fall theme" around September or mid-October will be appropriate, year after year. Why not challenge ourselves to find out what is *truly* of interest, of relevance and meaningful for all those young people in our programs! If we claim that we provide child-centred programs for children, we must examine our programs, our approach and our curriculum.

As a result of extensive research on children's learning, we know a great deal about how children learn and process information. Children learn from play; active exploration and manipulation of their environment; their own interests; those around them. Most people in the profession agree on these basic principles. Children are constantly integrating new information into their developing understanding of their physical and social world (Labinowitz, 1980). If we truly respect each child's construction of knowledge, then a linear, pre-planned approach to curriculum does not support the innate potential of each child to understand the world in a deep and personal way. "A developmentally appropriate curriculum is neither teacher- nor child-directed but a result of interaction between teacher and children, with both contributing ideas and reacting to them to build on appealing and worthwhile themes" (Cassidy & Lancaster, 1993, p. 47). One way to achieve this balance is an approach to curriculum planning called *emergent curriculum*.

Emergent Curriculum

Emergent curriculum stems from the interests of children and relies on teachers' knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice. Emergent curriculum is embedded in a reciprocal relationship between teachers and children, both having valid goals and ideas. It requires energy, flexibility, observation, listening skills and commitment. To begin the process, teachers set up the room with activities that they think might be of interest to the children. Next, they observe and record expressed interest in any of the planned activities that could be extended and built upon (Gordon & Browne, 1993). An effective way to record what the children are doing is to use a tape recorder or a video camera. Once the children become accustomed to having these tools around, they ignore them and teachers can record accurate versions of the children's play and conversations. Throughout the day, teachers respond to children's interests by planning activities and providing props and materials that elaborate on and extend the themes that emerge. Many teachers already practise emergent curriculum as they respond to and support children's play on a daily basis.

Levin (1986) encapsulates this idea in her discussion of a typical Monday morning in a day care. As the children were arriving, one child announced that she had brought her rock collection to show everybody. The children revealed their interest in the rocks as they gathered around the collection to label the colours, shapes and sizes of the rocks. The teachers had to decide what

to do with this spontaneous interest: should they continue on with their planned morning or should they foster and support the obvious interest in rocks? As a team, they decided that they would follow the children's lead and find ways to enhance and deepen the children's understanding of rocks.

Scales were brought out, magnifying glasses were used and hammers were allowed at the workbench. The interest in rocks was steadfast throughout the day and the team spent time planning activities for the following day based on the newly-emerged theme. Each day the teachers met to discuss the day's events and plan the following day. This was emergent curriculum at its best. The teachers observed an interest or theme that stemmed from the children; they supported the children's initiative by providing materials, equipment and props; they met to discuss the activities that had evolved throughout the day; they planned additional and extension activities for the following days; they re-evaluated their plans each day and adjusted activities to meet the needs and interests of their group of children.

Curriculum planning becomes a dance between children and teachers with each one taking the lead as well as responding to the direction of the music. Children and teachers become partners in the learning process (Gandini, 1993, p. 6). This kind of curriculum planning is exciting and appropriate, but you might be asking how all of this is recorded on paper. The answer is *webbing*.

Webbing

Webbing is a wonderfully easy and stimulating way to plan and record curriculum. It's a fun and exciting brainstorming method that can be used in several ways (Workman & Anziano, 1993). The two main uses for webbing are *planning* curriculum and *recording* curriculum (Levin, 1986). Planning webs are used to generate ideas for activities and projects for the children from an observed interest such as the rocks. Teachers work together to brainstorm many ideas and activities for the children which are then recorded in a "web" format. Activities can either be grouped by different areas of the room or by developmental domains. For example, clusters either fall under areas such as the dramatic play, block and science areas *or* around domains such as language, cognitive and physical development. Either way is fine, but being consistent in each web is important.

A web can be used in this format as a weekly or monthly program plan. Any activities that emerge throughout the day can also be added to the web. As a result, the web will provide a record of planned activities as well as activities that emerged from the children's play and ideas. This serves as an excellent visual representation to address the question, "What do the children do all day?"

The hospital theme web

Perhaps a child has shown a need to role play "doctors" ever since her mother was hospitalized. The teachers may also observe that the play of several other children reflects their experiences with hospitals and doctors. As a result, the teachers team up to plan a web around the theme of hospitals.

It is decided that the planning web will be based on activity areas in the room. In the dramatic play area, a hospital is planned. While the children are playing, they decide that they need an ambulance to transport patients to the hospital. The teachers support this idea by providing

props and letting the children build an ambulance in the block area next door to the dramatic play area. On the web diagram, the ambulance is recorded as a child-initiated activity and enclosed within a circle, while the hospital is considered a teacher-initiated activity and enclosed within a square. This method of webbing also emphasizes the integration of teachers' and children's input. Figure 1 displays a small version of this type of webbing.

A second method of webbing is to record what the children are learning while engaged in activities. This type of documentation is useful to show teachers and parents an integrated, visual map of what the children are learning. "Done on a regular basis, they (webs) can provide a useful planning tool as well as good documentation of the 'basic skills' that were incorporated into an educational program for the year" (Levin, 1986, p. 18). Again, it is easy to do and it validates the activities that have been planned or have emerged. Following the hospital theme, a web is set up with activity clusters that have either been teacher-planned or child-initiated. Skills, concepts and abilities the children develop are then listed surrounding each activity. This type of web is useful for showing parents quickly the goals for each activity, rather than sifting through goals and objectives in written format.

Using video cameras to determine children's interests

A useful and effective method of observing and recording children's interests is to use a video camera. Using a video camera to record and document children's play provides accurate and objective information for curriculum planning. For example, a 20-minute vignette of block play can reveal a multitude of interests, needs and play themes.

In September 1994, I videotaped the play of a group of kindergarten children in a non-profit, parent cooperative centre in Ottawa. I brought the tape into a curriculum course I was teaching to ECE students at Algonquin College. The goal was to demonstrate how emergent curriculum works. I used this segment of play as an example of what teachers can learn about their children using observation and documentation, via the video camera. It was wonderful! It was so exciting to have the opportunity to watch the children's play. Let's face it, in a busy room, how much time do teachers have to sit down and observe the children? A video camera can serve as a teacher's eyes and ears when she/he must be on the other side of the room.

After the students and I examined and discussed what we were seeing in the children's play, we used the tape as a springboard for planning curriculum that was truly based on those children's interests. We asked ourselves what the children were representing in their play and what interests they were displaying. Throughout the block play we observed house building, computer play, office role-playing, communications using phones and walkie talkies, and the operation of a police station. When we unravelled the progression of this play, several themes emerged: construction, telecommunications, computers and work settings, all of which were potential starting points for curriculum planning.

We created planning webs responsive to the observed play themes, we brainstormed long-term projects extending from the children's interests and we discussed the importance of concept webs to document the learning that had occurred throughout the day. It was an exciting and stimulating exercise that inspired many students. In writing about the process of webbing, one student reported, "Everyone's ideas were used and incorporated somehow and the final result was a very detailed web and a very exciting week of events" (Falsetto, 1994, p.2). Another student revealed her feelings saying, "When presented with webbing, it was as if the wall had

been broken. Ideas flew back and forth, and planning was done in a concrete way" (Maclsaac, 1994, p. 4).

Summary

A discussion of emergent curriculum implies that the starting point for planning curriculum is the *children*. By observing their play and social interactions, teachers investigate and research their children. In so doing, teachers explore the quality of children's thinking -- their thoughts, interests, play, questions and need for knowledge about the world.

Reynolds (1994) supports the value of emergent curriculum in that "children's interests and ideas come from their own lives and environments" and that these "interests are evident in their play" (p.4). It is wonderful to plan and record curriculum that is truly child-centred: one that involves the children's ideas, thoughts, needs, abilities and interests to their fullest. Children have much to contribute to the planning and learning process. Our job is to listen, observe, record, support and respond to children's learning. This is, indeed, a tall order, but one that is rewarding for children and teachers alike.

Why not...

- share this article with a co-worker and discuss it;
- read one of the readings listed in the reference section;
- put a tape recorder in one of your activity areas and listen to the children's play;
- borrow a video camera and record a day of play;
- jot down some observed interests or play themes;
- get together with a few co-workers and try a web.

Elizabeth Lightford, M.Ed., is a professor of early childhood education at Algonquin College in Nepean, Ontario.

References

- Cassidy, D.J., & Lancaster, C. (1993). "The Grassroots Curriculum: A Dialogue between Children and Teachers." *Young Children*, September, 47-51.
- Falsetto, E. (1994). Algonquin College Course Paper, Ottawa, Ontario
- Gandini, Lella. (1993). "Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education." *Young Children*. November, 4-8,
- Gordon, A., & Browne, K.W. (1993). *Beginnings and Beyond*. New York: Delmar Publishers Inc.
- Labinowitz, E. (1980). *The Piaget Primer*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Levin, Diane. (1986). "Weaving Curriculum Webs: Planning, Guiding, and Recording Curriculum Activities in the Day Care Classroom." *Day Care and Early Education*, Summer, 16-19.
- Maclsaac, C. (1994). Algonquin College Course Paper, Ottawa, Ontario.
- Reynolds, U. (1994, June). *Connected Curriculum*. Paper from a presented workshop, Nanaimo, B.C.
- Workman, S., & Anziano, M.C. (1993). "Curriculum Webs: Weaving Connections from Children to Teachers." *Young Children*, January, 4-9.

<http://www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/cccf/00000091.htm>