Our Proud Heritage

The Emergence of Emergent Curriculum

Elizabeth Jones



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In the late 1960s, Laura Dittman, professor at the University of Maryland's Institute for Child Study and NAEYC's last volunteer editor of *Young Children*, invited me to contribute to a collected work on curriculum planning in early childhood education. I was interested, but also confused, as I had always been by the concept of *curriculum*. In my experience, curriculum was what elementary teachers rather than preschool teachers were supposed to cover, using prescribed textbooks and worksheets.

My own introduction to working with children was in a 1950s university lab preschool where adults "set the stage" for children's exploration in a rich learning environment, and teachers focused their energy on observing children's play and recording anecdotal notes on notepads kept in their smock pockets (Jones & Reynolds 2011). We made plans from day to day in response to our observations and reflections on children's needs and interests. The curriculum was set down only after it had taken place, not laid out in advance except in broad terms.

These two focuses—creating the physical environment and studying the child—characterized the development of early childhood education in the first half of the twentieth century. Maria Montessori pioneered the focus on materials in the physical classroom, which were designed with great care to support children's cognitive and aesthetic development. In the 1940s child psychologists such as Arnold Gesell created child study laboratories at universities, taking detailed notes on children's physical and social-emotional development. In the 1950s psychoanalyst Erik Erikson first published a theory of *developmental stages* that explained in depth the role of play at the stage of *initiative*, the years from 3 to 5. Each of these thinkers focused attention on the young child as an active, self-motivated learner, deserving of intensive study in a thoughtfully planned environment.

And so I offered Laura the title "Curriculum Is What Happens" for the book. She liked it but insisted on adding "Planning Is the Key." That was OK with me, as long as we were clear that planning is done all along the way by program staff and not in advance by expert strangers who have never met the program's children.

In the last half of the twentieth century and today, the pressure to teach a prescribed curriculum has intensified in early childhood education. Across the United States, the 1960s discov-

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Curriculum Is What Happens

Curriculum is what happens in an educational environment. It may be prescribed, emergent, or accidental and unidentified. Elementary education commonly has been characterized by prescribed curriculum, in which specialists rationally determine what first or fourth graders should be taught. Curriculum in preschool education more often has been accidental and unidentified. Because preplanned curriculum may be merely arbitrary for the individual child, and because accidental curriculum lends itself neither to evaluation nor to teacher education, the importance of developing emergent curriculum models has been increasingly recognized. Our knowledge of how to implement this middle way, in which a curriculum emerges from each teacher's planful interaction with the individuals comprising a particular group of children, is limited. Those who are skilled at such teaching are often unable to communicate to parents, colleagues, or the public what intuitively they are doing superbly well (Jones 1977, 4).

ery of Piaget and cognitive development dovetailed with the national concern for social equity that led to the creation of Head Start in the mid-1960s and an increasing demand for accountability. The public asked, "If all this public money is being invested in programs for young children, how do we know they're learning?" Preschool teachers were expected to follow a curriculum, and children were tested for mastery. Commercial publishers of curricula and tests eagerly expanded their product lines.

My previous interest had been casual; it was the writing that got me started on serious investigation of early childhood curriculum. At Pacific Oaks College, I created an adult class, still in existence, and called it Emergent Curriculum. It let me talk, listen, write, and coconstruct an early childhood education curricular theory that made sense to me.

This journey generated a new NAEYC book in 1994, *Emergent Curriculum*, written with my colleague John Nimmo, who had pursued his doctoral research in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Created in the 1960s by Loris Malaguzzi, the Reggio Emilia preschool ideal had become by the 1990s a world-renowned model of the documentation of children's active learning at play and work and an emergent curriculum built on the strengths of the child. Like the Reggio educators, we collected stories of emergent curriculum in practice wherever we traveled as consultants working with teachers in their classrooms. Teachers, we reasoned, learn from each other's experiences.

The goal of emergent curriculum is to respond to every child's interests. Its practice is open-ended and self-directed. It depends on teacher initiative and intrinsic motivation, and it lends itself to a play-based environment. Emergent curriculum emerges from the children, but not only from the children (see "Sources of Emergent Curriculum," p. 68).

Curriculum emerges from the play of children and the play of teachers. It is coconstructed by the children and the adults and the environment itself. To develop curriculum in depth, adults must notice children's questions and invent ways to extend them, document what happens, and invent more questions. The process is naturally individualized.

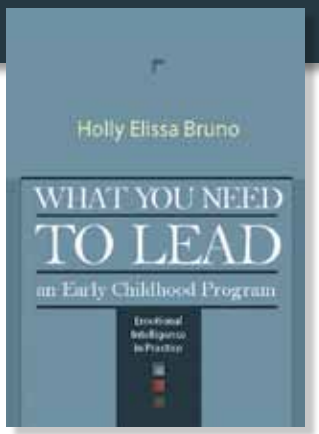
In contrast, standardized curriculum comes from unknown experts outside the classroom. It relies on generalization rather than on an individual teacher's creativity and attentiveness to individual learners. Indeed, standard curriculum may squelch teacher thinking. What it permits is linear planning and assessment that is responsive to bureaucratic needs in a large nation with large educational systems. In this approach, responsive

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teaching is sacrificed to efficiency, and only outcomes are measured.

In 1986 NAEYC published the first edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredekamp), which acknowledged the importance of accountability while continuing to emphasize child-initiated learning. However, the pressure for standardization continued to escalate. Passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 began a decade of overwhelming focus on test-based measurement and test-compatible instruction, with reliance on behaviorist learning theory rather than developmental theory (Kamii 1985).

Behavior modification approaches to teaching use the metaphor of the marketplace, a system based on payment rather than giving. These methods "inevitably produce a dichotomy between work and play, or—more broadly—between doing something because one has to, and doing something because one wants to" (Franklin & Biber 1977, 8). In a society focused on technology and consumption, the popularity of this view is understandable (Jones & Reynolds 2011, 91).

Emergent curriculum focuses on the process of learning. The more standardized the curriculum, the less children's individual needs are met and the more likely it is that many children will fall behind. Children have diverse strengths. Early childhood educators, granted the flexibility to do so, can build on those strengths and on passionate interests as they help children construct genuine knowledge for themselves and practice empathy and respect for their fellow learners. In no other way can the inhabitants of a diverse world learn to share it peaceably.

Sources of Emergent Curriculum

- Children's interests
- Teachers' interests
- Developmental tasks
- Things in the physical environment
- People in the social environment
- Curriculum resource materials
- Serendipity—unexpected events
- Living together: conflict resolution, caregiving, and routines
- Values held in the school and community, family, and culture

(Adapted from Jones & Nimmo 1994, 127.)

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