

“Follow the child’s lead”

The “emergent curriculum” approach bases learning on kids’ interests

BY CECELIA LEONG

O s it bird poop? A plant? Mold, like the stuff that grows on old bread?” The children in Richell Swallow’s preschool class wondered what that green stuff was floating on top of the pond. The kids were lucky—their school has real grown-up microscopes, so they could look at the strange stuff in detail. Then Swallow took them to the library. Excitedly, one child pointed to a picture of algae in a reference book: “That’s it—it’s that “A” word right there!”

Lessons like this are not unusual at the Joyce M. Huggins Early Education Center at Fresno State University, where teachers work together to design activities based on the children’s interests. Early childhood educators call this “emergent curriculum;” Swallow says it’s “on-the-spot planning based on children’s highest point of interest.”

At first the idea was scary, she says, but “After my first project, I thought, ‘This is great!’” Emergent curriculum “allows children to be proactive. They are able to work alone or with a group. They are able to explore ideas, take turns . . . it builds confidence and self-esteem.”

“It’s really easier to teach emergently,” says Dr. Betty Jones, who teaches at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena. “It’s more playful and more fun.” And emergent curriculum promotes learning: “What we learn is what we care about.”

“The advantage for both students and teachers is learning how to think and problem-solve,” adds Christine Richards, who teaches at The Growing Place in Santa Monica.

Here are some tips for getting started:

Notice children’s interests

Ask yourself, “What are children interested in?” says Jones. “If you don’t know, find out! Make a list of children in your class . . . then list the interests of each child.”

Sometimes many children are interested in the same topic. For example, once many children in Richards’ class were talking about going to a horse show with



Pam Andrade’s students watch to see whether a snail can cross a tightrope.

their families. Richards and her colleagues encouraged them to work together to mold horses out of clay, shape them out of wire, and write stories involving horses.

Follow the child’s lead

When a boy in Pam Andrade’s Castro Valley preschool brought in a snail, she and her co-teacher, Sydney Smith, saw how excited the children were. So they all stopped, put the snail on a piece of black paper, and watched it slowly inch its way across. The teachers asked questions to encourage children to discuss: How fast is the snail moving? How else can we make trails? Can a snail crawl across a tightrope made of string? Where do snails live?

Says Dr. Jan Fish of CSU Northridge, teachers have to “have the humility to follow the child’s lead.”

Sometimes it’s hard, though, says Andrade, when the kids have lots of different interests. Her school uses a blend of traditional and emergent curriculum.

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Be flexible: “You can’t watch the clock.”

“We have structure and routines, what we call the flow of the day.” Within that structure, says Swallow, you can make “an honest response to what’s happening in your classroom.” For example, Swallow’s class had “adopted” a river turtle at the pond. The children enjoyed watching “Tinkerbelle the Turtle” and left food for him in little clay dishes they made. One day, they noticed that Tinkerbelle was not eating or moving much and worried that he was sick and needed a doctor. So the class, with help from their teachers, wrote a note asking parents if they knew of a turtle doctor. One did, and the children wrote a note to the vet: “We’re very concerned that Tinkerbelle is not eating and not diving.” The children had a big celebration after the vet successfully treated Tinkerbelle for a respiratory infection.

Help children ask their own questions and find their own answers

Teacher Suzanne Duarte Jones at Pacific Oaks Children’s Center in Los Angeles says asking their own questions and finding answers makes children “more flexible thinkers and problem-solvers.” For example, after a rainy day, Duarte Jones noticed one child skirting the puddles because he didn’t want to get wet. The teachers encouraged the children to think about how they might get across these “lakes” more quickly. One solution was to walk across the puddles on stilts.

Pick up on classroom issues

In Sandra Harris’ classroom at the Helen Diller Preschool in San Francisco last year there were 17 kids who spoke 10 different languages. So teachers developed a year-long theme on identity. They encouraged kids to figure out their own answers to questions like “who are you?” and “where do you come from?” Parents came in, shared stories, and taught words in their languages. Children drew family pictures and self-portraits.

“A lot of conversations would focus on what was happening,” Harris recalls. Children said things like, “We can be friends even if we don’t like to play the same game,” and “Well, we’re different—we speak different languages.”

Be open to the environment

Children are interested in what’s going on around them—Jones shakes her head sadly at the memory of a teacher who pulled down the shades so the children wouldn’t be distracted from the lesson by the powerful Santa Ana winds.

In contrast, when children in Oakland’s Daisy Child Development Center talked about the events of 9/11, teacher Toni Gross encouraged them to express their feelings through artwork. One little boy drew a picture of a hurricane. Gross asked a neutral question: “What’s happening in your hurricane?” He responded, “It hurts people. It knocks down towers.” Other children built towers of clay and knocked them down with clay airplanes. The children used the artwork and reenactments to express their feelings of fear, understand what happened, and reach some resolution about the events.

In the end, says Jones, emergent curriculum is about “creating a democratic learning community in which people’s skills and interests are taken seriously.”

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT EMERGENT CURRICULUM

- *Emergent Curriculum*, Elizabeth Jones & John Nimmo, NAEYC, 1994
- *Reflecting Children’s Lives: A Handbook for Planning Child-Centered Curriculum*, Deb Curtis & Margie Carter, Redleaf Press, 1996
- “Painting a Tragedy” by Toni Gross & Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, the full story of Toni Gross’s classroom’s response to 9/11, available online at www.eceteacher.org/articles/articles.html
- “Untiming the Curriculum,” Wien Carol Ann and Kirby-Smith, in *Young Children*, NAEYC, September 1998
- Information on the Reggio Emilia approach (emphasizing child-centered curriculum), www.reggioalliance.org