Key Aspects of Emergent Curriculum

Rather than sets of lesson plans and objectives, emergent curriculum is a process that roughly follows these steps:

1. **Select a topic that reflects interests expressed by children** in their conversations or that you as their teacher suspect may be of high interest. Ms. Putnam brought a goldfish to school with the idea that the children’s care of the fish might interest them in exploring environment-related subjects.

2. **Brainstorm, alone or with colleagues, the many ways the experience could develop** to ensure that the topic has rich “generative” potential. As it evolves, the project may or may not follow what you brainstormed.

3. **Use something concrete** - from the children, their families, or the teacher - to pique initial interest and to maintain it. The concrete “thing” may be children’s own words as recorded by the teacher. Ms. Putnam used children’s questions about the goldfish as the starter for many pursuits. Throughout the year she recorded, saved, and studied the children’s conversations and kept using their words to arouse further interest.

4. **Tape or take notes of the children’s words as they react.** Study their words to determine what really grabs their attention. You may let a day or more pass to heighten the children’s anticipation and to allow yourself time to study their words.

5. **Continue to bring the children’s own words back to them:** “On Monday you said the fish’s water was really dirty. Joey said, ‘It’s full of poop.’ Would you like to help me clean the fishbowl?”

6. **Brainstorm what might happen before any new activity.** Knowing she wanted to build environmental awareness, Ms. Putnam had a container available to save the dirty water. When the children asked why she was saving it, she asked, “What do you think we could do with this water?” Again she recorded and studied the children’s answers, and brought back those that she had selected for their potential to spark environmental awareness.

7. **Use children’s words**, some particular things they have made, or photo(s) taken during the process as the stimulus for the next steps.

8. **Document the experience as each step happens.** Record the story of the emerging project as it emerges, using children’s words, photos of them, their drawings or other work, and a photojournalistic-type retelling.

Documentation

Documentation is the process of recording children’s thoughts and actions on a topic to maintain their focus and expand their interest.* It works like this:

1. As an experience begins, create a large panel out of sturdy cardstock or illustration board. Write a question, repeat a child’s comment, or make up a title as a headline for the panel. Include a photo, a drawing, or an object to show what sparked the project.

2. Continue to add information to the panel as the experience continues. Information can be key words from the teacher or children, a child’s drawing, or a photo or series of photos of the children, even an object. The information should reflect a pivotal moment, which led to next steps. Ms. Putnam added a photo of the full class at the first group meeting with the fishbowl in the center, one child’s comment, and one question each from two other children. As the project continued, she added drawings of children’s ideas for how to clean the fishbowl—one a theory, the other the process the class eventually adopted.

3. Whenever a panel is hung or words or photos are added, and before continuing the experience, gather the children who were involved, and read the panel to them (or have them “read”—retell—to you) what has happened thus far. This is called revisiting. Ms. Putnam and the small group revisited the panel at least once a day.

4. Add whatever photos and comments or questions bring the experience to a conclusion. In this case, Ms. Putnam added a series of photos—cleaning the fishbowl, discovering Big Eyes dead, everyone crying, and the fish’s grave. At the end she added two children’s questions which stimulated new projects: “What are we going to do with the dirty water?” and “What will happen to the dead fish?” A finished documentation panel should convey what started the experience, how it developed and why, and its outcome or the open-ended questions it sparked. As children revisit panels, they begin to retell the experience to themselves, to one another, and to their parents or classroom visitors. Revisiting helps the experience move forward, keeps the children focused, and deepens their understanding of their experiences. Documentation gives parents and visitors a window into life in the classroom and builds both appreciation for and trust in the school.

* Note: Documentation can also be used to convey what children are learning through their play to Center staff, parents and visitors by connecting the efforts and artifacts of children’s learning to identified learning foundations and curriculum standards.