

Shifting from a Rules-Based Culture to a Negotiated One in Emergent Curriculum

Matthew Sampson and Christine McLean

Matthew Sampson, who has worked in the field of early childhood education for 20 years, recently graduated with a master of arts in child and youth study from Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax. In 2018, Matthew received the Prime Minister's Award of Excellence in Early Childhood Education. He also coauthored "Zombie World: Boys Invent a Culture in Their After-School Program," a chapter in Carol Anne Wien's book *The Power of Emergent Curriculum: Stories from Early Childhood Settings* (2014). His research interests are emergent classroom environment design, emergent curriculum, and pedagogical documentation. Email: matthew.sampson@msvu.ca

Christine McLean is on faculty in the Child and Youth Study Department at Mount Saint Vincent University. She completed her PhD in applied psychology and human development (early learning) from OISE, University of Toronto, in 2018 and has been involved in the early childhood education field in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Nova Scotia for over 30 years. She is particularly interested in reflective practice and reflective thinking with both children and adults, as well as the coconstruction of pedagogical documentation by educators and children in early learning environments. Email: christine.mclean@msvu.ca

Written in the voice of the first author, this article examines how two early childhood educators who practice emergent curriculum shifted from following a rules-based culture in their classroom to a more negotiated one. The voices of the child and educator research participants are excerpts from a larger qualitative study involving five educators who participated in interviews focused on their perceptions of how their understanding of emergent curriculum evolved over time. Using self-selected examples of pedagogical documentation as a catalyst for discussion, the participants reflected on how their experiences with mentors, children, and program administrators influenced their shifts in practice.

Key words: early childhood education; emergent curriculum; shifting practice; reflective practice; pedagogical documentation

Early childhood educators have had a spotlight shone on them over the past several years with the introduction of such initiatives as jurisdictional early learning frameworks, quality assurance systems, and other regulatory programs designed to support the needs of children and families during these challenging social, physical, political, and global times. Educators are required and expected to engage in critical reflection and pedagogical inquiry in meaningful ways without necessarily having the time, space, and opportunity to do so. As an early childhood educator myself, it seems at times like everything is changing and next steps in my practice are not always clear. As Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and her colleagues (2015) describe, "We have learned to question taken-for-granted assumptions about what young children know and what they can do. We question what counts as appropriate practice, what our roles as early childhood educators are, and what they could be" (p. xiii). As we question

our assumptions, we look around to see if anyone else is also feeling unsure in their practice. Are others making "mistakes" as they attempt new ways of being, doing, and knowing? Does anyone talk about this? This article tells the story of two early childhood educators who were provided with the time, space, and opportunity to use pedagogical documentation as a catalyst for critically examining and questioning their current and past practices specific to emergent curriculum.

Emergent curriculum is an open-ended yet intentional way of teaching. In an emergent curriculum setting, the educator must "actively seek out and chase the interests of the children" (Biermeier, 2015, p. 73). Emergent curriculum

focuses on children's inquiry and engagement, using pedagogical documentation as a tool for communication (Stacey, 2019). It helps us understand the meaning children are making of their experiences (Wien, 2014) and it requires respectful, collaborative relationships based on trust and a sharing of power.

In my own career as an ECE at Peter Green Hall Children's Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I began to understand emergent curriculum with the help of two strong mentor educators who gave me time to follow the children's developing interests when I was ready to do so. My mentors had a few years of experience practicing Reggio-Emilia-inspired emergent curriculum in the early 2000s when it was still new to our region of Canada. When I became the lead ECE for a school-age classroom with this centre, I assumed that my practice in emergent curriculum would easily translate to this new setting. The classroom used an emergent approach, but as I would discover later, the power dynamics between adults and children and between educators and leaders felt unbalanced. This affected me and my relationships with the children and my colleagues. At one point, I encountered an uncomfortable situation where a piece of art drawn by a 7-year-old depicted what I interpreted as a scene involving drugs and violence. I felt the need to deal with it before it became an issue with other children, parents, and the director. I was worried that I was not doing my job well (or that it would be perceived in this way) and I would be reprimanded. My reaction to this stress was to ask the child for an explanation using a somewhat demanding tone: "What are you drawing?" No explanation was given (probably due to my tone and posture) so my strategy was to ban the art: "If you cannot talk about it then you cannot draw it here."

I was uncomfortable with how I handled the situation, but I felt that my reaction was necessary to avoid further issues / power struggles in the classroom. Later, upon reflection, I realized that I had betrayed the child's trust and taken away his right to express himself. Over the next few years, my relationship with this child and my appreciation for his art and unique ways of looking at the world deepened. He became a central figure in a significant and career-changing art piece called "Zombie World." "Zombie World" was a comprehensive and ongoing art piece that emerged from a homework assignment given to the grade 4 class at their elementary school and that I heard about from the children while they were in my school-age after-school classroom.

As in my previous experience with the drawing about the drug deal, I had similar struggles with the child-initiated "Zombie World" art piece due to its insinuations of violence and evil. However, and as a result of my reflective practice with other colleagues and my experiences in the field, my confidence as an educator had grown, and this, plus my trust in the children, gave me strength and the belief that the positive benefits of the experience for the children outweighed the negative. I realized that the "Zombie World" project had demonstrated their personality, their questions and understandings of the world, their creative expressions, and so much more. I believed, this time, that it was not my place to limit the artwork's potential. My role was to document its growth and try to understand the children's thinking.

As I reflected on this remarkable project, I realized that my shift in practice—away from controlling the classroom and toward supporting creativity—allowed children to rise to a level of success that previously seemed unlikely.

As a result of these experiences, I wondered if this sort of change happens to other educators, if they experience similar changes in practice related to their understanding and use of emergent curriculum. As a graduate student, I chose to examine what shifts in practice were experienced by other educators and if there were commonalities among these shifts. This article focuses on how two participants from this larger research study shifted their practice, from rules-based curriculum approaches to a more negotiated, participatory, and emergent curriculum.

Literature

Emergent curriculum

Simply stated, emergent curriculum is an open-ended style of teaching and learning (Wien, 2008). It is not as simple in practice, however, and moving from a more traditional theme-based and adult-directed curriculum approach to understanding and implementing emergent curriculum can be difficult for some. According to Nxumalo, Vintimilla, and Nelson (2018), “emergent curriculum stands in contrast to, and is an important site of resistance to standardized and theme-based curriculum in early childhood education, including increasingly regimented modes of governing what children can do and learn in the classroom” (p. 434). Therefore, emergent curriculum is in opposition to adult-directed curriculum in early childhood education. Adult-directed curriculum generally adopts a developmental perspective and focuses on what the child will know at the end of the lesson. Educators who follow an emergent curriculum approach, however, do not focus on the right answers; they focus on supporting children’s sense of agency and community, which includes their ability to research, plan, work together, and problem solve. Carol Anne Wien (2008) deconstructs and makes meaning of the contradiction between traditional and emergent curriculum:

The term emergent curriculum, thus, captures a seeming paradox: an intentional course is implied by the use of the word *curriculum*, derived from the Latin *currere*, meaning to run a course or make one’s way around a known route. But paradoxically, the course of this curriculum is not known at the outset. It is emergent—that is, its trajectory develops as a consequence of the logic of the problem, the particular connections that develop as participants bring their own genuine responses to the topic and collaboratively create the course to follow out of these multiple connections. (pp. 5–6)

This explanation dissects the complex nature of emergent curriculum; the unknown is the path to a much richer learning experience for both the child and the educator. It cannot be predetermined: As Jones and Nimmo (1994) explain, “Emergent curriculum is sensible but not predictable. It requires of its practitioners trust in the power of play—trust in spontaneous choice making among many possibilities” (p. 1). Many early childhood education programs have been interpreting emergent curriculum, with some subtle differences, by focusing on its foundation of taking children’s theories and curiosities seriously and treating children as citizens who are capable of participating in society, considering children as creators of culture, placing the environment as a third teacher, guiding behaviour and inspiring creative thought, and creating pedagogical documentation (Nxumalo et al., 2018; Wien, 2008). These fundamental ideas are necessary for understanding and coconstructing emergent curriculum.

Capable child as coconstructor

Before an ECE can begin to develop the curriculum or design the learning environment, they must first reflect on their image of the child. The educator’s image of the child is fundamental to emergent curriculum; it is the key that unlocks the possibilities of each child’s learning journey and each ECE’s teaching journey (Biermeier, 2015). Loris Malaguzzi, one of the originators of the Reggio Emilia system of municipal preschools, described the image of the child as a metaphor for how society views the capacities and/or incapability of children (Rinaldi, 2006). Malaguzzi (as cited in Rinaldi, 2006), proposed that a child, “right from the moment of birth is so engaged in developing a relationship with the world and intent on experiencing the world that he develops a complex system of abilities, learning strategies and ways of organizing relationships” (p. 83). This image of children’s potential is the basis for what is seen as possible for children and supports the necessity of valuing children’s right to think and learn on their own terms. Malaguzzi (1994) said:

Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a

child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image. (p. 1)

Perhaps the primary and most basic principle of teaching in an emergent learning space is the belief that the child is capable. This image sets up the educator to talk, listen, and observe in a manner that respects the child's capability as a thinker, participant, citizen, and researcher of the world around them.

Pedagogical documentation

Pedagogical documentation, a fundamental aspect of emergent curriculum, has its roots, in part, in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Educators use documentation to share the captured thinking and learning of the children and others in the classroom and to propel their investigations further (Fraser, 2012).

Many forms of documentation in educational practice are evaluative; they usually seek to assess the students' progress and the quality of the education (Wien, Jacobs, & Brown, 2015). In contrast to this, pedagogical documentation is more of an invitation to get involved in the learning process and a starting point for conversation about it. To document experiences in an early childhood environment means to approach everyday situations with wonder and curiosity. Iris Berger (2015) describes how the process of pedagogical narration (another term for pedagogical documentation) "triggered in educators an attunement to unexpected events that punctured a hole in ordinary understanding, and thus required complex, interpretative responses" (p. 145).

Jones and Nimmo (1994) describe pedagogical documentation as an invitation to the parents and community that opens a space for understanding and dialogue. Educators who practice emergent curriculum must trust that learning is happening, and it is their job to recognize, support, and make it visible, and to make meaning of the children's play and exploration, through pedagogical documentation (Cowan & Kress, 2017). Children are constantly making meaning of the world around them as they play, explore, and engage, and in pedagogical documentation the ECEs transcribe the children's meaning in order to communicate it to their colleagues and the children's parents (Cowan, 2018).

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) caution us to not confuse pedagogical documentation with child observation, which is generally used as a type of developmental assessment. When the focus of documentation is outcome driven, then we are engaging in a strategy of "complexity reduction," as described by Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010). Pedagogical documentation is much more complex than an evaluative tool for educators: It is a form of research into children's relationships with their world. With the educators as the researchers, pedagogical documentation is the analyzed data that has been generated in the form of drawings, conversations, and photographs, etc. It is then designed in a way that suits its specific purpose and audience, as described by Susan Stacey (2015). Although research and analysis are linked to pedagogical documentation, it also "reveals connections between events, and it provides children, parents, and teachers with an opportunity to review and plan future experiences" (Fraser, 2012, p. 141), while at the same time serving as "a practice to encourage a reflective and democratic pedagogical practice" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 152).

Carlina Rinaldi (2006) describes how the process of documenting learning is a form of research that has evolved and is still evolving in Reggio Emilia. By using this documentation, the educator is able to assess, engage in dialogue, and find meaning in the process of learning that was documented, informing their teaching practice (Rinaldi, 2006). Pedagogical documentation helps them organize the children's thinking and negotiate the curriculum with the children. Educators who use it are able to constantly research teaching practices with their students, which will then provide the opportunity for change through their findings or reflections.

Critical reflective practice

Reflective practice, as described by Donald Schön (1983), “can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice and can make new sense of situations of uncertainty or uniqueness” (p. 61). Critical reflective practice is how professionals examine what they are doing, assess how it is working, and then make changes to improve. In the field of education, critical reflective practice can be defined as “the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions” (Brookfield, 2017, p. 3). It is an “active process of engaging with difficult concepts, tensions, and uncertainties” (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015, p. 28). Consequently, as Deb Curtis and her colleagues (2013) explain, “educators who commit to focused reflection experience immediate and long-term benefits” (p. 14). In emergent curriculum, educators develop their learning and knowledge with children as reflection in action or practice (Curtis & Carter, 1996; Schön, 1983). Schön (1983) explains the process of reflection in action where a practitioner “seeks to discover the particular features of his [or her] problematic situation, and from their gradual discovery, designs an intervention” (p. 12). Curtis and Carter (1996) add that reflection in practice requires a “set of attitudes and habits of mind that enable them to respond to the classroom dynamics and multiple needs of children with the readiness of an improvisational artist” (p. 171). To ensure that their responses reflect the children’s thinking, experiences, understandings, and interests, ECEs must be critically reflective; as Brookfield (2017) explains, “critically reflective teaching happens when we build into our practice the habit of constantly trying to identify, and check, the assumptions that inform our actions as teachers” (pp. 4–5). This is how educators in emergent curriculum think on their feet and problem solve with children to support and expand their ideas and interests.

Earlier I highlighted two major points in my practice that were times for reflection: the “drug art” and the “zombie art.” Both pieces made me uncomfortable—as Schön (1983) puts it, were “situations of uncertainty”—because it was not what I had expected to see as examples of children’s art. Wien (1995) refers to these times of discomfort as “pivot points”: moments of change where educators take a different direction in their thinking and practice. Berger (2015) describes “moments of perplexity” where we are “forced to think about the unpredictable and contingent nature of our lives and to find together new meanings, new realities, and new relationships in a world that, for the most part, desires control, predictability and knowing.” (p. 138). In my experience, these challenges were opportunities for change or growth that were brought on by my discomfort. It is important to note that even though my actions in each situation were vastly different, upon reflection they were both opportunities for a change in my practice, the former (drug art) being an internal signal and the latter (“Zombie World”) being a change that affected my practice. Both moments were also highlighted by disequilibrium, or a moment of being unsure. Karen Murriss (2008) describes disequilibrium as “a positive force that opens up a space in which educators have the need to reflect upon their values, their beliefs about learning and teaching, and ultimately ... rethink their own role” (p. 1). Generally, people shy away from disequilibrium; as adults, we are comforted by the familiar and expected, but the uncertainty and excitement for learning in emergent curriculum may not be comfortable. It is like the feeling in your stomach as you swing with your eyes closed: uncomfortable but possibly delightful. Thus, disequilibrium and pivot points may work in synchrony to bring about the possibility of change in educators’ practice. Educators can learn from their challenges and, by embracing the unexpected, they can open up to the opportunity for growth.

Method

Research design

This qualitative research project examined the journey of educators specific to their experiences of shifting their practice with emergent curriculum. My research is guided by a social constructionism perspective that posits that there are many interpretations to one inquiry and that meaning is constructed through interaction (Guba, 1990). Social constructionist perspectives, according to Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015), “enable educators to critique the assumption of universal truths about children, families, and what constitutes ‘good practice’” (p. 33). Chosen because this research study focused on individuals who were trying to articulate, through their documentation and their own narratives, how their practice as educators had shifted or changed, social constructionism provided me with a lens that would help interpret and construct meaning from our conversations.

Using semistructured interviews with early childhood educators, I endeavoured to work with the participants to identify a particular point in time where a shift in practice had occurred. Documentation supplied by the participants provided a retrospective of their beliefs and practices and so, using this documentation, I asked the participants to reflect on what had changed between their past and current practices and uncovered, from their stories of change, why the change occurred and how it had affected their understanding of emergent curriculum.

Participants

ECE participants were selected according to specific criteria that included both education and experience in emergent curriculum. All participants needed a working understanding of emergent curriculum and needed to use pedagogical documentation as a regular part of their practice. The original research was based on data from four adults who were working in early childhood classrooms with children up to 10 years old, and one adult in an administrative role. This article focuses on the stories of two of these participants.

The participants met with me on two separate occasions within the span of a month for a 30-minute interview to discuss significant moments of their teaching practice. They shared two pieces of pedagogical documentation from their previous work. One piece of documentation focused on what they considered to be an example of their strongest work, and the other piece was an example of what they felt to be, in retrospect, evidence of a time when their skills and understanding of emergent curriculum were not as developed as they were at the time of the interview.

Data generation

Using an ethnographic interview approach, I conducted two semistructured interviews with each participant at the local public library. As stated previously, the interviews each centered on a different piece of documentation that the interviewee provided from their work history. Each piece of documentation was provided one week before the interview so I could familiarize myself with it. James Spradley (1979) describes how ethnographic interviews follow a format similar to a friendly conversation; this format helps the interviewer keep the dialogue relaxed yet meaningful.

One interview with the participants centered on documentation that the interviewee considered a reflection of a recent successful interaction or project with the children. In other words, it was what they considered to be an exemplary piece of their documentation that illustrated emergent curriculum in action. This was documentation they are proud to share with others as a good example of emergent practice that successfully led children and/or educators to deeper thinking and curiosity.

The other interview with the participants centered on a piece of documentation that represented an earlier understanding of emergent curriculum. This documentation demonstrated work they had since grown from, for example, where the educator had attempted to follow an interest, support answering a question, or scaffold an idea, but upon reflection and with more experience they recognized that this did not happen as they hoped. As with the first interview, questions were designed to gather details around the story and context of this documentation. This interview also included questions that examined what had changed or was different in the educator's practice/beliefs/values/opportunities as a catalyst between documentation two and documentation one.

Data analysis

I transcribed the interviews verbatim, including notes to clarify emotion, confusion, or any other aspects of the interview that needed clarification. One participant added a one-page email after each of her two interviews to add to her answers. I summarized the transcriptions by creating a chronological narrative of their journey using the most significant points in their responses. I replaced all names of educators and children with pseudonyms. In each educator's journey I began with their early example as a starting point, continued with their reflections on what had changed for them, and then finished with what they felt was their evolved example of documentation.

Participants' stories

Sahar: "I really wanted to know the right answer."

I interviewed Sahar about the two pieces of documentation she titled "Let's Talk About Guns!" and "Learning from Burned Cookies."

"Let's Talk About Guns!"

In our interview to examine the "Let's Talk About Guns!" documentation, Sahar described how, in her first six months of teaching in a preschool classroom with children between 3.5 to 4.5 years old, children were playing a pretend gun game. This made her uncomfortable. When Sahar asked if this kind of play was allowed, her lead educator asked her to document and explore this interest despite her discomfort, so Sahar took photos and made initial notes from her observations. She also wrote down and included a conversation that she had with the children about guns. Her piece of documentation included a brief description of the play, photographs of the children working with their gun creations, and transcribed conversations.

Although she remembered feeling nervous, Sahar had started her exploration of gun play with a conversation, as she had seen demonstrated by her mentor. Here is the transcript of her conversation with two of the children involved in this gun play exploration, as included in her documentation:

Sahar: So what kind of things did you make with K'nex[®]?

John: Swords.

Orion: Guns.

John: Swordguns and sticksmash.

Sahar: Why do you like to make those?

Orion: Because we can play superheroes.

John: Because they sharp the bad guys.

Sahar: Guns are good or bad?

John: Guns are bad, they die people.

Orion: Swords as bad as guns.

John: Some toy guns and water guns are good because they won't die people.

Orion: How about playdough guns, they are safe?

In her documentation of the conversation, Sahar had asked what they were making, and the children replied with several answers, one of which was "guns." Sahar then asked an open-ended "why" question. The children mentioned superheroes, but Sahar explained to me that since she was investigating guns, she continued to focus on that aspect of the conversation. Following this chat with the children, Sahar described how she tried to learn more about guns with trips to the library to find books and she attempted some follow-up conversations about guns, but the children did not seem interested. She described how, two years later, as she looked back at her first documentation, she thought she had erred. She saw that the children had only mentioned guns once in the conversation and there was more of a focus on superhero play. As she read her documented conversation from "Let's Talk About Guns!" she recognized that she had focused on guns, but the children had been focused on heroism. She reflected on her misinterpretation in this way:

I couldn't listen to that or maybe I didn't want to, I guess. I wasn't sure if it was going somewhere that I didn't know, so I had my walls up to make sure [the children] came along with me to discuss what I was asking about ... I wanted to hear what I was ready to hear, so I was picking up their words. I would pick up the word guns, but I wouldn't pick up the word superheroes because guns was my topic and superheroes was not my topic.

According to Sahar, in her first year or two of teaching, she was not able to relax. She was rushing to make a perfect plan and she needed to have all the answers. In the gun play scenario, she felt like she had to teach the children something about guns. After much reflection, she recognized that teaching was less about the facts that were discussed in her conversation, exploration, and documentation and more about how the children were thinking. Her questions could support the children to think and communicate their thoughts effectively. Sahar said, "Maybe I was not confident enough; I was not relaxed enough; I didn't have faith in myself and my children." Sahar explained that since this early time in her career, she had built her confidence through teaching experience, reflected on her previous work, set up her own classroom, and worked in partnership with a variety of early childhood educators at different points in their development.

For the second interview Sahar chose a more recent example of her documentation called "Learning from Burned Cookies." The documented exploration lasted for over a year.

"Learning from Burned Cookies"

Similar to the first example, this documentation included photographs, a brief explanation of what provoked the exploration, and the transcribed words of the children. However, this example also included more detailed explanation of the children's processes of exploration. During the interview, Sahar provided more detail about the event than what was evident in the actual documentation, often referring to her document as the original piece in a series of documentation related to this particular event.

As she described, one morning she had set up a provocation of baking ingredients that were available for the children to explore. These ingredients included flour, salt, cinnamon, ginger powder, apple spice, and oil. According to Sahar, although she did not know it yet, this simple provocation would lead to over a year of scientific exploration. As she explained, on this particular morning, the children were happily mixing ingredients without a predetermined plan or recipe. As one child moved away from his mixing, another joined and commented about this sensory exploration:

Safa: This looks like real food.

Jen: I am making rainbow ice cream.

The children wanted to eat their food, but Sahar reminded them that the dishes and tools they used were not clean for eating but they could test it in other ways. The children decided to bake it for ten minutes, and when their timer went off, they discovered that their food was burned.

Jen: Can we smell them?

Safa: Maybe we can wash off the black part.

Teo: Maybe you guys put too much oil.

Sahar: To bake for ten minutes was maybe too long.

Jen: Yes, maybe we can try four minutes next time.

Safa: No, I think we should try two minutes next time.

Jen: Can we make it again?

Sahar: Sure. We can try again tomorrow.

Sahar described how she was already getting feedback from the other staff at the centre. Some educators were saying, “What is that gross smell?” and suggesting recipes that they knew. Sahar stated that she had not been fazed by this criticism or suggested change in direction. She knew that the children were not disappointed with their baking. The next day they tried again.

Safa: I think we put too much oil yesterday.

Jen: Yes, we shouldn't put too much oil this time.

As the children continued, their play changed. On the previous day they had focused on pouring and mixing, but on this day, they were carefully using the spoon to delicately spread out the flour, and Serena would taste each ingredient before adding any to the mixture. Joud and Sofia joined in the play and soon Serena shouted, “Look, I made chocolate!” Sahar described in the interview how Serena was able to share her process of making chocolate and, as a result, the other children tried to make some too. Sahar described this as a key moment, when the children found success in their own terms and were able to ask and explain their process. Once everyone was happy with their creation, Sahar took them to the oven and they set a timer for two minutes. As her documentation indicates, when the timer went off, they said:

Sahar: Do you think they are done?

Joud: (poked the baked food with her finger to test the texture) Yes! It's done!

The children brought their food back to the classroom and started tasting.

Joud: It's delicious!

Serena: Do you want to try mine?

Jen: Sure, do you want to try mine?

Sahar explained how she noticed a change in the children's willingness to try this new food. She believed that being involved in the complete process of making the food allowed the children to consider food in a more comfortable way. Sahar remembered that they were very proud of their food and wanted to share it with their families. This exploration of food and baking took place over a year, with different children joining and leaving the group. The ingredients were always available in the classroom and were replenished frequently. With each new idea and discovery, Sahar added to the documentation, which eventually covered an entire wall. Sahar has been asked by other educators how she could let the children do whatever they wanted with the ingredients. She said, "If you have those eyes for children, then you know how important that is, to value their thinking." Sahar further explained that valuing children's thinking will help develop a trusting and comfortable relationship because it gives them space to share their big ideas in a meaningful way.

Sahar had stated that this documentation was not perfect, and when asked "What would you change about it?" she replied:

It's not about changing or that I know what to do differently. It would have been beneficial if I had a strong coworker with me seeing the same value. So, we could have a positive argument from our different perspectives, and we could see the different sides of the learning. I'm still learning. How could I say that's my perfect work or perfect documentation? Nobody's perfect, I'm just trying and learning. I will learn something from my next group that will open my eyes to a new thought.

Looking back at her first example, Sahar remembered the words of her first coworker when she had asked if gun play was okay. He had said, "Hmm, I don't know, what do you think?" She thought he sounded like he trusted her and it was okay to try. So that is the advice she would like to share with new or struggling educators:

You don't have to have all the answers because it's not about outcomes, it's the process of learning that is more important ... If it doesn't always go as you planned, it wouldn't matter to your children because they don't know what your plan was.

Sahar's final thought during our interview process was, "I was wondering if I was ready for this research because it seems very professional or for someone who knows everything. It sounded very deep, so I was not sure if I was okay to have an interview, but it gave me a chance to revisit my own journey."

Ingrid: "Is it okay to ask a question?"

I interviewed Ingrid about her early and recent documentations, "Sam's Combine Harvester" (first interview) and "Ami Makes Clothes" (second interview).

"Sam's Combine Harvester"

During our initial interview, Ingrid explained that she was not sure we would have enough to talk about from this piece of documentation, but it was her oldest piece, so she decided to use it anyway. "Sam's Combine Harvester" included an introduction, three small photos, and a brief explanation of what was happening in the pictures on half a letter-sized piece of paper. It began with an explanation of how 2.5-year-old Sam was using bungee cords to wrap

around a wooden ramp structure. He called it a combine harvester and explained what it did.

We can put a corn (pointing to a yellow foam block) into a hole in here (pointing to a hole in the wood structure for balls). It goes down and it will come out of this hole (pointing to another hole in the spindle). He brought the corn to the shelf, saying “This is an oven. We can cook this corn here.”

Ingrid indicated that Sam wanted to show his combine harvester to his mom and that later he made another machine called the “combine polar.” Ingrid explained that the materials used in this play were recycled materials, and she had been interested in how they were used by the child, but this explanation was not included in her documentation. Ingrid also noted that Sam had built another machine in addition to the combine harvester and she had brought in books about a combine harvester and had a conversation with him about it; however, this extra information was also not included in the documentation. Although Ingrid had planned to write a second piece of documentation with pictures she had printed out, she lost the pictures and completely forgot about continuing the documentation until she reflected on it for the interview. She regretted losing the extra pieces of documentation because they could have led to further understanding of what Sam was doing with the corn. Ingrid explained in the interview that it was interesting that he was using multiple different materials to construct the machine, and that this complexity had caught her eye.

Ingrid was also very critical of the aesthetics of this piece of documentation. She said she had been more focused on the shapes and styles of the photos and less on how easy it was to read. Ingrid also asked herself, “Is it okay to ask a question?” She felt that if she asked questions during Sam’s construction play it might change his idea, so she did not try to challenge his thinking with questions about his work. She felt that she had missed the opportunity to understand more, not only about Sam’s play but also about the play of other children, because she did not want to get in their way. She said:

I was kind of passive with documentation and a passive educator because I didn’t want to interrupt their play. I was hesitant to ask them questions and challenge them to go to the next level, so I was just observing them and writing down what they were saying and what I saw.

According to Ingrid, she believed that if she saw this type of play now, she would have a different perspective on it. She said, “Now I would want to know what he was really into. Like, I know he was making a combine harvester, but was he just having fun with a bungee cord or maybe he wanted to cook some corn?” Sam had continued working on the combine harvester and combine polar, yet she did not make another piece of documentation about it. She stated that in the past, she believed that toddlers could not engage in long-term projects due to their “lack of memory.” However, in an email following the interview, Ingrid shared another thought: “I thought toddlers had a short attention span that caused them to have shorter-lasting interests compared to preschoolers. Now, I think I was wrong and maybe it was my excuse[for not attempting ongoing project work with young children].” She explained that if she had followed up with other pieces of documentation and believed that younger children had the capacity to engage in longer-lasting projects and interests, then Sam’s exploration could have gone deeper.

In our second interview, Ingrid explained that over the two years between the two pieces of documentation, she had worked with several coworkers with varying levels of experience. Regardless of their years of experience, Ingrid described how they challenged her ideas and how this had helped her to refine her ability to argue and defend her opinions. She described how she discovered that, by using documentation, she can reach out in a way that makes the children feel more valued and listened to. In talking about her more recent example of documentation, Ingrid described how her questions and the documentation acted as a provocation for a child who appeared to be bored in the classroom and losing interest in the activities of her peers.

“Ami Makes Clothes”

The second piece of documentation that Ingrid chose to share consisted of six letter-sized pages with two or three photos on each page and text that included observations, children’s words, and conclusions. It appeared to be a series of pieces of documentation that, all together, told a longer story.

Ingrid explained that she worked with a group of 4-5-year-old children that included one particular child, Ami, who was older than her peers. One day, Ami brought in a naked Barbie® doll, whom she called Baby. Ingrid explained that her own first reaction was to remove the toy, because the children were not supposed to share toys from home. This was a classroom rule. Aside from the rules, she personally considered this type of doll to not have much play potential in the classroom. Ingrid said that, despite her misgivings, she asked a playful question: “I think Baby must be cold without any clothes on, what can you do for her?” Ami appeared to be challenged by this open-ended question and responded with “I don’t know what to do.” Ingrid had previously noted Ami’s drawing skills, so she suggested that Ami attempt to draw an idea. Ingrid explained in the interview that perhaps this was the catalyst Ami needed, because she quickly began to draw some clothes for her doll. Later, Ingrid noticed that Ami only made a dress for the front of her doll. She did not mention this to Ami, and instead observed and documented as Ami glued the dress on the doll. According to Ingrid, the other children noticed Ami using the doll and getting her picture taken and her words written down by the educator, and this appeared to motivate them to help Ami make a bed and pillows to keep her doll warm. They wanted their pictures taken too. Ingrid mentioned that she had observed how Ami was having difficulty connecting with other children and making friends, but now she was the centre of attention and others were joining her. Ingrid described how the next dress Ami made had vertical lines cut in it and so she asked about it. Ami explained, “It’s a fashion.” She noticed that Ami was not able to cut the way she wanted to, but later it became obvious that the vertical lines were meant to be a fringe. Ami went on to cut, colour, and style the doll’s hair in the same style as both of the educators in the classroom, with different colours for each educator represented on either side of the doll’s head. Ingrid explained that she had quickly created documentation and posted it that same day, primarily because it was not what she expected to happen with a “toy from home,” particularly this type of doll. Ami saw herself and her dress in the documentation and was excited to point it out to the other children in the class. After a long weekend, Ami came back with a similar doll and again she had a plan to make a dress for her. Ingrid wanted to try to push the dressmaking a little farther.

[Ingrid said to Ami:] “Oh, maybe she’ll be fine on the front because you made a dress for her, but maybe she might feel cold on the back, so what are you going to do? Do you have any plan for that?” I asked those kinds of questions and I didn’t try to put my idea into my question and shift her idea.

Ingrid described how Ami quickly made a dress for the back and another educator provided some elastics, which Ami used as a scarf and to hold the dresses on. More children kept joining in the dressmaking play with Ami. They were now also making side panels for the dresses. Ingrid explained that she felt it was time to shake things up a bit and help this play evolve and expand, so she added real fabric pieces. Ami was quick to make dresses and she even invented a closure where a long piece would pull through a small slit in the fabric and hold it closed. Ingrid described how she took photos and wrote notes throughout the activity to include in the documentation. Each time she created a new piece of documentation, Ami was happy to see her designs and herself included in the display. Ingrid found some fashion books from the library that showed 1600s fashions and she brought in her own special dolls from different cultures. After this step, Ingrid described how she was ready to challenge Ami again and brought in bigger pieces of fabric. She asked Ami if she wanted to make fashion for herself. Ami quickly cut and tied some fabrics together and made clothes. Ingrid asked, “Do you want to see what you look like?” and Ami said “yes,” so Ingrid took a picture of her and showed her. Ami was not happy with the way she looked: She thought she looked silly. She took off the fabric and went to play with something else. Ingrid explained that this was where

the documentation ended and that she and Ami were comfortable with this natural conclusion. Ingrid's advice to other educators is:

I want them to break their own rules, because I had a fixed idea, like a prejudice, that we cannot allow Disney[®] characters or Barbie[®] because it's too [stereo]typical, it's not open ended, its nothing useful for the kids and [does not] welcome their ideas. And be there for the kids, be there to listen and play with them and learn from their activities. I learned a lot from [Ami].

After the interview process, Ingrid emailed some additional thoughts about the complexity of emergent curriculum and asked that they be included. She wrote:

Emergent curriculum gives children opportunities to choose their own path to develop their ideas. Children are the leaders and educators support them as a co-learner by having conversations and designing optimal environments. Educators help children think deeper or extend their work into expected or unexpected fields and educators make documentation for children to revisit and for parents to use it as a way of communication.

Shift identified

Shift from a rules-based culture to a participatory culture in the classroom

Emergent curriculum is a style of teaching that relies on the emergence of new ideas occurring, somewhat naturally, through exploration, curiosity, and interactions with others and with the physical environment. Attempting to practice emergent curriculum while following rules, a lesson plan, or a daily schedule can become problematic, because these are predetermined by the educator. ECEs who practice emergent curriculum begin a shift where they challenge assumptions, let go of their rules, lesson plans, and schedules, and instead follow the thinking, questions, and excitement of children. To shift one step further, when an ECE is more comfortable following emerging ideas, they also come up with questions and ideas, some that are shared with the children and some that remain as their own reflections. This shift dismantles the traditional adult-to-student flow of knowledge by allowing children to coconstruct their own learning. It is then that the ECE can participate in the questions and ideas while ensuring their voice does not lead the thinking. They are now a part of a participatory culture. Both participants in this study shifted toward negotiating a participatory culture rather than a rules-based culture in their classrooms. This shift allowed emergent curriculum to flourish.

A rules-based classroom refers to a space where predetermined or nonnegotiated rules are applied, like, no running in the halls, or no climbing up the slide, and where space for negotiation and conversation is limited. In Sahar's story, the proposed rule was "no guns in the classroom" and for Ingrid it was "no toys from home in the classroom." But whether it was intrinsically motivated or through the extrinsic motivation of feeling challenged by a mentor teacher, both hesitated about applying the classroom rules and instead asked for input from the children. This important step helped the educators to resolve their discomfort with these seemingly arbitrary and authoritarian rules, and it allowed the negotiation to begin. Now, both educators use questions and negotiation as a natural part of their interactions, practice, and planning for emergent curriculum.

Sahar explicitly stated that in her earlier example she had asked others for the classroom rules about gun play. Also, she had been more worried about knowing the right answer than about knowing what the children were thinking. Later in her interview, using the pedagogical documentation as a tool for critical reflection, she described how negotiation among the children about possible changes to their recipes led to a months-long exploration of cooking ingredients. She shifted from demonstrating to the children how to do the cooking (the rules the

adult might impose) to supporting and engaging in a negotiated curriculum where children's participation was welcomed and necessary.

The second example Ingrid provided of this type of shift was when she described how her opinion changed in respect to classroom rules about toys from home, as well as the play value of Barbie® dolls. By breaking her own rules about commercial toys, Ingrid created an environment where Ami was able to develop her own plan with the Barbie® doll, which led to an exploration of how clothes are constructed. Ingrid shifted from applying arbitrary rules that narrowed children's opportunities to creating an atmosphere where adults and children negotiated the curriculum and cocreated the learning.

Implications and recommendations

It is likely that preservice postsecondary education training cannot sufficiently prepare educators for the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum in an early learning setting. Mary Ann Biermeier (2015) writes, "Learning to teach well rarely occurs during college instruction, but rather within the context of classroom experiences and discussions with colleagues" (p. 74). This is not necessarily a new finding. As Mary Beattie (1997) explains in reference to teacher education programs, "our programs are not long enough, or good enough, to bring about the necessary conceptual changes, growth, and attitudes necessary to be a successful teacher" (p. 121).

Educators need time, opportunity, and a safe space to critically reflect, debrief, and deconstruct their classroom experiences so that a deeper and more complex understanding of their role as educators and the children's role as active and authentic participants in the program-planning process can emerge. Using pedagogical documentation as a catalyst for these important and somewhat difficult conversations was an effective tool for critical reflection for the participants in this study. They expressed how they benefitted from reflective peer dialogue and how their documentation provided a window into their past and current practice. These conversations with peers helped them to consider their understanding of emergent curriculum and their role in the classroom, and this practice of critical reflection appeared to motivate a change toward embracing and accepting the complexity inherent in an emergent curriculum approach.

The findings of this research could help educators recognize that documentation is not only for the development of children's thinking, but it can also contribute to their own personal and professional growth. Reflecting on pedagogical documentation with peers, whether on site during regularly scheduled planning times or in professional learning communities, can contribute to a refinement of practice and the development of a more complex understanding of emergent curriculum for all involved. As well, postsecondary ECE programs can build safe spaces for critical reflective practice, in both the classroom teaching and practical components of the program, thereby building a belief among early years practitioners that their work environments should strive to create atmospheres where reflection is welcomed and expected.

Conclusion

Using emergent curriculum in an early learning classroom is a complex venture. In addition to having knowledge and understanding about what it is and how to do it, the ability to apply this knowledge depends on personal attributes such as confidence, openness, flexibility, and an ability to be comfortable with discomfort. These skills are honed over time and cannot be developed in a vacuum. In other words, educators need to be able to engage in reflective dialogue with peers in order to develop to their own full potential.

While designing this research study, I wanted to explore what shifts in practice relative to emergent curriculum

take place as a result of the process of reflection. People learn best from experience and, in many cases, what they might consider as mistakes; therefore, I felt it could be helpful to see the self-identified mistakes of other educators in their own applications of emergent curriculum and how they learned from these experiences.

The insights from the educators during the interviews were both practical and philosophical. True to the nature of social constructionism, where meaning is constructed through interaction, my own practice has been changed by my interactions with the research participants. Both participants came to conclusions that required me to reflect on both my own practice as an educator and how I understand children's interaction with their learning environments. This allowed me the freedom to be comfortable with and to take comfort in the complexity and ever-evolving roles and relationships that occur among children, educators, and colleagues in early learning environments.

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