

Queensland kindergarten learning guideline

Professional development | Module 3: Examine



Understanding emergent curriculum in practice

Emergent curriculum describes curriculum that develops from exploring what is relevant, interesting and personally meaningful to children. 'As caring adults, we make choices for children that reflect our values; at the same time we keep our plans open-ended and responsive to children.'¹

Key features of emergent curriculum²

1. Emergent curriculum is not a linear process.
An emergent curriculum is constantly evolving in response to children's changing needs and interests, parental and community interests and concerns, and teachers' priorities. Each of these key elements shapes the direction for future learning.
2. Emergent curriculum is cyclical.
As teachers get to know children and their families they observe children's learning, discuss and share ideas with colleagues and families, interact with children and continue to monitor learning progress and document learning. This process is repeated continually.
3. Emergent curriculum is flexible and responsive.
Teachers plan flexibly with children, as curriculum is constantly evolving in response to children's interests, building on children's strengths, needs and interests.
4. Emergent curriculum is collaborative.
Emergent curriculum provides opportunities for adults and children to contribute to decision-making processes.
5. Emergent curriculum makes children's learning and teacher's thinking visible.
Teachers document learning with children, colleagues and parents. They engage partners in discussion and reflection about their learning experiences and document learning through a range of tools to make the learning process visible. In the process, teachers' own thinking, planning and decision-making is made visible.

The benefits of an emergent curriculum

In the kindergarten setting, planning and recording the learning experiences that develop from children's budding interests, passions, strengths and needs, is an important part of teachers' intentional teaching practices. The topics of interest that emerge are often linked to children's play, their experiences at home, a community event, and priorities that emerge from conversations between children; children and teachers; and teachers, parents and other partners. The benefits of using an emergent curriculum approach to teaching and learning are evident for children, teachers and partners.

¹ Jones, E & Nimmo, J 1994, *Emergent Curriculum*, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Washington DC, p. 3.

² Adapted from Stacey, S 2009, *Emergent Curriculum in Early Childhood Education: From theory to practice*, Redleaf Press, Canada, pp. 5–6.

The benefits for children include:

- recognition of children as agents of their own learning
- opportunities for children to make choices about and begin to take increasing responsibility for their learning
- purposeful curriculum planning with children that builds on their interests, questions, queries and wonder about the world
- exciting, challenging and motivating learning experiences
- opportunities for sustained and focused interest in learning by children
- enhanced opportunities for the development of children's self-expression, oral language and creative abilities.

The benefits for parents include:

- authentic participation by parents, families and other partners and community members, which uses their diverse understandings, capabilities and knowledge
- strong communication about children's learning, and opportunities to contribute family and community priorities and ideas
- engaged and enthusiastic children in a child-responsive program.

The benefits for teachers include opportunities to:

- use authentic assessment practices that are linked to children's personal understandings, capabilities and dispositions in purposeful contexts for learning
- integrate learning across the five areas of learning and development through play, real-life engagements and routines and transitions
- build continuity by connecting children's prior knowledge to new learning, leading to deeper understandings about topics of interest
- challenge thinking and support children to engage in alternative ways of explaining and representing their ideas
- teach from a dynamic and evolving curriculum.

Intentional teaching within an emergent curriculum

Intentional teaching happens when teachers have a learning focus in mind, use strategies to support children's learning, and monitor and adjust their interactions with children based on observation of the learning that is taking place. Intentional teaching also involves being able to articulate to parents, colleagues and partners why the practices they observe in the kindergarten setting are important for supporting children's learning. This may involve talking about very familiar, well-practised strategies; a new strategy; or an on-the-spot decision to use a particular strategy to support a spontaneous, teachable moment.

Skilful teachers are intentional in many aspects of their work. They make decisions and plans to support children's learning every day, as well as when creating short-term plans and through long-term planning. These plans may be developed in response to a spontaneous event that occurs, or be retrospectively based on children's responses during the day or over longer periods of time. Teachers are intentional about planning and making decisions concerning the:

- emotional climate of the room, deliberately making choices that help children to feel safe, secure and have a sense of belonging

- physical climate of the room, with attention given to the use of space and location of materials to support children's developing independence
- temporal rhythms of the day, ensuring that children are unhurried and that there is a calm flow about the routines and transitions over the day
- planned experiences, ensuring that they are inviting and excite children's interests
- interactions that they share with children, creating opportunities to challenge, scaffold and extend children's thinking, skills and dispositions towards learning.

Intentional teaching practices are characterised by Epstein as:³

- **High expectations** — When teachers expect that children will experience success in learning, they create the conditions that support the development of children's knowledge and skills. When children recognise that teachers hold high expectations of them, they feel valued and capable, in turn encouraging the development of positive dispositions towards learning.
- **Planning and management** — Teachers balance plans to introduce particular content with related topics and interests that arise from children. In addition they manage both individual behaviour and whole-group dynamics.
- **Learning-oriented kindergarten setting** — Teachers model respect for the learning environment, encouraging children to value the kindergarten setting as a place where learning occurs for children and adults.
- **Engaging experiences** — Teachers recognise that learning opportunities connected to children's ideas and experiences are more likely to capture children's interest and attention. Teachers understand that learning should be supported in ways that match and extend individual children's current capabilities.
- **Thoughtful questioning** — Teachers understand the importance of challenging and stimulating thinking through interesting provocations. Skilful questioning enables teachers to gather insights into children's interests, knowledge and ways of thinking.
- **Feedback** — Teachers present information, make comments, ask questions and identify contradictions in children's thinking. They pose 'What if' challenges to provide effective feedback. Such feedback focuses on learning rather than judgment, e.g. 'I really like the way you found some paper towel to wipe up the water, now the floor isn't slippery'.

The role of the engaged teacher

Working with children using emergent curriculum involves much more than simply providing a range of learning experiences that stem from children's interests or providing interesting materials and resources and assuming that play will develop.

Engaged teachers take an active, **intentional role** in the learning using a balanced approach that combines children's interests and needs with systemic requirements to focus on the significant learning highlighted in each of the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* learning and development areas.

³ Adapted from Epstein, A 2007, *The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the best strategies for young children's learning*, NAEYC, Washington DC, p. 5.

The role of the engaged child

Intentional and engaged teachers also acknowledge and support the roles children play in their learning as active, engaged learners. While emergent curriculum approaches draw on a range of intentional teaching practices, the emphasis is on co-constructed learning. Co-constructed learning recognises the importance of teachers and children making meaning as they interact together.

Jordan describes co-constructed learning as follows:⁴

- the child is recognised as a powerful player in his or her own learning
- teachers become aware of what children know and understand
- teachers value children's expertise as much as their own
- children hold expert knowledge, at other times teachers do.

The reciprocity within the relationship relies on the willingness of both children and teachers to see themselves as learners, and to share their knowledge irrespective of whether the adult or child initiated the topic. Successful co-constructed learning also relies on teachers' willingness to build content knowledge about topics of interest to children and skills for engaging children in sustained and meaningful conversations about these topics.

A balanced approach to planning within an emergent curriculum

A balanced approach to planning involves the integration of long- and short-term decisions with daily and emergent responses to children's interests and ideas. A balanced approach enables teachers to incorporate children's voices, ideas and interests with their own teacher-led focus for learning. Creating opportunities for children to take an active role in decision-making is important, as the greater degree of choice that children have in their learning, the greater the degree of involvement in their learning.⁵

A balanced approach to planning develops over time and with experience, as children and teachers become familiar and comfortable with the process. In practice, achieving a balance involves:

- balancing individual, small group and whole group learning opportunities
- responding to children — taking into account their different capacities and desires to work together and engage in topics of mutual interest
- looking for opportunities or 'hooks' to incorporate aspects of curriculum content into the learning experiences that develop from a child's emerging interests
- monitoring the learning that is taking place and looking for gaps in the learning and development areas
- finding an opportunity to 'plant a seed' when an important aspect of learning and development has not been evident in the children's interests

⁴ Jordan, B 2004, 'Scaffolding learning and co-constructing understandings', Chapter 3 in Anning, A, Cullen, J, & Fler, M (eds), *Early Childhood Education Society and Care*, Sage publications, London, California and New Dehli p. 34.

⁵ Laevers, F 2005, *Deep Level Learning and the Experiential Approach in Early Childhood and Primary Education*, Research Centre for Early Childhood and Primary Education Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

- using daily routines and transitions as opportunities to extend learning, e.g. 'Remember when too many people wanted to use the soap pump and Jani cried because he was pushed and the liquid soap spilled on the floor. Was that safe? Was it fair? What do you think we need to do?'
- careful organisation of the kindergarten day so that there are opportunities to manage differing interests
- incorporating community events as a springboard for new learning opportunities
- explicitly modelling cooperative learning strategies and encouraging children to assist one another
- recognising any obstacles to learning as they arise and helping children to brainstorm and try out possible ways to solve them (this will require explicit modelling at the beginning of the year)
- providing opportunities for children to share ideas using their preferred form of interaction, recognising the wide range of skills and abilities children demonstrate when communicating with others
- introducing topics, knowledge, skills and dispositions that children need to develop
- ongoing modelling and encouragement when planning with children.

Vignette

The vignette below shows how one teacher plans learning possibilities, reviews and adjusts plans as interesting topics develop and 'plants seeds' to challenge children's learning.

Planning within an emergent curriculum

When a topic of interest is emerging I do a mind map and think of lots of learning possibilities. I also talk to the children and add their ideas. As the interest develops, I review this plan and record dates and comments about how particular ideas worked/what happened. Each day, I write up a learning story for the day and this is available for parents and other staff.

Most projects last about three weeks. This allows time for deep learning but I find the children are ready to move on by then. I don't plan 'table activities' but I do 'plant seeds' that relate to children's interests or plans and provide vocabulary and ideas to challenge them. I am happy to 'run' with the children, but I also plan and I am ready to build on their ideas and play. I may also plan something more specific for a special needs child, e.g. a child with Asperger syndrome. I will think about what might interest them and give them time and attention so they have lots of opportunities to learn and develop too.

In addition, each child has a book in which I include samples and learning stories. Each story has a specific title. From time to time, I review the samples and stories and create a summary. I organise the summary using the learning and development areas. In the summary, I identify important learning and development (in each area) and make a reference to the title of the story and date.

Carol Stanley, kindergarten teacher

Focus questions

- How does the information fit with your view of emergent curriculum?
- How do you incorporate intentional teaching while planning from children's ideas and interests?