

# An Emergent School Curriculum

## ***how your child's own ideas and passions influence class content***

by René Gilbert

Published: Biophile December Issue 2006



"How are your children finding school at the moment?" I asked a mother who had just dropped off her children at the school gate.

"Oh, the doctor is doing well, but the lawyer is finding it a bit rough though," she responded as she waved at the eight and six year old boys.

If parents verbalised their aspirations in such a way we would be surprised. But is it not the aim of most parents and schools too prepare children for getting that school leaving certificate that provides entrance to a university? Parents are required to make judgements on what their children learn in school and how well their learning is integrated so that they can prepare them best for their future and their aspirations.

But is school about learning how to become a lawyer or medical doctor? Or is school about learning a skill? Or is school just a 'place' in which learning happens? Are we learning about life, or are we actually living our lives through our experiences and our learning?

While many tertiary institutions argue that children are not adequately prepared with the basic skills for what is expected of them in further education, trend futurists on the other hand are predicting that certain personal characteristics rather than qualifications are what will be in demand for success in the future workplace.

Statistics show that 60 % of professional qualified 30-year-olds are no longer using their professional qualifications in their working environment. Should our efforts not be on giving children a love of lifelong learning instead of aiming to select the right profession for them by the age of 16?

Once parents shift to this mindset, then they will also beg the same question of our schools and teachers. So if we want schools to be a place where we engage with the world around us, exploring who we are and our relationship to the people and things around us, we will need teaching techniques to support this.

Schools teaching this kind of emergent curriculum are scarce. In Cape Town a school called Synergy Schooling was established by teachers that believe learning is by nature interactive and the skills which support human interaction must be part of the educational process. But for these teachers and others like them, acting as facilitators for the children's insights to integrated understanding means that they move away from using predetermined yearly themes and textbooks. They create a framework which can support the children's interests while at the same time being aware of the requirements of the Revised National Curriculum.

"A curriculum which focuses on inquiry-based, experiential learning such as ours requires time," says Tahirih Cook, a grade five and six teacher at Synergy Schooling. "It takes time to develop ideas and questions and then to explore them. This means we have to make choices about what is important when it comes to the curriculum. As a result, we tend to favour 'depth' over 'breadth' in the curriculum. This is one area where we are very different from a more traditional school. We are not trying to 'cover' a predetermined curriculum the way more traditional schools do. Instead we are creating a process which engages children so that they have a meaningful and relevant educational experience."

Carey Bouwer, a foundation phase teacher says that to support herself as a teacher within this approach she needs to be highly organised and clear on what the outcomes are for the year or the term. "Literacy and Numeracy programmes in the Foundation Phase are developmental and important. But I am not tied to these termly curricula. I allow myself to be very flexible around this. I need to be comfortable with change as I then can change my curriculum continuously as I go along, picking up on the gaps the following term. For example, if I wanted to learn about Time in Numeracy during the 4th term, but a child brings in their grandfather's watch collection in the 2nd term, I am probably going to learn about Time right then and there. If a child who left our class wrote us a letter

***Should our efforts not be on giving children a love of lifelong learning instead of aiming to select the right profession for them by the age of 16?***

*“I want them to become powerful thinkers, intellectuals who believe in themselves and believe they have something worthwhile to share with others.”*

we would then learn about how to format a letter so that we could write back to them. This means that I need to have a good understanding that learning does not have to happen in a certain manner or timeframe or order. Learning happens all the time and mostly when it is meaningful and child-initiated.”

Robin Booth, founder principal at Synergy Schooling and a pre-school teacher says that there are many different levels a teacher can go to with an emergent curriculum. He elaborates: “Some teachers may be comfortable only in rethinking the content of their curriculum. In other words in learning to read, we can provide books on the topics that the children are interested in. Or if we wish to study anatomy, we can study the anatomy of the animals that the group decided it wants to study.

“Other teachers may also rethink the skills that underpin the content - if a four year old child says they want to start reading, do we say, sorry, that

only happens when you are six years old?” In our current reality in South Africa, teachers and parents may also actually question whether the Revised National Curriculum is still too prescriptive and what happens if more changes to the National Curriculum are again affected?

One of the most exciting elements of the emergent curriculum approach is that the teacher and the child are all involved in the process together. This means that the teachers don't step into the classroom with pre-conceived ideas of what the children “will” be interested in at any given point.

The teacher needs to be very observant of the conversations and interactions that are happening in and around the classroom on a daily basis to see what it is that children are showing an interest in and talking about. They then open up a subject (provide books, encourage them to bring things in around this topic, find pictures, activities, give space for discussions etc) and offer the children

more around it to see if it is something they wish to pursue.

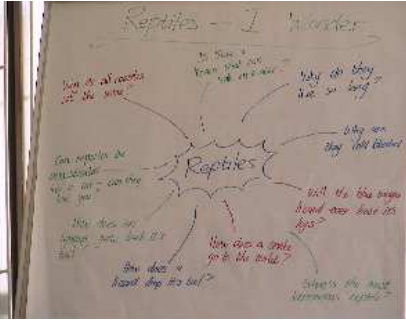
It is the teacher's role to guide this learning so that it does not become too thin and flighty and to ensure that the class goes deeper into topics to achieve their learning outcomes. It is important not to flit from subject to subject and here the role of the teacher is to keep that passion going by providing the right questions to keep the children interested about the topic as well as exciting and interest-grabbing activities to keep them thinking.

As a foundation phase teacher that has experience of both approaches to the curriculum, Carey Bouwer says that the teacher with an emergent curriculum needs to be flexible with her timetable. “Often when the children are very interested in something they want to spend a large chunk of time working around it. Therefore the teacher needs to be comfortable with spending chunks of time on a certain learning activity. Can we just do Maths all day? Is it okay to work solely on a project for 3 whole days? What will happen if we don't read for a week? We call this chunking the timetable. We give children the time they need to work on what they want to do. We are not bound by time. It is about being confident in knowing that the learning that needs to take place, will all take place.” she says.

As so much of the learning is incidental the teacher needs to be a consistent record keeper. “I keep an observation book in which I note the children's conversations, interests during free play time, activities during project time as well as their friendships,” explains Carey. “This is time consuming and once again the teacher needs to be organised to fit all this into her day. I also need to keep a record of all the subjects and topics we discuss to be



*It seems that the key to implementing an Emergent Curriculum is to shake off the image of the teacher as a ‘giver’ of information and the ‘tester’ of memory recall.*



able to record them in my curriculum at the end of the term.”

This approach demands much more of the teacher, but what about the children? They are seemingly challenged in ways that a normal set curriculum does not provide for.

Tahirih Cook says the fact that the children’s interests play an important role in shaping the direction of the curriculum is a factor which facilitates a sense of belonging and connectedness at school. “If your interests, ideas and experiences are validated and seen as important this has an impact on how you see yourself. It can be an affirming experience to have your thoughts and contributions integrated in the educational process. It helps to create relevant learning and this has a positive impact on the relationships and interactions in class. I work very hard to support the development of the children’s self-esteem through a process of validation and engagement in class. I encourage them to share their ideas, to reflect and develop their ideas further. I do not present myself as the expert who knows all the right answers, which they need to learn and retain,” she says.

She adds: “I want them to become powerful thinkers, intellectuals who believe in themselves and believe they have something worthwhile to share with others. I feel that it is very important for the children to learn from one another and to understand that different ideas held by others can be just as important and engaging. It is about facilitating reciprocal relationships which require well developed communication skills.”

Carey Bower agrees that the approach demands much more of the children

These are her observations:

- Children need to be able to *share* their knowledge and interests with others which demands a major focus on developing communication skills.
- Social skills within a group are developed to enable children to *listen* to others and encourage and hear their classmates.
- As the children are required to bring their interests into the classroom to kick start the process, they need to know what their interests and passions are. They get to know themselves better and develop a *sense of self*.
- The manner in which the teacher asks questions and encourages inquiries, to develop the topic, makes the children use their own thinking and questioning skills. They are *actively* involved all the time and not just passive receivers of set information foisted upon them by an adult.
- The children are responsible for their *own learning*. They need to bring information to the group, go to the library, participate in the group discussions and engage with the process.
- There is a *personal ownership* of the learning programme that is happening within the classroom. The children are part of making things happen, they can direct the learning and their unique personalities affect the group’s learning.
- Each child is acknowledged as an integral part of the learning that is happening. This affirms the child as to how valuable they are. They are worthy of being listened

to, acknowledged and their contributions to the group discussions are valuable and heard. She observed a rise in *self-esteem* and joy within the children as they feel secure and acknowledged. There is a great feeling of *group unity*, as so much time is spent together in discussions and learning to support each other within a group. The children get to know each other very well and feel comfortable in opening up to each other.

It seems that the key to implementing an Emergent Curriculum is to shake off the image of the teacher as a ‘giver’ of information and the ‘tester’ of memory recall. The teacher comes to view the children as people who have their own ideas and beliefs about the world, and who acknowledges that these children have a right to explore their own interests. Schooling can then become a learning opportunity that is relevant to their lives and is an exciting collaborative journey. School can be a place where our children engage with the world around them, establishing their relationship in it and exploring who they are so that they have the skills to shape their world and find their special place in it.

You can phone the school (021 785 5500) to find out when the next public talk is on: ‘Sharing examples of an Emergent Curriculum’

*School can be a place where our children engage with the world around them, establishing their relationship in it and exploring who they are so that they have the skills to shape their world and find their special place in it.*