



## **Co-inquiry, Co-construction, Collaboration: The Emergence of Curriculum**

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Using close observations of children's conversational threads, inquiries, and play enactments, this article describes the process of designing emergent curriculum with young children.

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The natural inquiries of young children (“Why is the sky blue?”) remind us that the world is meant to be questioned, experienced, and lived through interactions with places, ideas, and people. In New York City, where our school is based, the children’s questions reflect the uniqueness of what the city has to offer: modes of transport, changing seasons, the bustle of the city and its dwellers. Several subway stops away is the Museum of Natural History, where the multiple floors of dinosaurs, true-to-life scenes of predatory conquest, and brilliant displays of outer space are enough to transfix adults and children alike. It’s only natural, therefore, that the children’s inquiries into dinosaurs, space, transportation, and seasons play a prominent role in our emergent curriculum.

In many formulations of child-centered pedagogy, children’s interests and inquiries are scattered and sprinkled *throughout the curriculum*; we, however, see their interests and inquiries *as curriculum*. As a lead teacher in a play-based preschool classroom (Kuan-Hui) and as researchers (Tran and Haeny), we see teachers as critical to setting up curricular experiences while also being attuned to the subtle complexities of children’s inquiries. When we read through observation notes, transcribe conversations, and record children’s questions, we find that they hand *us* the curriculum. As a result, we contend that simply building on children’s interests is far from a complete definition of emergent curriculum. A more robust picture of emergent curriculum

includes spaces where children and teachers co-design curriculum anew, understanding that topics are not finite, but co-constructed by members of the classroom community. Through interactions and play, children guide curricular ideas and new learning through coordination with each other, alongside teachers who observe, ask questions, and provide materials and resources to extend children’s ideas. Under the auspices of play, teachers privilege peer cultures, bringing child-ordered organization to the forefront of curriculum making (Wohlwend, 2011).

In this column, we describe the process that took place in the preschool classroom of Kuan and Margaret (co-lead teachers) as the children took the class along unexpected curricular paths in response to Hayao Miyazaki’s film *My Neighbor Totoro* (see <https://goo.gl/okJOX0> for more details and <https://goo.gl/UwX95o> for the trailer). We show that when curriculum emerges, both children and teachers are engaged in *co-inquiry*, *co-construction*, and *collaboration*, working together to expand perspectives and curriculum itself.

### **Facets of Learning**

#### **Co-Inquiry**

Opportunities for co-inquiry emerge when we invite children’s lives (typically reserved for their peer cultures and home) into school. One such example of this in our classroom is when the children plan a pajama party and we watch their favorite

films together. This gives us a peek into each other's lives, desires, and fears. During one pajama party, we noticed that Udaya (all student names are pseudonyms), a preschooler with a sensitivity to wickedness, cried out in distress at the sight of a film character with features that appeared blemished or, in a word, monstrous. Instead of censoring those "scary" parts, Margaret saw an opportunity to share in a broader inquiry: How, she wondered, can we expand our ideas of being human, despite our preconceived notions of beauty and "normal" physicality?

Margaret invited Udaya and several other children to watch *My Neighbor Totoro*, a Japanese movie that provides a counter-narrative (Bamberg, 2004) to the usual Disney narratives with ugly "bad guys." In *Totoro*, there are no antagonists. Instead, the potentially scary creature with claws, affectionately named "Totoro," is actually a gentle, lovable giant. Though this inquiry began with teachers' observations, it would be sustained by the children's assent into exploring and co-constructing new narratives, as we examine next.

### Co-construction

The children who first watched the film decided to retell *Totoro* in their own show. They cast themselves in the roles, which Margaret recorded on a sticky note. That sticky note, the first of several public manifestations of the evolving curricular path, was the seed of an emerging reality. These displays of children's thinking, conversations, and questions acted as visible artifacts throughout our inquiry together. Subsequently, retracing and reflecting on these moments enhanced curricular topics, opening up spaces for critical conversations (Vasquez, 2014). Excitement spread as the first children who watched the film started to throw around the word "Totoro," piquing the interest of others. Udaya's engagement with the *Totoro* film contrasted her previous encounters with scary-looking characters. She took on the role of Satsuki, who discovers and comes to trust Totoro. She even showed up to school early one day with scissors in hand, ready to help transform cardboard boxes into Catbus, the film's

fantastical creature (a cross between a cat and a yellow school bus) that transported the other characters in their adventures.

We reserved time in our daily meetings for *Totoro* planning, such as preparing the costumes, props, and scenery; teachers and children brought in necessary materials. Margaret brought in fluffy fabric to create Totoro's iconic belly. Colin brought in socks for paws and a bunny ear headband for its ears. Leo found a stick on our way to the park with the idea of using it to hold up puppets in one scene. In the weeks leading up to the show, we had a dozen rehearsals, including dress rehearsals for the toddlers down the hall. As the teachers used words like *backdrop*, *scenery*, *props*, and *understudy* to label parts of the show production process, the children's language shifted; this new vocabulary became familiar, allowing them to apply the words comfortably in everyday contexts. (Colin even referred to a substitute teacher as an "understudy" one morning.) As a result, the classroom production was constructed collectively, in that we all contributed ideas, materials, and edits to the event.

### Collaboration

When curriculum is dialogic (Freire, 1970)—a meaningful conversation within classroom communities—it becomes a living, breathing, and collaborative entity. The teacher is no longer the sole arbiter of introducing themes, preparing materials, and controlling the flow of activity. Rather, the teacher is a co-participant, alongside the children, parents, and community members. In our classroom, an emergent curriculum is inherently a collaborative and dialogic one.



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Presenting shows has been a familiar tradition for the class over the years. The children often ask to “do a show,” dictating a plot to a teacher and inviting their peers to join in as different characters. The children, understanding the “script” to be a key component, collaboratively wrote the *Totoro* script over several days. They took turns dictating various parts of the story from memory to Tran. After each new addition, they read through what had been written, listened for vital plot points and key characters, and offered suggestions for edits. For example, Zahbia noticed a primary character had been left out of the script and inserted him where she felt was appropriate. The children listened in on each other’s edits and at times nodded in agreement to the proposed changes.

The interest also made its way from school to homes. Pablo, who was taking piano lessons, learned to play the *Totoro* theme song. His mother recorded his rendition, and we used it as the show’s soundtrack. Children who had previously asked for Disney-marketed toys started to ask instead for *Totoro* merchandise. Joshua’s parents, inspired by the final show performance, wrote a theater review in the style of the *The New York Times* as a way to honor the children’s production.

### Nurturing an Emergent Curriculum in Your Classroom

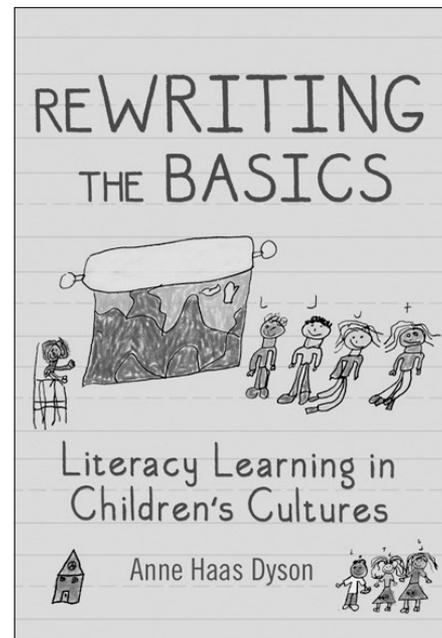
When we co-create emergent curriculum by keeping boundaries permeable (Dyson, 1993) and inviting children to wander new spaces with us, we are challenged to reconsider what it means to inquire, construct, and collaborate with children and their families. We conclude with key points for educators interested in nurturing an emergent curriculum in their own contexts:

1. Keep logs of individual children’s ideas as well as their participation in group activities and events.
2. Encourage multiple pathways of engagement to open the classroom to children’s lives (e.g., pajama party, objects from home).
3. Find ways to expand the children’s worldviews: research materials and resources

that build on children’s ideas and activities and provide counter-narratives to single stories (Adichie, 2009).

4. Involve children in curriculum making by documenting their journeys, recording their insights, and providing the materials and space to enact their ideas.
5. Consider each child’s preferences and personalities, and then invite them to collaborate in their own distinctive ways.

### For Further Reading



*ReWriting the Basics: Literacy Learning in Children’s Cultures*, by Anne Haas Dyson, Teachers College Press, 2013, 224 pp.

In Mrs. Bee’s kindergarten and Mrs. Kay’s first-grade classroom, the scripted curricula and decontextualized literacy curricula are no match for the sophistication of the children there. Dyson forefronts the children as active participants who use their literacy skills in authentic and meaningful contexts set up by their teachers. This work highlights the merging of the unofficial work of children (e.g., writing party invitations) with the official work of learning the basics. Dyson advocates for a reimagined notion of the basics to include a space for play where children use literacy to negotiate their social, cultural, and intellectual identities.

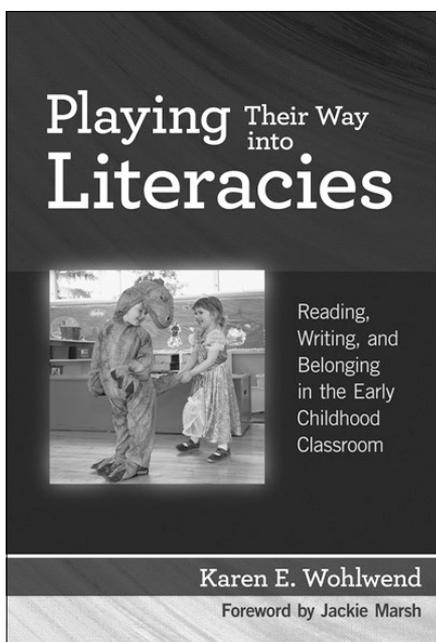
*Playing Their Way into Literacies: Reading, Writing, and Belonging in the Early Childhood Classroom*, by Karen E. Wohlwend, Teachers College Press, 2011, 192 pp.

Wohlwend's work brings to life the notion of *third space* where play (children's valued cultural practice) and literacy (school's valued practice) intersect in a kindergarten classroom. Through multimodal productions of reading, writing, and design, the children take up popular media, dolls, and toys. Play acts as a transformative space where children trouble gender identities, expand and

revise popular narratives, and create spaces for collective participation. Curriculum that emerges from children's play in this work embodies authentic literacy practice.

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