

# EDUCATORS SHIFTING THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF EMERGENT CURRICULUM

Early childhood educators shifting their understanding of emergent curriculum; “It’s about transforming thought”

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### **Abstract**

What shifts occur in an educator's practice from knowing the parts of emergent curriculum to understanding the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum? This research study examines this question through the experiences of five early childhood educators who have identified shifts in their own understandings and practice related to emergent curriculum. Five early childhood educators in Halifax, Nova Scotia each participated in two interviews that used examples of their self-selected pedagogical documentation as catalysts for discussion about their past and current thinking and practices related to emergent curriculum. The data from these interviews were developed into individual chronological stories of shifting understanding and practice. An examination of the data from the interviews led to the identification of four common themes related to shifts in practice. Specifically, shifts were related to how educators communicated with children in the classroom; the educators' levels of confidence; the ability of educators to move from a rules-based classroom to a more participatory culture negotiated between adults and children; and, finally, the use of documentation as a way to focus on children's ways of thinking rather than a focus on what the children are doing. In their interviews, the participants used metaphors such as "You're constantly putting one more track in front of the train" and philosophical statements such as "It's about transforming thought" to explain their complex understanding of practicing emergent curriculum. The identification of these specific shifts in practice can inform new professional development opportunities for educators to benefit from each others' experiences and can create a greater understanding of how documentation can be used as a tool of reflection when discussing the complexity of emergent curriculum.

*Key terms:* Early childhood education, emergent curriculum, reflective practice, pedagogical documentation, shifting practice.

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I have been an early childhood educator for over fifteen years and have been practicing emergent curriculum most of that time. I first experienced this curriculum approach while working at Peter Green Hall Children's Centre (PGHCC) in Halifax Nova Scotia and have been practicing and developing deeper understanding of emergent curriculum in the years since. Emergent curriculum is an open-ended yet intentional, child-centred way of teaching. It focuses on an examination of what children are thinking, using pedagogical documentation as a tool that makes their learning and thinking visible (Stacey, 2009). It helps us understand the meaning children are making of their experience (Wien, 2014). In this opening section I will explain how my experiences in emergent curriculum have led me to the questions that I will explore in this research.

In 2004, I began teaching in a preschool classroom that had already developed a culture of teaching where the primary teaching methods were listening and trusting in children. Any decisions made for the classroom and curriculum were discussed with children and I was able to join and teach in that way. I had two very strong mentor educators who gave me time to follow the children's developing interests when I was ready. It took six months of observing and participating in the culture to understand how to begin to cultivate that curriculum approach. When I was ready, I began to notice a subject that interested the children that was in line with my

interests and expertise. The children were exploring the limits of their physical abilities through risky play, such as climbing the furniture, or running and jumping in the classroom. I provided an option to go outside on a regular basis and guide the children using large loose parts to develop a series of obstacles in our outdoor play space. This was my first experience documenting learning with children, and from that effort I became known as the “outside/risk teacher,” in the classroom to complement the art specialist educator and discussion/research specialist educator.

I had learned how to ask questions rather than providing answers, and more importantly that the “right” answer was irrelevant, because the children in the emergent classroom would learn how to answer their own questions through different forms of research, expression and discussion. In this setting, I found it easy and natural to follow the children’s interests and I had no need to steer them in any direction or impose answers upon them. I was more interested in finding out what they wanted to know and how I could help them with their questions.

After three years I moved to an afterschool classroom as lead educator, excited to teach in the emergent approach that I had learned. But the context was different; I was moving into a classroom with a more authoritarian climate, with rules and requirements that seemed antithetical to my approach of encouraging autonomy and openness. The children were required to ask to go to the bathroom, for example, and were required to hold hands with each other while walking to and from the school. When asked why these rules were in place the answer was “because that’s the way it’s always been.” My co-workers were also very transient, each one staying for less than a year only to be moved into another classroom. I focussed on creating more of a balance of power between the adults and the children. I strived for a community feeling that suggested that anything was possible. I took all of the furniture and learning materials out of the classroom and

started fresh asking the children what we needed to bring in. I developed a style of environmental design that was open to change at any time ensuring that the children knew it was their classroom and that it could change if needed. For instance, when construction was popular, we developed a woodworking area with real tools, and when they wanted to have a fashion show, we got fabric and sewing machines to bring their designs to life. When theatrical play became a major interest, we built a stage for the classroom. The culture was more open, and I felt that I played a significant role in this change. I had “figured it all out” and I knew how to do emergent curriculum “perfectly”, or so I thought.

But now every success or failure was on my shoulders, and I took “Afterschoolers” on as “my classroom” where I was in charge. It was still an emergent classroom but, as I would discover later, the power dynamics were still unbalanced. I encountered an uncomfortable situation where a piece of art drawn by a seven-year-old depicted what I interpreted as drugs and violence and I felt the need to deal with it before it became an issue with other children, parents, and the director. As well, a parent complained to me about inappropriate language being used in the classroom by other children and they asked me to check on where it was coming from. In addition to the parent complaint, my director questioned how messy the classroom was when some work was left out to be continued another day, and now there was a picture of drug deals and stabbing at the art table. I was worried that I was not doing my job well (or that it was being perceived by other adults that I was not) and I would be reprimanded. My reaction to this stress was to ask the child for an explanation. “What are you drawing?” I had asked in a demanding tone. 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 it was necessary to avoid further issues in the “perfect” emergent curriculum classroom that I had set up. Later, upon reflection, I realised that I had betrayed the trust of the child and taken away his right to express himself. In later years this same child was a central figure in a career-changing art piece called “Zombie World” (Wien, Sampson, West & Bigelow, 2014). Zombie world was an art piece that had emerged from a homework assignment given to the grade four class at their elementary school. The children were asked to do a news broadcast. Two boys from this grade four class who attended Afterschoolers were not particularly happy about what they considered to be a boring homework assignment, so I suggested that they make it more exciting, for example, do breaking news on an extreme storm in Hawaii or something like that. They quickly changed their minds about the homework and began to come up with characters for what they called, “Zombie news.” As they finished drawing their characters, they began to develop the setting for the news and decided that a spaceship would be appropriate. The other children in the afterschool classroom were interested and found ways to join in this art and soon most of the after-schoolers had drawn a collaborative spaceship for zombies. The spaceship had many rooms and each room in the drawing was drawn by a different child and had a character attached. Within the next few weeks, most of the children in the classroom had added a room to the spaceship. Eventually it grew too big for a single table, so we used the stage (a large platform in the classroom). When it had grown too big for the stage, we placed it on the wall, and it continued to grow around the classroom walls until there was too much paper on the wall for fire regulations. But still we let it grow (we removed other papers from the wall). One educator, who was a student at the local art university, brought it to display and reinterpret in an art show. To our delight, it was picked up by another gallery in the city as well. This emergent curriculum

experience became the subject of a chapter that was published as a part of one of Wien's books on emergent curriculum (Wien, Sampson, West, & Bigelow, 2014).

As in my previous experience with the drawing about the drug deal, I had similar struggles with Zombie world. There were parents who complained about violence being depicted in artwork on the walls, and the director had questioned its size and the images of guns, but there was something different this time around. My confidence as an educator and 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 realised that this 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 its potential. My role was to document its growth and try to understand their thinking.

As I reflected upon this remarkable project, I realized that my shift in practice – away from controlling the classroom and towards supporting their creativity – allowed children to rise to a level of success that previously seemed impossible. I wanted to know: What were the aspects of my practice as an educator that allowed and even nurtured a child's idea to become something so big and special? Why did I resist squashing their ideas due to my discomfort? How had my goals as an educator changed? What changed in the environment? What changed in me? Upon reflection, I could recognise significant catalysts of change and a fundamental shift in my practice.

I wondered if this sort of change happens to other educators. Have they experienced any shifts in their practice? This study examines changes in practice of educators using emergent curriculum, as well as how and why they changed their practice. Through the process of interviews and discussions with participants, I examined what their shifts in practice were and

which shifts were common among multiple participants. In my experience, reflecting on how I opened up an idea (zombie art) rather than shutting an idea down (the drug art) was the reassurance that bolstered my beliefs in the capacity and rights of children as co-creators of their learning. This research project has uncovered what changes occurred for some other experienced educators that led to their growth and evolution of emergent curriculum practice.

### **Literature Review**

The literature to which this research is linked has been divided into three sections with sub-sections to clarify meaning. The first section will give an overview on how the literature defines and describes emergent curriculum. The next section will explain different forms of pedagogical documentation; as they are the reference materials for the interviews. The third section on reflective practice will examine the evolution in educators' practice and the necessity for reflection in emergent curriculum.

### **Emergent Curriculum**

Emergent curriculum is an open-ended and child-centred style of teaching and learning (Wien, 2008). It can be difficult for people from more adult-directed curriculum backgrounds to understand emergent curriculum because adult-directed curriculum focuses on what the child will know at the end of the lesson. In emergent curriculum educators do not focus on the right answers; they focus on the development of children's research skills and understanding of the child's thinking. Wien (2008) breaks down and makes meaning of the contradiction between emergent and 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. (Wien, 2008 p. 5-6)

This explanation dissects the complex nature of emergent curriculum; the unknown is the path to a much richer learning for both the child and the educator. It cannot be predetermined:

“Emergent curriculum is sensible but not predictable. It requires of its practitioner's trust in the power of play – trust in spontaneous choice making among many possibilities” (Jones & Nimmo 1994, p. 1). Emergent curriculum is an ongoing process of meeting whatever challenges and questions arise, with the potential to navigate, negotiate and discover. In my experience, it seems that the complex nature of emergent curriculum is difficult to grasp even after formal education. It takes time and experience for educators to practice emergent curriculum. Many early childhood education facilities have been interpreting emergent curriculum---with some subtle differences--- with a focus on its foundation, such as treating children as citizens who are capable of participating in society; considering children as creators of culture; thinking of the environment as a third teacher, guiding behaviour and inspiring creative thought; and creating pedagogical documentation (Wien, 2008). These fundamental ideas are necessary for the understanding and co-construction of an emergent curriculum program.

## **Fundamental Components of Emergent Curriculum**

**Capable child as co-constructor.** The educator's image of the child is fundamental to emergent curriculum. Malaguzzi describes 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), proposes 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 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.

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. (Malaguzzi, 1994, 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, and a researcher of the world around them. As stated by Malaguzzi, it is very difficult to change the internal image.

**Environment as a third teacher.** This concept comes from The Reggio Emilia approach. "The environment is seen here as educating the child; in fact, it is considered as 'the third educator' along with the team of two teachers" (Gandini, 2012 p. 339). The environment affects how those in it perceive and understand the world around them. In classroom settings, "Space and its objects in relation can be organized, designed, layered, and bounded in ways that invite learning without teacher intervention" (Wien, 2008 p.9). If the feeling of the space is

calm, for example, the mood of the people working in that space will potentially be calmer as a result. The physical space and arrangement can be helpful to support a type of play or work: “The environment sets the stage by creating an atmosphere and opportunity for engagement” (Curtis & Carter, 1996, p. 24). Thus, big open spaces are more apt to encourage loud group play (large construction, group games and dramatic play), while smaller spaces may suggest a more intimate setting for quiet, deep thinking and uninterrupted play. Callaghan (2013) explains that ‘space speaks.’ A high ceiling may inspire loud voice play, while low ceilings can instead suggest quieter and softer voices (Callaghan, 2013, p.1). The arrangement of the physical environment can nurture or impede exploration and the emergent curriculum educator uses this ‘third teacher’ to facilitate different forms of investigation.

Beyond the physical arrangement of the learning space, the environment also includes the space’s sound, light, texture, beliefs and values. The materials on display can easily identify the values of the room: For example, Stacey (2015) illustrates how decorative borders around children’s art work suggest that the teacher is attempting to catch your eye to look at the border and does not trust in the value of the art itself.

We often form a strong first impression, then follow up with deeper browsing, a searching for links to the person’s thinking and how the person makes that thinking visible. Each teaching and learning space has an ambiance and a message, and we intuitively pick up on this message. (Stacey, 2015 p. 8)

If the walls are filled with posters demonstrating letters, shapes, colours etc. the visitor sees that children are instructed by an educator about what they need to know; however, if the walls are filled with examples of children’s, ideas, struggles, and experiences, the visitor infers that children are participating in their learning, and the educator is interested in learning with them.

Shifting from institutional and a visually busy environment to a more supportive natural environment that reflects and respects the children's thinking takes time to cultivate.

**Pedagogical documentation.** Stacey (2015) explains how pedagogical documentation goes beyond the process of daily documentation:

The process of documentation becomes pedagogical --- a study of the learning takes place--- when we try to understand the underlying meaning of the children's actions and words, describing events in a way that makes our documentation a tool for collaboration, further learning, teacher research and curriculum development. (p. 1)

The documentation, or evidence that is collected, is examined and assessed to find meaning in how the children understand the world. Using this documentation as a physical representation or map of the children's learning, we can support the development of their theories. Stacey also notes that the photos, transcribed conversations, and examples of their expressive artwork demonstrate how the educator values the children and their ideas (Stacey, 2015). This demonstrated valuing of the children's ideas can help to develop a trusting relationship between the educator and child where children are more willing to share their theories and interpretations because the educator is not 'looking for a right answer'.

**Authentic classroom culture.** The culture of an emergent program is composed first and foremost of the members that work within the classroom, the children and educators, but there is also a very strong connection between the administration and the families. As an example, Wien, Keating, West and Bigelow (2014) describe a family who participated in the classroom for very different reasons than most families who are looking for childcare. Usually parents are looking

for care; a place for their child to go while they are at work, or education; a place where their child will learn what they need to know.

In *Aaqib at the Center* Wien chronicled a terminally ill boy, Aaqib, whose family was looking for an opportunity for him to have real relationships with peers, and friends (Wien, Keating, West & Bigelow, 2014). The children in the classroom began to note differences in how Aaqib interacted with the adults by hitting and scratching. Some of the children saw this problem as an opportunity to share their thoughts and knowledge of the space. They told Aaqib that daycare is fun, and he could play with them. Aaqib was able to integrate into the classroom and made real friendships, but his failing health brought about questions from his peers about death (Wien, Keating, West & Bigelow, 2014). The process of authentic discussions within the emergent curriculum classroom is a result of the complex culture that has been cultivated over time by the educators to bring the community together; these children were showing their capabilities without constraint.

Aaqib's death was honoured, in his family's view, by the friendships he was able to make, and the entire community's response to their time of grief (Wien, Keating, West & Bigelow, 2014 p. 119-127). The classroom culture offered the children and adults a place to more authentically understand and discuss events that are usually withheld from children. Through this dialogue the children demonstrated their ability to ask tough questions and express real fears they had. Aaqib was able to have moments of an authentic childhood and was welcomed as part of a community that went through this tough time together. The community expanded from the classroom and created a welcome space for dialogue, and trust in children's capabilities.



## **Pedagogical Documentation**

Pedagogical documentation, a fundamental aspect of emergent curriculum, has its roots, in part, from the schools of Reggio Emilia Italy. The primary goals of documentation have been succinctly explained by Forman and Fyfe (2012): “Documentation refers to any record of performance that contains sufficient detail to help others understand the behavior recorded... The intent of documentation is to explain, not merely to describe” (p. 250). When North Americans brought their observations back from Italy, they honoured its source, calling their work Reggio-inspired, and expressed the necessity of documentation; “Teachers who embrace the Reggio Emilia approach realize very early on that documenting is essential... Documentation is the most important way of demonstrating the important principle of transparency in action” (Fraser, 2012 p. 143). They use documentation to share the captured thinking and learning and to propel their investigations further (Fraser, 2012).

Many forms of documentation in educational practice are evaluative and usually seek to assess the progress of students as evidence of quality education (Wien, Jacobs & Brown, 2015). However, pedagogical documentation is more of a starting point for a conversation. Jones and Nimmo (1994) describe pedagogical documentation as an invitation to the parents and community that opens a space for understanding and dialogue (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). Essentially, pedagogical documentation can be described as a recorded instance of a child’s learning or thinking. However, this does not begin to grasp the complexity, importance or variability of what pedagogical documentation illuminates:

Pedagogical documentation is the teacher’s story of the movement of children’s understanding. The concept of learning in motion helps teachers, families, and policy

makers grasp the idea that learning is provisional and dynamic; it may appear to expand and contract, rise, and even disappear. (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdoussis, 2011, p. 2)

Educators who practice emergent curriculum must trust that learning is happening, and it is their job to recognise, support, and make it visible through pedagogical documentation. 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.

Documentation is a visual or written record or both that shows traces of the children's work, our thinking as teachers, the activities and learning that have been taking place in the classroom, and, most important, the process that children and teachers have gone through to construct knowledge or develop new understandings. (Stacey, 2009 p. 108)

With the educators as the researchers, pedagogical documentation is the analysed 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 Stacey (2015). While research and analysis are linked to pedagogical documentation, "It reveals connections between events, and it provides children, parents, and teachers with an opportunity to review and plan future experiences" (Fraser, 2012, p. 141). Thus, it must tell the story of the children's learning and thinking in an engaging way that sets the stage for possibilities to come.

Stacey explains nine different types of documentation: documentation panels, extraordinary moments, daily log, documentation developed by or with children, individual portfolios, electronic documentation, transcripts or recordings of conversations, learning stories, and the classroom as documentation, all with different uses and methods (Stacey, 2015). For this research I am choosing to include any type of documentation that tells one story over time and includes the educator's and child's thinking. Three types of documentation fit these criteria:

1. Documentation panels – these consist of photos, text and children’s work and are mounted on larger board in the fashion of a poster.
2. Documentation developed by or with children – These include photographs, anecdotal notes (usually handwritten), children’s work, and their voice (transcribed by the teacher).
3. Transcripts or recordings of conversations – These include both the words of children and adults as they engage in dialogue.

(Stacey, 2015, p. 4-7)

These forms of documentation will yield the best opportunities for the interviewer to understand both the context of the work that was documented and the thinking, beliefs and values of the documenter.

Rinaldi describes how the process of documenting learning is a form of research that has evolved and is still evolving in Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2006). By using this documentation, the educator is able to assess, engage in dialogue, find meaning in the process of learning that was documented and inform their teaching practice (Rinaldi, 2006). Documentation provides a type of mirror for the educators in terms of how they can use it to reflect on various elements of their practice in emergent curriculum. Thus, educators who use pedagogical documentation are able to constantly research teaching practices with their students, which then provide the opportunity for change through their findings or reflections.

### **Reflective Practice**

Reflective practice, as described by Donald Schon, “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 the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness” (Schon, 1983, p. 61).

Thus, reflective practice is how professionals examine what they are doing, assess how it is working, and then make changes to improve. However, this is not easily or quickly achieved. It takes time-daily, weekly, monthly, over a year, and it involves consistent consideration of your beliefs, values and practice. Consequently, “educators who commit to focused reflection experience immediate and long-term benefits” (Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes & Carter, 2013 p.14). While many professions regulate tried and true methods, practicing professionals may become dependant on a certain script even if it no longer serves its original purpose. However; those who reflect in practice are able to integrate observations that build upon expertise to solve old problems in new, sometimes better, ways (Schon, 1983).

In order for educators to practice emergent curriculum they must be open to change on a regular basis (Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes & Carter, 2013). Sometimes that change is external, like a change of place, weather, or students; however, sometimes educators’ experience a shift that comes from within. The shift within is not easily achieved, it requires dialogue and reflection on practice in order to shift values and beliefs (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot & Sanchez, 2015). As mentioned above, Schon (1983) explains that practitioners’ “tacit understandings” are tried and trusted methods of practice. Wien (1995) describes this phenomenon in the context of teaching as “tacit patterns” or “scripts for action,” and explains how these are “taken for granted aspects of work processes, carried through automatically” (1995, p. 12). These tacit understandings (Schon, 1983) or tacit patterns (Wien, 1995) are scripts or routines that hide the opportunity for inquiry. In my introductory example, the children had previously been required to hold hands while walking to school which was their script for this routine. Upon reflection of that practice, I changed these routines in order to develop self-regulation and trust. I trusted that the children would not run away or injure themselves and I did

not require the routine holding hands as a false sense of control. This would require me to pay attention and reflect in action (Schon, 1983) during the walk and perhaps open an opportunity for discovery along the path that may not have been pre-planned or intended. In emergent curriculum, educators develop their learning and knowledge with children as reflection in action or practice (Schon, 1983; Curtis and Carter 1996). Schon (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). This is how educators in emergent curriculum think on their feet and problem solve every day rather than refer to a list of rules that govern their responses.

The issue of isolation can also contribute to or rather inhibit the development of an educator’s practice (Curtis, Lebo, Cividanes & Carter 2013). Because much of emergent curriculum is reflective and responsive it can be overwhelming to attempt to challenge yourself without the assistance of dialogue with peers. Co-inquiry is a process introduced by John Dewey where, “teachers construct knowledge through inquiry with the assistance of colleagues and faculty, who help them refine and clarify their ideas about their learning and teaching experiences” (Perry, Henderson & Meier, 2012 p. 149-150). In emergent curriculum children would also be included in the list of ‘co-enquirers’ as they are seen as capable co-constructors of their own learning and environments (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012).

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 Schon puts it,

“situations of uncertainty” (1983) ---because it was not what I had expected to see as examples of children’s art. These times of discomfort can be explained as what Wien calls, ‘pivot points’: Moments of change where educators take a different direction in their thinking and practice (1995). 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 latter (zombie world) being a change that affected my practice. Both of these moments were also highlighted by disequilibrium or a moment of being unsure. “Disequilibrium is 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 encourages educators to rethink their own role” (Murriss, 2008, p. 1). Usually people shy away from disequilibrium, and as adults we are comforted by the familiar and expected; however, 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 synchronicity 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.

Motivation is crucial in understanding educator change, how to bring it about, and how to support it. To analyze educator-change further, we must question the motive behind it. Is it initiated by an external agent (e.g. a supervisor) or an internal desire to grow and improve? While there are a lot of educators who are externally motivated to make changes to their curriculum and practices, this research is more interested in understanding the internal

motivation of educator change. To refer once again to the image of the child, Malaguzzi (1994) explained how your image of the child directs your actions and beliefs and, I would add, motivation. Educators imbued with an image of a child as capable and resourceful are motivated by the possibilities, potentials and rights of children to engage with them in exploration and dialogue. The leaders in the early childhood education field are those who understand how conventional practices are not sufficiently supporting authentic learning, thus they make efforts to evolve with the changing beliefs and values for students and learners. How can self-motivated educators be supported in their desire to make a shift?

### **Research Question**

Emergent curriculum is a complex approach to education that requires more than merely a delivery of demonstrated elements and practices. Emergent curriculum requires experience, struggle, design, mentorship, and a willingness to change in order for the curriculum to be authentically effective. This research project examines the practices of experienced educators using their struggles, triumphs and changes in practice. The research question is: What shifts occur in an educators' practice from knowing the parts of emergent curriculum to understanding the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum?

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This is a qualitative research project that examines the journey of educators specific to their experiences of shifting their practice with emergent curriculum. Using semi-structured

interviews with five early childhood educators I endeavored to identify a particular time of change. The documentation that the participants developed in the past would demonstrate a retrospective of their beliefs and practices. I asked the participants to reflect upon what changed between past and current practices and uncovered, from their stories of change, why the change occurred and how it affected their practice. They were asked to choose examples of pedagogical documentation that illustrated their past and current practices which were used as the focus of the two interviews. As stated above, documentation provides a type of mirror for the educators to reflect on various elements of their practice in emergent curriculum. The semi-structured ethnographic interview format allowed the participant to tell their story and allowed me to gather deeper meaning and understanding from their described experience to reflect upon what changed, what led to the change, and how that change affected their practice. Therefore, my main research question was: What shifts occurred in an educators' practice from knowing the parts of emergent curriculum to understanding the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum?

### **Participants**

Participants were selected according to specific criteria. This study required educators with both education and experience in emergent curriculum. All participants needed a working understanding of emergent curriculum and especially pedagogical documentation upon which the interviews were based. In Halifax, educators are classified by their education level. Educators with a basic training certificate receive a level one classification; educators with a college diploma would receive a level two classification and educators with a university degree would receive a level three classification. To participate in this study, each participant needed emergent curriculum knowledge from a college or university thus they needed to have a level two or three



classification. They also needed to have at least one year of teaching experience in an emergent curriculum setting where they developed pedagogical documentation as part of their practice, to ensure that they would have enough examples of documentation from which to choose.

The selected participants include four adults who currently work in early childhood classrooms with children up to 10 years old, and one adult in an administrative role. They each have education and experience in emergent curriculum, and an early childhood education diploma, Bachelor's degree or Master's degree. Some travelled to international study tours in Reggio Emilia and many have taken part in local workshop series that illuminate the complexity of emergent curriculum. Thus, they all have at least an understanding of: the concepts of the image of a capable child, the environment as a third teacher, pedagogical documentation, and authentic classroom culture. This knowledge and experience were requirements, as stated in the letter of consent and reviewed in a pre-interview discussion, at our first meeting.

The participants all have experience working directly with children in an emergent setting where they used pedagogical documentation as a way of understanding children's thinking. The participants did not need to be currently working directly with children but were still directly involved in the early childhood sector. They needed to be willing to share their experiences, both positive and negative, related to using an emergent approach. They also needed to acquire permission for the use of their documentation to be referenced in this project. And finally, the participants needed to be accessible by Skype and email or in person for the interview process. All interviews were conducted face to face.

Each participant was required to meet with me on two separate occasions within a month for approximately 45 minutes each time to discuss significant moments of their teaching practice. They needed to share two pieces of pedagogical documentation (one for each

interview) from their previous work. Participants were asked to select one piece of documentation that they felt highlighted their strongest work, and the other piece that they felt, in retrospect, depicted some challenges that they had had in their practice of emergent curriculum. The participants were asked, but not required, to make a digital copy of each piece of documentation before the corresponding interview and provide it to me one week in advance for my preparation.

To recruit participants, I emailed my research letter to directors of early childhood education centres within the Halifax Regional Municipality that were known to practice emergent curriculum and asked that they share it with their staff. Included in the letter was my contact information so that interested educators could contact me. Six educators got in touch with me through email. However, one educator was not sure that her examples of documentation would be enough for the interview process and her professional commitments did not allow her time to meet. The five-remaining participants were invited to join the study and they agreed. When I first met with each participant, we discussed the informed consent before they signed their consent forms, we reviewed the consent form the next time we met, and I reminded them that participation in research is voluntary.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Each participant read and reviewed a consent form that outlines the purpose of the study and their rights concerning the research [see appendix]. These rights include anonymity, confidentiality and right to withdraw prior to the successful defense of this thesis. The participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study as I explained before, during, and after each of the two interviews.

When transcribing the interviews, no identifying information was included, and names were replaced with pseudonyms. The data collected were retrospective reflections of documented experiences within an emergent curriculum setting. This study posed a minimal risk to participants because the interview process is similar to the educators' regular, ongoing reflections on their practice; thus, they did not encounter any hardships that they would not naturally encounter in their own daily reflection. The interview process was guided by open-ended questions based on the pedagogical documentation that each participant provided. Investigating their practice may have led to some slight embarrassment; however, they had the opportunity to review the record of their interviews for accuracy once they were transcribed. One participant emailed additional information regarding the questions after each interview to ensure that any misunderstandings were corrected. Seeing an analysis of their work in print may also cause discomfort; however, the analysis was not evaluative and the reflections on their work were made by the participant rather than the researcher. To ensure confidentiality, all collected data as well as transcribed interviews have been kept in password protected files on the MSVU server. While the subject matter inevitably included the play and work of children in general, no children were involved in the research process and no identifying information related to children was included in the study. All digital copies of the documentation will be deleted, and physical copies of the documentation will be returned to the interviewee following the successful defence of the thesis.

### **Data Generation**

Interviewees were notified in advance of the interviews that they were expected to select a piece of documentation and discuss it as the basis of each interview. I explained to the participants that I was looking for examples of educator change. I asked them to provide

examples of documentation before and after their self-identified change occurred. After the participants gained permission to use their documentation, they sent me a digital copy, which were reviewed in preparation for the interview. By using the pieces of pedagogical documentation as artefacts or snapshots of their emergent practice I had points of reference that helped to guide each story. This allowed me to form meaningful questions prior to the interview and allowed me to follow their narrative more effectively during the interview. Once I reviewed the documentation sent to me by the participants, I conducted two semi-structured interviews, in the form of an ethnographic interview, with each participant at the Halifax public library. Interviews lasted between 25-30 minutes and were conducted approximately a week apart. The interviews each centred on a different piece of documentation that the interviewee provided from their work history.

## **Interviews**

Spradley (1979) explains a process of ethnographic interview describing how they follow a format similar to a friendly conversation. This format helps the interviewer keep the dialogue relaxed yet meaningful (Spradley, 1979). I used Spradley's (1979) approach that turns an interview into several friendly conversations, but these were not without structure. Spradley highlights the three most important elements of the interview as explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations, and ethnographic questions (1979 p. 59-60). The explicit purpose for this interview or the reason that we are getting together for the interview (Spradley, 1979) was to review the pedagogical documentation chosen by the interviewee as their reference point of before and after change. The ethnographic explanations, include project explanations, recording explanations, native language explanations (Spradley, 1979). The native language explanations

are of particular interest to this research because the way in which educators speak to children may have changed over time (between their past and current practices) and therefore I have asked that the interviewee attempt to be honest and authentic in recalling the way they spoke in the context of the events that took place. The ethnographic questions included three main types, descriptive questions, structural questions and contrast questions (Spradley, 1979). Descriptive questions attempt to discover the basic story, for example; what do you know about pedagogical documentation? Structural questions attempt to discover the details of the story, for example; when did you have time to develop your documentation? Contrast questions help the interviewer gain deeper understanding about a particular idea by asking how it compares to another idea that is mutually understood, for example if the educator was describing a huge climbing rock, the interviewer could ask; is the climbing rock bigger than a car?

It is important to develop a relationship of trust in order to gain authentic insight rather than cold, structured direct prompts that put pressure on the interviewee (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997). I attempted to create a warm, safe atmosphere for the interviewee to share their journey without the worry of judgement or expectation. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis (1997) succinctly express the difficulty of developing the familiar yet professional rapport, “It is in the building of relationships that the portraitist experiences most pointedly the complex fusion of conceptual, methodological, emotional, and ethical challenges” (1997 p. 135). The interviewer must feel familiar enough to speak casually with the interviewee while remaining professional and keeping the interview on track. To build this relationship, I intentionally conducted the interviews in reverse chronological order, from recent practice to previous practice, so that each participant could share their more recent and more experienced example of emergent curriculum first and become comfortable with me. When

sharing the second piece of documentation they would feel more comfortable reflecting on their earlier perspectives.

The first interview with the participants centered on documentation that the interviewee considered a reflection of a current successful interaction or project with the children. In other words, it was what they consider to be an exemplary piece of their documentation that illustrates emergent curriculum in action. This was documentation from their more recent work history that 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 second interview with the participants centered on a piece of documentation that represented an earlier understanding of emergent curriculum. This documentation demonstrated their work that they have 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 recognised 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 changed or was different in the educator's, practice/beliefs/values/opportunities, as a catalyst between documentation two and documentation one.

I pilot-tested the interview process with one person to refine the number and type of interview questions and to help define the interview style and flow. No information was gathered from the pilot test and the pilot interviews were deleted immediately after the pilot test session. The questions that were pilot tested included:

1-Tell me the story about your documentation.

2-Could you please explain what \_\_\_\_\_ means?

3-Could you tell me about your intentions in this situation?

4-How does your second piece of documentation demonstrate a change in practice?

5-Tell me about it.

6-How has your practice changed?

7-Have your beliefs changed?

8-How has your change in beliefs affected your practice?

As a result of the pilot-test interview, I switched question four for a more natural question: Why did you choose this as your most successful/less successful piece of documentation? I rarely got to ask the eighth question because it was often answered from question seven.

I used two digital audio recorders (to minimize the potential for technical difficulties) to record all interviews for transcribing as well as took notes relating to the interview exchange and atmosphere, e.g. emotions exhibited, and to provide clarity on answers. One week prior to the interview I asked that each participant consider why they chose their example of documentation and how it demonstrated change in their practice, to allow the interviewee time to collect their thoughts and choose their documentation. One of my participants was quite nervous about the interview process and asked for the questions ahead of time. I provided examples of what I was going to ask and explained that other questions will come from their story. She felt much more at ease having the questions ahead of time, perhaps because English is not her first language. My intent was always to get a natural response to the questions, so I saw no issue with sharing the questions all ahead of time.

## Data Analysis

I transcribed the interviews verbatim, including notes to clarify emotion, confusion or any other aspects of the interview that needed clarification. The transcribed interviews generated 95 pages of data, with a range of 8 pages to 14 pages per interview. 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. In each educator's journey I began with their early example as a starting point and continued with their reflections on what changed for them and then finished with what they felt was their evolved example of documentation.

I read through the transcribed interviews for statements of past versus current perspectives on emergent curriculum practice. I wrote down each statement on an index card and coded them as B for before shift or past perspective, and A for after shift or current perspectives. I also labeled the pseudonym of the participant and the number of interview that the quote came from, either 1 or 2. I created a chart for each participant with three columns to compare statements that pertain to a similar belief or idea. I grouped similar past statements (for example: I used to believe) on the first column of the chart and I grouped similar current statements (for example: Now I believe) on the third column of the chart. I grouped past statements that fell under that same topic, and I grouped the current statements that fell under the same topic. I then compared the groups of past statements with the groups of current statements that fell under the same topic. After all statements were grouped together, I identified the shifts that connected the past statements to the current statements. I wrote the shifts in the second column between the linked groups of statements. I highlighted the shifts that were supported by the most statements as the key findings. After completing a chart for each participant, I



compared key shifts looking for commonalities. I also highlighted a shift that was unique yet profound, concerning the importance of invisible thinking, which challenged my understanding of emergent curriculum.

## **Results**

This section presents the findings based on an analysis of the data from the interviews (two each) from the five participants. What follows are excerpts from the interviews of each participant followed by an interpretation of the perceived shift in practice experienced by each participant.

### **Participant Profiles**

Sahar is an early childhood educator with a level three classification, who has worked exclusively with preschool children for her early childhood education career. Sahar enjoys exploring Halifax in her personal time and when she discovers something beautiful, like wildflowers or old ceramic tea sets, she shares it in the classroom. For most of her career she has been working in a centre with an established emergent curriculum. She first entered the centre as a student educator and went on to work there for several years following her graduation. She felt like the practices were in line with her own philosophy, so it seemed like a great place to begin her career. However, she describes how she was somewhat overwhelmed with the pressure of keeping the high standards of emergent curriculum up to the level that they were before she entered the classroom.

Raven is an early childhood educator with a level three classification, who has worked with a range of children from infants to school age. Most of her early experience was working with preschool children and her later experience was working with infant and toddler children.

When she began to work at her first childcare centre that practiced emergent curriculum, she was ready for a challenge. She had already been in the field of early childhood education for two years and she was eager to learn and grow through practicing emergent curriculum that she had learned about in school and read about in her own professional development. She was also starting to work with a new age group, infants, and according to Raven she found it a little daunting to learn emergent curriculum while teaching a group with whom she had no previous experience.

Ingrid is an early childhood educator with a level three classification, who began her career before moving to Canada, teaching in her private English language learning school (using her Bachelor of Arts), with diplomas in nursing and education. After she moved to Halifax, she received her early childhood education diploma and began to practice emergent curriculum at a small private centre in Halifax, working with toddler children aged 2 years to 3.5 years old. The staff and director of the private centre had been practicing emergent curriculum for over ten years. Ingrid had joined an experienced educator and learned a lot from her but when that educator left after about one year, Ingrid was not confident in her ability to practice emergent curriculum on her own. Her director hired an educator mentor to work with her for 6 months and help her to develop her practice. During this time, she began to develop some documentation about what the children were playing with and what they were interested in learning about.

Kim is an early childhood educator with a level two classification, who has practiced teaching for 12 years in different Canadian provinces with children from eighteen months to five years old. Much of her experience has been working in early childhood centres that were practicing emergent curriculum. She first practiced emergent curriculum in a childcare centre that was in a different province, where the staff and administration were beginning an effort to

replace their theme-based curriculum. Later she moved to Halifax where she joined a preschool that had been practicing emergent curriculum for a few years---just like her.

Sofia is an early childhood educator with a level three classification, who, throughout her career, has worked with children from infants to school-age. She has worked at a variety of childcare centres for 25 years including non-profit, commercial, and now public school. Lately Sofia was excited to work in a forest school setting as it was a significant aspect of her graduate degree.

### **Participant's Stories**

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

In September 2018, I interviewed Sahar about the two pieces of documentation she chose, Let's talk about guns! and Learning from burned cookies.

Let's talk about guns. In the first interview, while examining the "Let's talk about guns" documentation, Sahar described how in her first six months of teaching, the children were playing a pretend gun game, with which she was not comfortable. When Sahar asked if this kind of play was allowed, her lead educator asked her to document and explore this interest even though it made her uncomfortable. 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, then a photograph of the children working with their gun creations, followed by their transcribed conversation, and concluding with a photograph of the group during their conversation. I was emailed a copy of the documentation a week before the interview took place to prepare for the interview. As I began the interview, I had a digital copy on my computer to refer to for any

clarification. Sahar went on to explain her documentation from her memory and her own digital copy on her laptop computer.

Although she remembered feeling nervous, Sahar had started her exploration of gun play with a conversation, as she had seen demonstrated by her mentor as follows.

**Sahar** – So what kind of things did you make with Kinex?

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?

(From Let's talk about guns! Documentation)

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 went back to ask about that. Following this conversation with the children Sahar described how she attempted to teach and learn more about guns with trips to the library to find books and other follow up conversations about guns, but she said that the

children did not seem to care to learn about guns. She described how, two years later, she looked back at her first documentation. Sahar thought she had erred. She saw that the children only mentioned guns once in the conversation and there were more references to superhero play. As she read her documented conversation from “Let’s talk about guns”, she recognized that she was focused on guns, but the children were 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 they 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. She felt like she had to teach them something about guns. After much reflection, she recognized that it 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.” Since this early time in her career, Sahar explains that she has built up 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.

In the second interview Sahar chose a more recent example of her documentation, one about baking with children called “Learning from burned cookies.” The documented exploration began in December 2017 and continued into the following spring and summer months of 2018.

Learning from burned cookies. This new documentation process was similar to the first, including photographs, a brief explanation of what provoked this exploration, and the transcribed words of the children but it also included a lot more explanation of the processes of exploration by the children. Again, she shared her documentation through email, and we had a digital copy to refer to during the interview. Sahar provided a lot 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 describes, one morning, she had set up a provocation of baking ingredients that were available for the group of three children to explore which 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 explains, this morning the children were happily mixing ingredients without a predetermined plan or recipe. As one child moved away from his mixing another joined and noticed something about this sensory exploration;

Safa – this looks like real food.

Jen – I am making rainbow ice cream.

They 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 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 was not fazed by this criticism. 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 they began, their play changed: the previous day was all 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 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!

They 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 the food in a more comfortable way. Sahar remembers that they were very proud of their food and wanted to share it with their family. Sahar has been asked by other educators how she could let the children do whatever they wanted with the ingredients. She says "...If you have those eyes for children, then you know how important that is, to value their thinking." Sahar went on to explain how valuing children's thinking will help develop a trusting and comfortable relationship and 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 this documentation?" 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 co-worker 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, Matthew, 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 it will open my eyes to a new thought.

Looking back at her first example Sahar remembered the words of her first co-worker when she asked if gun play was okay. He 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. "

**Interpretation of Sahar's shift.** When Sahar started teaching four years ago, she knew what emergent curriculum was from the textbooks she had read in school, and she knew that it was how she wanted to teach. But she felt that she was not ready for guns in the classroom, and although her documenting skills were precise and detailed, she was "Listening with her ear but not her head." She was trying to know why they wanted to play with guns but did not hear that they wanted to be superheroes. This filter for seeing what she wanted to see or hearing what she wanted to hear was an unintentional barrier to information that led Sahar to miss the point of her children's play. However, because she included the children's words in her first piece of documentation, she was able to see her own limitation in her later reflections. Her coworker trusted her, but she was not yet open to the many possibilities that arise in emergent curriculum. The pivot point that Sahar noted as most significant occurred when she first reviewed the documentation two years later and realized that they were not playing guns: they were playing superheroes, which opened her eyes and helped her see the difference between what she wanted to explore and what the children were exploring. Sahar shifted from following a child-centered

learning theme to being attentive to children's meaning when exploring their thinking. Another two years later she stated that she is confident that the children will learn important things about baking through their own ideas, mistakes and inventions. Sahar shifted from being uncomfortable with the unknown to trusting both herself and the children. She says she is no longer concerned with teaching them something, she is ready to learn together with them. Sahar says she has faith in herself and in the children's ability to learn whatever emerges in their exploration. Sahar also shifted from guiding children toward conventional knowledge to supporting and engaging in a negotiated curriculum. Sahar's now believes that emergent curriculum is less about making sure that children know correct pieces of information and more about supporting the ways that children are developing their thinking and expressing their understanding.

**Raven: "There needs to be reciprocal learning."**

I interviewed Raven in November 2018, she chose to discuss Balls in the Pool and Cooking Soup to demonstrate how her practice had shifted.

Balls in the pool. The piece of documentation that was presented during the first interview was one page (letter size) with a title, a large photograph of the children playing in the balls, and a brief description of what happened. Raven shared a digital copy of her documentation through email one week before the interview so that it could be reviewed prior to the interview. I had a digital copy on my computer during the interview but most of Raven's explanation came from her memory with very little reference to the documentation as it was so short.

Raven tells us how she set out some plastic balls from a ball pit, in a small plastic wading pool in the classroom, for the infants aged 4-18 months to play with and that the children's

excitement encouraged Raven to extend the activity to a pool-sized ball pit. She described how she focused on their sensory exploration during her observations and she decided to document the infants' experience. She included four photographs of children sitting in the pools and holding the balls, while looking at the camera. The documentation finished with an explanation that they left the experience out for a week so that the children could explore the balls further if they wanted to. Raven explained that she was documenting what the children seemed to be interested in but did not understand what to do next, so she just left it at that. She did not follow up with further activities or questions. In her documentation, she described the activity in a very general way; "This activity was a big hit, and a number of children really seemed to enjoy it, so we left the pool out and the children were enjoying it." But looking back now and reflecting on it she said, "I didn't fully realize that you can go deeper with it; now I would ask questions" and "I would not make assumptions." Raven felt that the greatest weakness of this documentation is that it did not represent the thinking of either educators or children. If she could give her younger self some advice, she would suggest that she wait, watch, and think. She described that, at the time she was so concerned with getting some documentation on the wall but, as she explained in the interview, it is not about getting it on the wall as soon as you can; "Documentation isn't something that you have to pump out to show that the children are learning."

During the second interview Raven explained that over the next four years she spent a lot of time practicing her documenting skills and reflecting on what was working and what was missing so that she could improve each time. While she did recognise that time and experience were crucial aspects of her shift, Raven identified two types of learning that contributed greatly to her shift. She was working with her professional peers with whom she would share her

documentation and ask for their critique. She explained that, “Networking with other educators and learning from them increased my understanding of documentation and young children.” Raven’s says that her understanding of the capabilities of young children such as infants and toddlers demanded that she advocate for them as capable learners. She says that so often young children are overlooked as capable learners even in emergent curriculum, and this fueled her drive to use her documentation to show other educators how capable infants and toddlers are when they are supported in emergent curriculum; “I am always looking for ways to advocate for the rights and abilities of very young children...” Raven explains that as her understanding of the children increased, she recognised how her ability to understand the meaning of pedagogical documentation deepened; “I realized that I needed to do more but less at the same time...I ended up doing less documentation but deeper pieces of documentation. Once I started to understand that, I actually started to be able to engage in and support project work in the infant room.” Now Raven was thoughtfully engaging in documentation with her group and very much in her comfort zone; she even started to share her experience and expertise through workshops. Raven also found that mentoring staff and supporting their understanding helped her deepen her understanding of emergent curriculum.

Raven said she eventually moved to a different classroom, but a similar age group, where her co-worker was more experienced than her but less confident in her understanding of emergent curriculum. Raven felt that she was able to mentor this co-worker and she noted that while working together her co-worker's understanding and practice “improved,” according to Raven. She said:

In my experience, for meaningful learning to occur there needs to be reciprocal learning. It's not just a process of one teaching another. Through the act of exploring together, the

emergent teacher is on that journey learning about themselves and learning about learning.

In her time working with toddlers and mentoring her co-worker, Raven explains that she became more confident in her own understanding of emergent curriculum and in particular, her documentation skills.

Cooking soup. The second piece of documentation included six photographs of the children age 12-24 months and educator in different stages of soup preparation. The documentation included an explanation of how the exploration unfolded. I had a digital copy of the documentation on my computer for reference; however, most of her explanation described what came before and after this piece of documentation. She chose this piece of documentation because it was the initial piece in a series that represented the potential of toddler children in emergent curriculum settings.

The introduction of this documentation explains that a child in her class was having some issues with food, and while the educators had explored what might be the cause of these issues, they attempted an exploration that might help this child try more foods by being involved in the process of preparing the food. The documentation explains how the children peel, cut and prepare the vegetables for the soup. There are images that show the children going through these processes and focusing on their task. It shows the children eating the soup later and stated that further exploration with food will follow, as it is an ongoing interest. Raven was particularly proud of this piece of documentation because, for her, it represented a culmination of the work she had put in to improving her practice as an educator and her documentation skills;

This documentation marked a progression, for me, from having gone through the steps of finding my voice with documentation and finding ways of representing children

respectfully by telling a story that stayed true to the children, but also advocated for them and their learning.

From this piece of documentation Raven described two goals that were achieved: First, she was able to show how capable the children---even toddlers---were in peeling and cutting vegetables. Due to her colleagues' expressed fears of Raven allowing children to use real tools, such as knives, Raven felt that she had to demonstrate the possibilities when educators are able to trust children with tasks that might seem risky. "We were looking to empower the children, we were also looking to prove that young children are capable of using real materials and learning to use things safely with the right support from adults." The second goal that was achieved was in finding solutions for children with some food issues. Raven explains that documentation can help the educators and the children along a path of understanding. In this project "It was not only us trying to find strategies to help the child, this child was involved in finding strategies to help their self." Furthermore, Raven noted that it was an example of ongoing project work with very young children. Through the process of exploring and reflecting on documentation with children, Raven explains that even very young children could build upon their previous explorations and ideas. Their work with food preparation was an ongoing theme for months to follow.

Looking back at this piece that is now a few years old as well, Raven says that she is able to see how it helped her strengthen her bonds in the classroom;

I just remember how it brought us as educators closer with the children and closer with the other educators. The act of including children in every step of this process, empowering them and following their lead builds trust between the child and educator and among the children.

She wants other educators to consider how we teach and help children,

There is so much that is done for and to them and they have a developing sense of self that needs to be respected. When the adult is able to take a step back and reflect on how to empower the child to realize their potential and their impact in their own lives, just what a gift that is to the adult and the child.

**Interpretation of Raven's shift.** When Raven took on the challenge of joining a school that practiced emergent curriculum, she knowingly embarked on a journey of struggle and change. She began to try out pedagogical documentation in a new environment with a new age group. She was not able to lean on her knowledge and experience to ease the transition, but rather documented things as she saw them without much consideration of what it had to do with the child's overall experience. Raven shifted from making assumptions and generalizations about children's thinking to questioning children's explorations and the context of that learning. For instance, in her early experience, she used general observations like "they enjoyed it," and "it was very popular," to describe what the infants were learning. Later she questions what it is about the balls in the wading pool that children are drawn to.

Raven believed that mentoring was her most obvious pivot point and she engaged in it in several ways. First, she was learning from her mentors who provided supportive feedback for her documentation style, and depth. Second, she found success in hosting workshops and group meetings to share her ideas. Third, Raven became a mentor and helped another educator to succeed in ways that she had not in her long experience at the centre prior to working with Raven. From this mentoring she discovered that, "For meaningful learning to occur, there has to be reciprocal learning." Raven's understanding of mentoring shifted from a one directional flow of information to a reciprocal exchange of information. This shift parallels the change from

conventional teaching curricula to emergent curriculum in how the focus of the teaching changes from the notion of one expert teacher, to all participants contributing to the learning.

Raven became an educator who strongly advocates for the understanding of very young children's capabilities. Both of her examples come from her time working with infants and toddlers. However, her practice and understanding while working with this group shifted dramatically. Raven shifted from using documentation to justify that she was teaching in and emergent curriculum to using documentation to advocate for children's capabilities. This shift is also connected to her level of trust in herself, emergent curriculum and the children. She produced fewer pieces of documentation, but her process is deeper in thinking and in the exploration by the children. She focused on children's focus, and nonverbal communication in her documentation. Raven later saw herself as an early childhood educator, advocate, mentor, and experienced documenter. She was excited to have the opportunity to reflect on her previous thinking and learn yet again from her children. Her overall advice is that very young children are capable of deep thinking and project work if supported by thoughtful educators. She also suggests documenting less, as in fewer pieces, yet more, as in deeper and more reflective, at the same time. This idea of fewer but deeper reflections in documentation is paralleled in how educators' practice becomes more complex. It is not about many examples of learning, it is about really questioning and understanding the learning.

**Ingrid: "Is it ok to ask a question?"**

In January of 2019 we met to discuss Ingrid's early and recent documentation, Sam's Combine Harvester and Ami Makes Clothes.

Sam's Combine Harvester. During our second interview Ingrid explained that she was not sure that we would have enough to talk about from this piece of documentation in



this interview, but it was her oldest piece, so she decided to use it anyway. The “Combine Harvester” documentation included an introduction, three small photos (one square and two smaller ovals), and a brief explanation of what was happening in the pictures, on half a letter-sized piece of paper. Ingrid emailed me a copy of this piece of documentation a week before the interview and brought a paper copy to refer to during the interview. It begins with an explanation of how a 2.5-year-old child named Sam was using bungee cords to wrap around a wooden ramp, toy structure. He called it a ‘Combine Harvester’ and he 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 explains that Sam wanted to show his mom and that later he made another machine called the ‘combine polar.’ She included three pictures of Sam building and working with the combine harvester which have different frame styles on them, one square picture with a bold grey frame, and two oval pictures with a faded border. Ingrid explains that the materials used in this play were recycled materials, so she was interested in how they were used by the child, but this was not included in her documentation. Ingrid also noted that Sam had built another machine and she had brought in books about a combine harvester and had a conversation with the child about it, but all the extra information was lost and not posted in a piece of documentation. She regrets losing the extra pieces of documentation because it could have led to further understanding of what Sam was doing with the corn. Ingrid explains in the interview that it was interesting that he was using multiple different materials to construct the machine because the other children had

only really used one material at a time which was why his use of materials caught her eye to document it.

Ingrid was also very critical of the aesthetic of this piece of documentation. She said she was more focused on showing that she could make two different shapes of pictures and less about how easy it is to read. She explained that if she separated it into two simple paragraphs and had the pictures all the same shape next to the text, it would have been more appealing to read. She felt that she missed the opportunity to understand more about the children's thinking because she did not want to get in their way;

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 had seen this type of play now, she would have a different perspective on it, "Now I 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?" The child had continued working on the combine harvester and combine polar, yet she did not make another piece of documentation about it. She stated that she believed that the children could not have a longer project 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." She explains that if she had followed up with other pieces of documentation and believed that younger children had the capacity to have longer lasting projects and interests, then it could have gone deeper.

As she explained in interview #2, over the next two years, Ingrid had several coworkers, some with more experience than her and some with less. Regardless of their experience, they challenged Ingrid's ideas; this helped her to refine her ability to argue and defend her opinions. She now works in a public school with children who are four-and five- years of age. Her team is very supportive but less experienced in practicing emergent curriculum. According to Ingrid, she discovered that, by using documentation, she can reach out in a way that makes the children feel more valued and listened to. In her more recent example of documentation Ingrid found that in emergent curriculum documentation could be a tool that helped her to challenge a child who was bored and was not getting enough stimulation.

Ami makes clothes. The second piece of documentation that Ingrid chose to share was 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 told a continuing story. Ingrid shared a digital copy of this and brought a paper copy of the documentation to refer to during the interview.

Ingrid explained how, in her new school, she has a very active group of 4-5-year-old children and one child, Ami, who is older but has demonstrated very challenging behaviours. One day, with a smaller group of children, Ami brought in a naked Barbie Doll, whom she called 'Baby'. Ingrid explained that her own first reaction was to remove the toy, because they do not share toys from home at school and because Barbies are not an open-ended toy. Thus, Ingrid did not think that this toy had much potential in a classroom that was focusing on emergent curriculum. Ingrid said that instead of reacting quickly she asked a playful question, "I think Baby must be cold without any clothes on, what can you do for her?" Ami was not used to being challenged with an open-ended question, so Ami said, 'I don't know what to do.' Ingrid had

noticed Ami's drawing skills, so she suggested that Ami attempt to draw an idea. Ingrid explains that perhaps this was the permission that 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. Ingrid did not mention anything yet, and Ami was gluing 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, so this appeared to motivate them to help Ami make a bed and pillows to keep her doll warm so that they could also get their pictures taken. Ingrid mentioned that Ami was having trouble connecting with other children and making friends but now she was the centre and others were joining her. Now Ami was making another dress but this time she was making it with vertical lines cut in it, Ingrid said that she did not know why Ami was doing it, so she asked. "It's a fashion," Ami replied. Ingrid explained that Ami was not able to cut the way she wanted but later Ingrid realised that it was fringe. Ami even went on to cut, colour and style the hair of the Barbie in the same style as her educators', different colours for each educator on either side of the doll's head. Ingrid explained how she had quickly written up a piece of documentation because it was not what she expected to happen when the Barbie was in the classroom. After a long weekend Ami came back with another Barbie, and again she had a plan to make a dress for her. Ingrid wanted to try to push the dress-making a little farther,

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 part and another educator provided some elastics which Ami used as a scarf and to hold the dresses on. More children kept joining

in the dress-making play with Ami. They were now also making side panels for the dresses. Ingrid explains 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 was taking pictures, writing down notes all along and writing up the documentation. She was including 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 is where the documentation ended and that she, Ingrid, was comfortable with how it ended.

I surmised that Ingrid was more permissive about the use of the Barbie doll than she would have been about other toys, so I asked her during the interview if she would have allowed Ami to cut the hair of her special dolls or any dolls that would usually be in the classroom. Ingrid said ‘no’ and explained that it was probably because she did not believe that Barbies had any real potential or value that she allowed Ami to be so experimental with them. Ingrid’s advice to other educators would be,

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 welcome their (children’s) 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].

**Interpretation of Ingrid's shift.** When Ingrid began teaching in an emergent curriculum setting just two years prior to her first example of documentation, she saw how her co-educator was exploring with children and was able to support it but when she was on her own, she was not confident in her ability to continue an effective emergent curriculum. She was taking pictures and writing down the words of the children and her focus was on what happened and making it look interesting. But looking back she feels that all she was doing was taking away from the message and confusing it with tricky design features such as, different picture shapes and custom text boxes: "I don't know how it looks to others, but it looks unattractive and scattered to me. I don't know what I was trying to do, and I don't want to read what it says. This documentation lacks curiosity and questions." She wished she had followed through with more documentation, but she did not believe that toddlers had the attention span to have long term project work. Ingrid shifted from using documentation to show off her skills to using documentation to support and motivate children's thinking. This is connected to a shift in her confidence, practicing emergent curriculum. The more confident she became from working on documentation and practicing emergent curriculum the less she felt that she needed to decorate her documentation.

With support and challenges from her mentor educator and her new co-workers who held strong opinions on how things should be done within the program, and also holding strong opinions herself, Ingrid was often put into the position of having to defend her practices and beliefs. These ongoing challenges and debates with her co-workers were her pivot points. From this process she developed more conviction in her own ideas. She is in the process of leading

other educators and showing the possibilities of emergent curriculum when using documentation. From her example she demonstrated how using documentation in emergent curriculum not only made the learning visible but also allowed the children to feel heard and even provided opportunities for deeper thinking and development of children's ideas.

Later Ingrid used documentation to keep the thinking moving forward and shared it with the children to remind them of what they have already done and make plans for their future work. She is also more willing to provoke and scaffold with questions that make the children consider what they are doing without suggesting any specific next step. Ingrid shifted from feeling uncomfortable asking questions to intentionally using open ended questions that scaffold the child's thinking, this shift is also connected to her confidence in practicing emergent curriculum.

In her recent example of documentation Ingrid shares how she had always followed certain rules in the classroom, but once she broke her own rules about bringing toys from home, she was able to see that the rule was not the best solution to each situation. Ingrid shifted from using rigid rules that narrow children's opportunities to using negotiation with children to empower them in co-creating their learning. Ingrid stated that negotiating with children in the classroom provided an opportunity that was impossible to predict. Even her lack of valuing Barbie dolls' potential made it easier for her to negotiate how the children could use the doll. After the interview process, Ingrid emailed some additional thoughts about the complexity of emergent curriculum and asked that they be included. She wrote that,

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.

(Ingrid, email correspondence)

**Kim: “One more track.”**

The two pieces of documentation that Kim shared for this interview in December, The Mud Kitchen and Making Soup were both developed in Halifax at two different locations within the same organization.

The Mud Kitchen. The first piece of documentation that Kim shared was a folded pamphlet printed on a letter-sized page, printed front and back. It included two small pictures, two mud splatter graphics, and text that explained what the mud kitchen was and some short quotes in different text fonts and colours made to read like an advertisement. She emailed me a photograph of this documentation and we referred to it on my laptop computer during the interview.

Kim explained how she wanted to enhance the outdoor play space, which included a play structure, a toy shed and some potted plants. She wanted to provide more opportunities for exploration like the children had inside the classroom. After weeks of observation and discussion among the staff at her preschool Kim had set up a new sensory area called ‘The mud kitchen’, which included bowls, pans, pots and big wooden spoons, outside her preschool:

The first time the kitchen was in use, excitement was high. The children worked together to fill the buckets with water and assemble the necessary tools. With a bench-like set up, the chefs could stand on either side of the workspace.

She explained that she was excited that this open-ended area was available to her children and she was excited to let the parents know about it. Kim described how she watched the children



play with it for the first few days and took pictures of what they were doing. After work she spent hours writing up the mud kitchen documentation, as “the new fancy restaurant in Halifax” where the families (of the children in the preschool) could come and enjoy a delicious meal, “Your first and last dirt dining experience.” Kim designed the piece of documentation to look like a pamphlet to grab the interest of the parents and she made sure to put in lots of clever and humorous anecdotes that would entertain the parents as they read the piece. Upon reflection Kim stated that she later recognized that she neglected to include the interesting explorations that were happening in the new mud kitchen or how the children's play from inside the classroom now had a space to continue outside: “I want to go back and tell myself just... just write what happened.” She recognized that, “There were a lot more exciting things happening in the mud kitchen that I could have followed and I could have documented” and rather than make the children’s play, thinking and learning visible she made it “Gimmicky; I made it like a travel guide or a Pamphlet” and she was “Just trying to be quirky and funny.” Another issue that Kim had with her old documentation was that she felt that she got started and did not follow through. “Why did I stop? Why wasn't I following the different things that they did in that area? If I was to go back and do it again, I would have continued to add to it each time there was a new thing happening.”

Kim explained how she began to look deeper into the purpose of documentation. Through conversation with educators, coworkers, and parents, she stated that she began to develop her own philosophy of pedagogical documentation. Kim was beginning to shift her beliefs and understanding of pedagogical documentation. “It’s not for parents to feel entertained by what's happening at the preschool. I now know that documentation is much more for

reflection and for the children's benefit and for being able to build projects further.” Kim went on to explain how documentation affects a project.

When I first learned about projects, I always thought that you started it and then finished it, and that it was a finished product wrapped up in a package, but I'm starting to learn that everything that you do in in the room, every activity and every provocation... they're projects.

Kim stated that projects are not merely the thing that you work on for the month they are, “fluid and changeable so when you set out and you do something that seems to have a very set theme it is going to change before the end and it is going to bleed into the next thing that is happening.”

Kim described the process of following a project;

You're constantly building, you're constantly putting one more track in front of the train or the multiple trains that are going all over the place. So, when I have a project like the mud kitchen, I might sort of stay in that physical area but it might have changed into cooking different things and then I might have found that if I added different materials that the theme completely changed into the children wanting to make potions or I might find that it turns into something creative and it turns into painting the fences. So, when I say project, I guess I just mean, in that exact moment it was a mud kitchen project but really, it's going to keep building...[into] ...a story that follows all the children throughout the year.

Making Soup. Kim explained that she still discusses and negotiates with her co-workers on a regular basis, but she feels that the difference now is that her co-workers are more confident or willing to share a different perspective that helps to inform Kim in her classroom setup and documentation to propel the interests and projects. An example of this was demonstrated in the

‘Making Soup’ documentation from our first interview. In this documentation Kim began telling the story about a mixing exploration, and a food preparation exploration that seemed to be connected. This documentation was six letter-sized pages that included at least one photograph on each page, and plain text that described how the children’s different activities all came together to make soup. It also included a few one to three-word quotes from children. Kim shared a digital copy of this documentation and we referred to it on my computer during the interview.

First, Kim and her co-workers noticed that children were mixing together different materials and using the word ‘potions’ which had been carried over from their previous explorations with mixing at the other preschool site, where the children were mixing water and other natural materials such as leaves and dirt outside with pots and pans. The educator provided the children with water for their potions and the children requested items from around the classroom, such as, dried paint chips from unwashed classroom paint containers, white sugar, flour, salt and dried oats. In the end, “The children remarked on the smells and how it looked like vegetable soup.” They also commented on the change of colour from the paint chips, “[Kim] drained the concoction and showed the children how the oats looked afterward. Pink!”

Meanwhile in the art studio Kim’s co-worker had been following a paint mixing exploration. “The children called the colours they added together a ‘recipe’” and each recipe was recorded with the child’s name and the colour it created. Upon reflection, Kim noticed that there was a third component that likely affected the children’s interest in this particular exploration. “They do a lot of food prep in general, but it was extremely popular, cutting vegetables and cutting fruit and counting numbers of things.” Although this food prep was a part of their daily routine rather than an ongoing interest, the ideas and skills

developed during this food prep time seemed to have influenced the overall project. As these three factors were simultaneously happening Kim explained how she had noticed that the children were talking about soup a lot and she asked them, “Are we making soup?” This question was the topic of many circle time discussions and when Kim felt they were ready she sat with them and recorded what each child thought could go into the soup. This made up their recipe, and with the help of the families, the children brought in their suggested ingredient and made their vegetable soup for lunch. Kim reflected at this point in her documentation process, and realised that their food prep skills, their colour mixing recipes, and their making potions had all culminated “to a very satisfying conclusion.”

Kim said that she can now appreciate her “old ways” with new perspective; “I’ve almost come full circle where I started out not knowing much about documentation and just sort of doing it very lightly and carefully, to it getting extremely complicated and convoluted and big and too much information, to now coming back to simplicity.” And most importantly “I realize now that documentation is not about looking good.”

When asked what advice Kim would give to a new educator who is making documentation she said:

I would say take yourself out of it; not that you shouldn't be in your documentation and you shouldn't have reflections and thoughts but take your ego out of the documentation. Don't try to make it a showcase of how good you are at writing, or how funny you are, or how clever you are, but instead just be straightforward reflective descriptive observational.

Furthermore, Kim introduced the idea that, rather than merely entertaining parents as she did in The Mud Kitchen, documentation is meant for supporting projects. She further explains that

in the beginning of her career she believed that projects were just a replacement for learning themes; “You choose a project and then you teach the children all about that project and write up a documentation about what you learned about the project.” Kim explained that her perspective has changed, everything she does in her classroom contributes to the ongoing projects:

Projects do not end, rather they usually bleed into each other, so what you have been working on with colour mixing and potion making bleeds into making soup. It was not soup making in the beginning, but all the pieces keep adding together and eventually become making soup.

Kim described the process of developing a project as like trains: “You're constantly building, you're constantly putting one more track in front of the train or the multiple trains that are going all over the place.”

When Kim's interview was coming to a close, I asked her if she had any further comments. She wondered if other participants were genuinely choosing their ‘worst’ examples of documentation or if they were merely sharing a piece that could demonstrate their growth without revealing their ‘worst’ work. I explained that I did not ask people to share their ‘worst’ piece, merely two different examples that demonstrate a change in their understanding and practice. However, Kim described how her willingness to share her ‘worst’ documentation demonstrates, to herself, her own growth. Previously she would have buried it away where no one could see it, but later, because of the process of reflection, she was able to see the value in learning and sharing without ego.

**Interpretation of Kim's shift.** When Kim joined her new centre with some experience using pedagogical documentation and practicing emergent curriculum, she wanted to prove that

she knew what she was doing. From her earlier example we can see an educator who is attempting to paint a clever picture of herself through her documentation that will show the parents that she is both funny and interesting. She used documentation as a chance to entertain, advertise and be witty. Her focus was not on children's thinking but on what was new at the centre and in her own words she used documentation as, "A showcase of what I think is cool about myself." Over the next few years at the centre she took part in many workshops and regularly engaged in conversations with her colleagues. Kim shifted from focusing on informing and entertaining parents with her pedagogical documentation to recording and propelling the children's learning and exploration. It seems that these conversations were her pivot points, because it was through these conversations that she was able to focus on what the children were doing, thinking about, and how their various experiences were coming together. With her colleagues' perspectives and a simpler method of documenting she was able to 'lay down her tracks' and see the project. Now Kim's documentation is less 'gimmicky' and more thoughtful. Her understanding of emergent curriculum has deepened in her interest in reflecting on both what the children are doing and what she is doing, in order to learn and grow as an educator.

Kim stated that she would never have shared her old documentation due to embarrassment, but more recently she participates in a group that share their work to reflect together and gain different perspectives. Kim shifted from wanting to hide her mistakes to actively looking to share her older work to reflect upon it with peers. Kim also wondered if other educators in this study are comfortable sharing their less successful examples.

Finally, Kim shifted from thinking of a project as a themed learning module that is chosen by the educator to an understanding of projects as a flexible idea or concept being researched and explored by children with the support and guidance of an educator. Kim

compared the project process to laying the next track for the train (the children's thinking). She is not in control of where the train is going or if it splits into multiple directions, she is present for where it is and records where it has been.

**Sofia: “A passionate fascination with death.”**

The documentation pieces that Sofia shared for our interviews in January 2019, were; “The exploration of birds” and “Decay and death in the forest.”

Sofia's early example of documentation was a six-foot panel, printed on vinyl that was prepared for a child-care centre's anniversary gala. It included many examples of documentation from the same child-care centre. It had several photographs and text that included explanation and children's words.

The explorations of birds. Sofia explained that this documentation was her first display. She described how she did not really understand the point of pedagogical documentation, but it was “a part of the daily routine of our classroom to document everything.” Sofia explained that she thought that this piece of documentation was very simple, yet, upon reflection she says that this covered a variety of activities surrounding the topic of birds. However, Sofia stated that it still lacks a depth of exploration of children's thinking. In May of 1999, Sofia and her coworker were in a park with their preschool group when they noticed that the children had gathered up found materials to make nests, “The children carried their materials inside and began to construct.” “I was trying to look for a project to do with the children so, as soon as I saw that, I thought I would investigate.” Sofia explained how the children explored the process of to making nests; they drew pictures of nests; and one child wanted to find birds to put in the nests. Sofia borrowed some stuffed birds from the local museum for the children to draw. They also carved birds from soap after a visit from a wood carver. The group visited a farm and when it was

explained that ducks sit on their eggs the children wanted eggs to hatch in their school.

Eventually the group had hatched two duck eggs and brought them to a lake to live. Sofia explained that she felt the need to include each child in the documentation regardless of their interest in the topic: “forcing people to do things that they did not find that interesting so I could show their parents.” This selected piece of documentation included a variety of learning activities that were planned and provided by the educator, such as: getting items from the museum to drawings, visiting the farm, and book research where the group learned how to care for eggs and ducklings. The documentation also shows a variety of skills being developed, such as: drawing the nests, sculpting the birds, and discussing the life of birds and ducks.

However, Sofia said her focus was not on developing deeper thinking: “the focus was on proving to people that children learn through emergent curriculum.”

Sofia stated that she felt that the exploration was rushed. Instead of allowing the children to stop and play with nests for a month, they were pushed on to the next aspect of the life of birds from nests, to birds, to eggs to ducklings to releasing them in the wild, and all within two months. Sofia said that she was always in a hurry to get to the next step but looking back and reflecting on it now, she would do things differently, “Instead of me pushing it along where I thought it should go, I would have waited to see where the children wanted it to go.” She explains that educators often observe children’s excitement and glance at what they are excited about to follow that as an interest, but it is deeper than the first thing you see:

Children like to play paw patrol and people are like ‘oh we should do a project on paw patrol’ ... but why do they like paw patrol? Is it the animals that they like? Is it the feeling of power it gives them? There is a deeper underlying lesson there without exploring paw patrol and it's just like the nest... it's not just about nests and eggs but what



about their interests the children? I was like ‘oh they must want to see birds hatch’, but maybe it's more of an emotional thing, things contained within things, or mystery, is it transformation? I would have asked deeper questions.

Sofia criticized her old documentation because although there was a lot of learning happening, she feels that she was missing something:

It was all about visible learning instead of invisible learning or thinking. To me it all had to be about producing a product, but now it's about transforming thought; and slowing down more so that we are more mindful of emotions and motives for doing things.

Since this piece of documentation Sofia has continued her career for another 20 years, and worked in a variety of settings, from preschool classroom to an infant classroom, to private daycare in a school-age program, to a forest school. She has had children of her own and continues to teach and learn. While working at her forest school, Sofia began to notice how her feelings were changing for the worse, “I felt intense frustration and anger a lot of the time working.” She asked herself, “what can I do to kind of channel my energy into a more positive way?” She decided to go back to school and was faced with a decision to stay in the field of early childhood education or to move on to something else. It was not an easy decision for her, because there are many drawbacks to working in this field. Sofia noted that pay and status are among the least rewarding parts of this field of work. However, it is a very rewarding job when it comes to joyful work. Sofia explained that it is like, “We're doing volunteer work right in our own community and we're getting paid a little bit for it and it's very rewarding if you can make a living.” Sofia decided to do her Master's degree in Child and Youth Study and continue in the field. Sofia explains that, reflecting on whether to stay in the field or leave, and deciding to continue her education were what got her to move forward in her career. While struggling with

this change Sofia was still at the forest school but with new understanding of emergent curriculum.

The second piece of documentation was called “Decay and death in the forest” It was a one letter-sized page with a large photograph of the forest where they walked and a block of text explaining what happened. Sofia emailed me a digital copy of the documentation and included more explanation in the email to provide context to the piece of documentation. I had the digital copy on my computer to refer to during the interview.

Decay and death in the forest. In her more recent piece of documentation, Sofia explained that she spent a lot of her time with her preschool class walking near a service road in a forest. One day, the group was forced to remain on the service road due to weather. That is when they came upon a dead frog. The children were all pushing each other to get a closer look and then they were stunned when they saw it. “They just stood around it and stared at it and they were intensely fascinated like they wanted to be as close to it as possible.” Sofia explains how she was not prepared for this investigation and had to depend on her memory to document what the children were saying: “‘That frog squished’ and ‘Maybe we need to take him to the doctor so that he’ll be OK later’ and then somebody said ‘Well his insides are out of his body. I don’t know. I think he’s dead.’” Sofia described how she was following the children’s lead on this, not deciding who was right and what they should talk about or do, just providing support to their way of investigating the dead frog;

One of the children got a stick and poked the frog and it started moving, so everybody screamed at the same time and we had some intense reactions from the adults which kind of influenced the reactions of the children.

Sofia noted how the children’s reactions were in contrast with the adults’;

I think the children were okay with it, but the adults [other educators] couldn't deal [with the grossness] anymore, so we took the frog and we buried him under some leaves. We involved the children as much as possible, but the adults were in a pretty big hurry to get this over with.

Sofia did not want to gloss over this intense fascination, so she explains their next step, “We went back to the centre and we drew pictures and there was[sic] a lot of pictures of blood.” Sofia explained how she noticed something very interesting from the drawings of the five-year-old children. From their pictures she could see that they were focused on the life of the frog; “It was like their brains couldn't compute death, so they just drew the frog when they were [sic] alive.” Sofia said that she did not pursue this any further and just allowed the children to initiate the next step but another animal death forced further exploration: “A couple weeks later we came across a rabbit, a dead rabbit just lying in the middle of road.” The first things that they thought about were coyotes and bears in the area but upon closer inspection they noticed that the rabbit was fully intact, like it died suddenly without being attacked. They also noticed that its tail was missing. The group continued on their walk away from the dead rabbit, and played further in the woods but on their way back to school, they noticed something on the rabbit changed, “It had these giant bloody puncture holes in it so that led to further speculation,” and “The body of the rabbit moved to the side of the road.” This time they did not bury the rabbit but again they went back and drew pictures of the dead animal. Sofia noted that there were two opposing themes to the drawings. One group focused on blood and death, and the other was more interested in the life of a bunny. Sofia described how one girl, “felt the need to compensate for the death of a rabbit by creating another dialogue about the bunny’s life.” Sofia explained that, over the next months, the children visited the rabbit corpse like a friend or landmark along the way through the

woods. They stopped sometimes to discuss the changes and continued their walk. Following this second animal death, Sofia described how the children saw her as the educator who deals with death and gross stuff. The discovery of a dead mouse on the childcare centre playground provided an opportunity for further exploration. Sofia noted that the children developed a “joyous fascination” with dead things. When the children discovered a fourth dead animal Sofia was ready. The children found a dead squirrel on the service road and Sofia put it in a Ziplock bag to make it visible and portable. Sofia described how the children investigated it using magnifying glasses in their classroom and hypothesised about what happened to the dead squirrel. Shortly after this, Sofia left this program for a new job in a public school. Sofia described this year-long exploration with the children as a passionate fascination with death. Reflecting, Sofia explains why this was her strongest example of pedagogical documentation, even though it did not have a lot of pictures or discussions:

I liked how there was no answer. It was open ended and I'm a person that can't deal with that. I like an answer right away, so it helped me accept that in the world sometimes there's no answers. I was a little frustrated because they didn't seem to go the way I wanted. I wanted them to say that ‘The rabbit died, when you die you never wake up again’ I wanted to hear those kinds of things. I didn't hear anything like I thought it was going to hear. I heard more like ‘What did the rabbit do when it was alive?’ and I was like ‘Are they avoiding it?’ and I had so many questions afterwards, more questions than when I started.

One of the main questions that Sofia has is, “Is documentation about answers?” Sofia noted that usually documentation is to make the learning visible, “like when showing how children learn to cut with scissors.” However, in this example, the learning could not always be made visible

“You could see the children thinking and wondering but they didn't always say it aloud.” It is important to remember that “It's okay not to have answers.”

**Interpretation of Sofia's shift.** Sofia explained how earlier in her career she would hide death from the children. When a classroom pet died, she would try to replace it before the children could ask questions about it because she wanted to shield them from the harsh realities of life and death. But in her more recent example she not only allowed the children to ask questions about the dead bunny but also allowed and encouraged them to get closer and poke the mysterious situation. Sofia shifted from censoring children's experiences to nurturing children's curiosity about difficult topics. In her later example she provided opportunities for drawing and discussion in hopes that the children would discuss their ideas of death. Instead they focused on the life that the animals may have lived leaving the questions unanswered.

Early in her career, Sofia was working with preschool children trying to prove that emergent curriculum is an effective curriculum approach in terms of promoting learning and wellbeing. She was most focussed on what the parents were thinking of her teaching. She made sure that she found an emergent interest and that everyone was involved in exploring it together. The group explored all aspects of a bird's life that they could think of, nests, eggs, hatching, releasing into the wild, drawing sculpting and researching through books. She made sure that the children had all the information about birds that they could get from a variety of sources. Her documentation was exhaustive and complete, and it was even used for a professional development gala. Sofia shifted from rushing to the next step in a project, to allowing the project to emerge and take shape over time.

Sofia went through many changes over the 20 years between projects but the most notable pivot points for her were reflection on if she should stay in the field, and higher

education in the form of her master's degree in Child and Youth Study. Both led to her deep reflection on whether she should continue to work in the field of early childhood education.

Sofia has now become an educator who is more concerned about developing deeper understanding, arising from her more complex and nuanced understanding of emergent curriculum. She is no longer looking for answers to questions; she is instead asking questions about questions. For example, why are the children more interested in the life of dead things than the death of the dead things? Sofia's observations are not merely about the subject of the death of the bunny, but on how the children are interpreting it. She is also more focused on what makes the children think. Sofia has shifted from trying to make the children's thinking visible to appreciating and accepting "invisible thinking", as she called it. Rather than listing knowledge and skill acquisition in her documentation or explanation she is discussing changes in thinking, emotional and moral shifts. Her advice to educators is to reflect on why they work with children and always continue to educate themselves.

I believe that Sofia's question, "Is documentation about answers?" is a rhetorical question that she intends to ask other educators, to help them reflect on why they document. An example that she gave during the first interview was about making learning visible. She said that the way she initially understood "making learning visible" was in the acquisition of skills that could be demonstrated and recorded over time through examples and photographs. If a child starts and cannot hold scissors in one hand, then later they can hold the scissors and cut jaggedly, and finally they can hold scissors and cut straight or curved lines, the learning is visible. The reader can see how the skill was developed over time. It answers the question, 'How do they learn to cut with scissors?' However, so much of what children are learning is unseen. In both of Sofia's pieces of documentation, the children are learning about life and death. Sofia said that she

believed this change in understanding cannot be made visible, yet it appears to me that she made it visible through her reflective explanation of why the children were drawing the rabbit's life rather than its death. So perhaps emergent curriculum is not merely about superficial or concrete answers to questions; instead documentation can be about answers that explain a change or shift in understanding.

### **Key findings**

The purpose of this research was to understand what shifts occur in educators' practice from understanding emergent curriculum on a simplistic level to understanding the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum. This section summarizes key findings related to four distinct shifts in practice.

Once I identified the participants' individual shifts in practice, it became clear that these shifts, although unique to each person, shared commonalities. Four distinct themes were identified. The first theme related to how styles of communication shifted from simply asking what children were interested in to following the children's questions and allowing the questions to expand as they explore. The second theme identified the shift from feeling self-conscious about emergent curriculum practice to practicing with confidence. The third theme captured how educators shifted towards negotiating a participatory culture rather than a rules-based culture. The fourth theme centred on how participants shifted from using documentation as physical evidence of what happened in the classroom (what children did) to a more complex story of how children's thinking developed.

**From interests to questions**

The first key finding is: Participants shifted towards following the children's questions and allowing the questions to expand as they explore rather than asking what the children are interested in.

The first example of this shift was in Sahar's story. Sahar began by exploring the interest in guns in her class. Sahar noted that she picked up on the word gun and focused on that as a theme. Upon later reflection, Sahar noticed that the children were actually talking about superheroes. In Sahar's later example, she was working with a group of children who were developing their own recipe and, rather than trying to make a good recipe, she followed the children's thinking, and documented their recipes, observations and critiques. The children's understanding of ingredients expanded due to their exploration. Thus, Sahar shifted from following a child-centered learning theme to being attentive to children's meaning when exploring their thinking.

The second example of a shift that falls under this theme is how Raven shifted from making assumptions and generalizations about children's thinking to questioning children's explorations and the context of that learning. In Raven's early piece of documentation, she wrote that the children were 'really excited' about playing with the balls in the pool, but while reflecting during the interview Raven wished that she had explored why the children were excited.

The third example of a shift that is connected to this theme came from Kim's experience. In her interview Kim discussed the idea of projects. Earlier in her career Kim believed that projects were an emergent theme that the educator notes from the children's play, which informs what activities to set up. Kim explained that "projects do not end, rather they usually bleed into



each other”, and she compares project to trains, in how the tracks come from many different directions to meet at a train station (the project), and then spread out again from there. Kim shifted from thinking of projects as a themed-learning module that is chosen by the educator to an understanding of projects as a flexible idea or concept being researched and explored by children with the support and guidance of an educator.

One final example of this key findings comes from Sofia’s example from her bird documentation. When emergent curriculum was new to Sofia, she had to find out the children’s interests. She noticed at a park that the children found a nest. The nest interest was followed by a series of activities, including drawing, sculpting, going to visit a farm, and eventually hatching eggs, all within a three-month period. Upon reflection Sofia believed that the children could have been interested in many different things: however, the educators were in a hurry to label and document this interest. In her later example Sofia discovered a dead animal with her children while walking on a path. The children’s questions about the animal made Sofia take notice, and they revisited this animal and found other dead animals over a year. She encouraged the children to draw what they were thinking about and engaged in discussions with the children about what happened. Sofia was hoping to hear some theories about death; however, the children were more focussed on what the animal did while it was alive. Sofia shifted from rushing to the next step in a project, to allowing the project to emerge and take shape over time.

### **From self conscious to confident**

The second key finding is: Participants shifted from feeling self conscious about their emergent curriculum practice, to practicing with confidence. Sahar shared an example of this shift, when explaining how she wanted to know the right answer. Sahar first asked her co-worker if there are rules about guns, and then tried to look in books about guns and kept

following the gun idea. Sahar was uncomfortable now knowing where the gun discussion would lead. Later Sahar was willing to try anything with the recipe development, the children chose ingredients, they chose how much of each, they chose baking time and they decided how successful the bake was. With each new recipe the children could build upon their previous work, and Sahar did not try to get to a good recipe she was more interested in children's thinking about recipes. Sahar shifted from being uncomfortable with the unknown to trusting both herself and the children.

The second example of this key finding is evident in Ingrid's documentation. In Ingrid's first example of documentation she was not ready to ask questions because she did not want to control Sam's idea. Rather than ask a question, Ingrid described herself as passive. In the interview Ingrid explained that it is necessary to ask open-ended questions that scaffold children's ideas. In her more recent documentation Ingrid suggested that the Barbie doll might be cold and asked what Ami could do about that. This question led to months of clothing design, that might not have happened without Ingrid's provocation. Ingrid shifted from feeling uncomfortable asking questions to intentionally using open-ended questions that scaffold the child's thinking.

The third example of this key finding comes from the second interview with Kim where she described her willingness to share her "worst" documentation. She explained that in the past she would not have shared her mistakes with others, because she would be embarrassed. Now Kim is more confident and able to share her "mistakes" with other educators. Kim said that she actively looks for opportunities to share her documentation to reflect with others and learn from different perspectives. Kim shifted from wanting to hide her mistakes to actively looking to share her older work to reflect upon it with peers.

One final example of this key finding comes from Sofia's story. When describing how comfortable she is with death, and gross topics, Sofia remembers how in the past she would not have explored the topic of death with children. She explained how when a class pet died, she quickly replaced it to avoid difficult questions because she would not know what to say. However, later in her experience Sofia was comfortable discussing concepts of death with children. When the children expressed their curiosity about the life of the dead animal, Sofia was able to accept the unresolved theories of death. Sofia shifted from censoring children's experiences to nurturing children's curiosity about difficult topics.

### **From rules-based to negotiated**

The third theme that was identified through an analysis of the data relates to how the educators shifted towards negotiating a participatory culture rather than a rules-based culture. The first example of a shift that supports this key finding was in Sahar's interview. She explicitly stated that she was asking for the rules of the classroom about gun play. She was also worried about knowing the right answer rather than knowing what the children were thinking. Later in her interview she was able to encourage negotiation among the children about possible changes to their recipes. Sahar 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.

The second example that supports this key finding was stated in Ingrid's first interview when she explains about using Barbies in the classroom. She said that she would never allow toys like Barbie dolls in the classroom because she thought that they had no value in an emergent curriculum. However, Ami was having trouble focusing in the class, so Ingrid asked her what her plan was instead of following her own rules. By breaking her own rules about commercial toys Ingrid allowed Ami to explain her plan, which led to an exploration about making clothes.

Ingrid shifted from using rigid rules that narrow children's opportunities to using negotiation with children to empower them in co-creating their learning.

The third example that supports this key finding was Raven's shift with mentoring. In her first interview Raven explain how her perspective on mentoring changed dramatically. At first Raven was a less experienced educator, who was learning from educators with more experience. She only considered that she was the one benefiting from this interaction. Later in her career she was the mentor and through her mentorship with colleagues and coworkers she realized that she was learning from mentoring as well. Raven's understanding of mentoring shifted from a one directional flow of information to a reciprocal exchange of information. Each participant of the mentoring or learning can have value and responsibility in co-creating the learning.

### **From evidence of teaching practice to a story of transformation**

The fourth and final theme focuses on how participants shifted from using documentation as physical evidence of what happened in the classroom to a more complex story of how children's thinking developed. The first shift that embodies this theme was evident in Raven's documentation. Raven's first example of documentation was an explanation of the daily activity. She explained how using balls in the pool was popular and the children were excited. Looking back Raven wished that she had explored what was motivating the children's excitement and perhaps understand their thinking. Raven explains that now she sees the purpose of documentation is to understand more. She writes fewer pieces of documentation but reflects deeper on what is happening and each child's context within the learning. Raven shifted from using documentation to justify that she was teaching in an emergent curriculum to using documentation to advocate for children's capabilities.

The second example of this theme is evident from both of Ingrid's pieces of documentation. Ingrid was impressed with Sam's knowledge about the combine harvester; however, in her documentation she was focusing on the display (including interesting picture shapes) and she limited the description of the event to what had happened. In her second piece of documentation, Ingrid developed an introductory documentation piece that captured the surprising exploration of clothes. She then continued to add to the documentation when the play changed which made it easier to understand how the child's ideas were developing. Ingrid shifted from using documentation to focus on her personal design skills to using documentation to support and motivate children's thinking.

The third example that supports this theme came from Kim's documentation. Kim's first piece of documentation was a 'gimmicky' designed pamphlet that focused more on Kim's sense of wit and humour than on children's ideas or thinking. She explained that she was new at the centre and wanted to show her personality by writing up the mud kitchen as a trendy new restaurant. Kim's later example of documentation is much more intentional. She writes down children's ideas about making soup and connects how their previous interests, such as, mixing potions and helping the school cook, contributed to the children's current plan to make their own soup. Kim shifted from focusing on informing and entertaining parents with her pedagogical documentation to recording and propelling the children's learning and exploration.

One final example of this theme was explained by Sofia during one of her interviews. Making thinking and learning visible was what she believed the focus of documentation was early in her career, as it had been explained to her many times. Her example was using scissors, taking pictures of children unsuccessfully using scissors, then cutting jagged lines and finally cutting straight lines successfully. More recently Sofia was focussed on the importance of what

she called “invisible thinking”. The concept of invisible thinking is not something that I as an educator have ever considered, however, Sofia explained that “invisible thinking” can be connected to a moral shift based on experiences. For example, children who have been supported in their investigation and discussion about death may have a shift in their empathy or understanding of living things. Before this experience a child may not have considered living things other than people to be significant, but after, they may stare a little longer trying to observe more closely. Sofia finds it difficult to make this change in thinking visible and debates whether she should try to document this. Some learning may too complex to be documented. Sofia has shifted from trying to make the children’s thinking visible to appreciating and accepting “invisible thinking”.

### **Conclusion**

When beginning this process and reflecting on how my practice has shifted throughout my career, I expected to hear stories of change that were profound yet predictable. As I engaged in the interview process, I was prepared to empathize with their struggle, but I was surprised to be so moved by their passion. In listening to reflections of experienced educators, I found the shifts they were sharing were often more profound than they realized. They told me how thankful they were for the opportunity to reflect and to be heard. Some said that they did not believe their work was serious enough to be researched, yet as we came to the end of our second interview, they recognized the depth of what they had shared.

What shifts occur in an educator's practice from knowing the parts of emergent curriculum to understanding the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum? This question

will have different results for each educator. The individual shifts for each educator include the following:

- Sahar shifted from being uncomfortable with the unknown to trusting both herself and the children.
- Sahar shifted from guiding children toward conventional knowledge to supporting and engaging in a negotiated curriculum.
- Sahar shifted from following a child-centered learning theme to being attentive to children's meaning when exploring their thinking.
- Raven shifted from making assumptions and generalizations about children's thinking to questioning children's explorations and the context of that learning.
- Raven's understanding of mentoring in emergent curriculum shifted from the belief that the mentor shares knowledge with those who are less experienced, to the understanding that reciprocal learning occurs in mentoring.
- Raven shifted from using documentation to justify that she was teaching in an emergent curriculum to using documentation to advocate for children's capabilities.
- Ingrid shifted from using documentation to show off her skills to using documentation to support and motivate children's thinking.
- Ingrid shifted from feeling uncomfortable asking questions to intentionally using open ended questions that scaffold the child's thinking.
- Ingrid shifted from using rigid rules that narrow children's opportunities to using negotiation with children to empower them in co-creating their learning.
- Kim shifted from focusing on informing and entertaining parents with her pedagogical documentation to recording and propelling the children's learning and exploration.

- Kim shifted from wanting to hide her mistakes to actively looking to share her older work to reflect upon it with peers.
- Kim shifted from thinking of projects as a themed learning module that are chosen by the educator to an understanding of projects as a flexible idea or concept being researched and explored by children with the support and guidance of an educator.
- Sofia shifted from censoring children's experiences to nurturing children's curiosity about difficult topics.
- Sofia shifted from rushing to the next step in a project, to allowing the project to emerge and take shape over time.
- Sofia has shifted from trying to make the children's thinking visible to appreciating and accepting invisible thinking.

An analysis of these individual shifts led to the identification of four consistent themes:

1. Participants shifted towards following the children's questions and allowing the questions to expand as they explore rather than asking what the children are interested in.
2. Participants shifted from feeling self conscious about their emergent curriculum practice, to practicing with confidence.
3. Participants shifted towards negotiating a participatory culture rather than a rules-based culture.
4. Participants shifted from using documentation as physical evidence of what happened in the classroom to a more complex story of how children's thinking developed.



As each educator discussed their shifts, they expressed their complex practices using metaphors and philosophical statements. What these educators have to say about practicing emergent curriculum can be inspirational and enlightening to others.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations of this research. Although generalizability of these findings was not the purpose of this study, a larger sample size may have yielded more generalizable shifts. All the participants practice within the Halifax Regional Municipality which may influence a likeness in their understanding of emergent curriculum. My experience as an educator who practices emergent curriculum may have influenced how I interpreted the data, although I was mindful of this bias, and made every attempt to negate its effect on my analysis.

### **Implications**

While designing this research study I wanted educators to be able to benefit from another educator's growth. People learn best from experiences and in many cases, mistakes; therefore, it is helpful to see the self-identified mistakes of other educators and what was learned. It is evident that education training does not sufficiently prepare educators for the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum. Most participants benefitted from reflective peer dialogue to consider their emergent curriculum understanding and practice. It appears that this was a catalyst for their change towards complexity. The findings of this research could help educators recognise that documentation is not only for the development of children's thinking. The findings suggest that reflecting on pedagogical documentation contributes to refining practice and developing a more complex understanding of emergent curriculum. Its processes may support the development of adult thinking as well. Professional development opportunities that

are based on reflective peer dialogue in connection with documentation could propel educators' growth towards more complex understanding and practice.

The words of wisdom the educators suggested in their interviews were both intellectual and philosophical. Valuable, transformative dialogue could come from discussing quotes from each participant, such as: Kim's "Laying the next track," or Sahar's "Having those eyes for children," Ingrid's "Break their own rules," Raven's "Doing more but less at the same time," and Sofia's "It's all about transforming thought?" Each participant came to conclusions that make me reflect on both my own practice and how I understand children's interaction with their learning environments.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix A**

Letter of invitation & informed consent

#### **Introduction**

Hello, my name is Matthew Sampson and I am a master's student of Child and Youth Study at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am doing a research study exploring educators' experiences with emergent curriculum. The purpose of this research is to discover what changes in an educator's experience as he or she practices emergent curriculum. My research question is: What shifts occur in an educator's practice from knowing the parts of emergent curriculum to understanding the complexity of practicing emergent curriculum?

I wish to invite you to be a participant in my study because I believe you meet the requirements for participation, and my research gives you a chance to share some of your work and your thought processes about it, and for us to consider it together.

#### **Recruitment Criteria**

This study requires educators with both education and experience in emergent curriculum. All participants will need an understanding of emergent curriculum and especially pedagogical documentation. Emergent curriculum knowledge from post-secondary course work, or study tours and workshops will be sufficient. Experience practicing emergent curriculum and developing pedagogical documentation for at least one year is necessary to ensure that participants will have examples of their work to examine for the study. We can discuss this before our first interview.

**Participant Requirements**

Participants will be asked to meet with me on two separate occasions within a month for about 45 minutes each time to discuss significant moments in their teaching practice. They will share two pieces of documentation, one for each interview - one that highlights their best work with children; where they feel they were able to examine aspects of their thinking and development and another that will demonstrate challenges, for example, a time when they felt that they were less successful in understanding the children's thinking. Participants are asked to make a digital copy of each piece of documentation prior to each interview. These pieces of documentation will help to provide focus for the interviews, and the copies will serve as reference points while I am preparing the research paper.

**Voluntary Participation**

All research is voluntary which means that you have the choice to participate and/or withdraw from this study at any time prior to the successful defence of this thesis. You also have the right to not answer any question during the interview, or at any other time. If at any point you are uncomfortable with anything, you have the right to withdraw from the study, which means that all information collected from your documentation and interviews will be removed from the data. I will remind you of this before and after each interview.

**Known Risks and Benefits**

This research will have a minimal risk to participants because the interview process is similar to your reflections on your own practice. You may feel uncomfortable to discuss challenges with me (the researcher); however, I am not evaluating your practice, I am studying your shifts in practice. It is also sometimes uncomfortable to see your conversations in print, but this can also be a helpful tool for reflecting on your own practice. This process of interviewing

and discussing your practice could be a catalyst for change and it may help you to shift your practice further. It could also help other educators who are struggling with emergent curriculum to see your journey and benefit from your growth.

### **Data Generation**

All data generated for this research which includes pedagogical documentation, interviews, and contact information will be stored in password protected files on the researcher's laptop. Only the committee and I will have access to this information at any time. After the successful defence of this thesis I will keep the data for five years and then it will be deleted. If this research leads to further publications the data may be reviewed in the future.

### **Procedures for Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Privacy**

Every effort will be made to maintain participants' confidentiality. I will not disclose any identifying information about you, the place where you work, or the children in your care. I will ensure that any information that is not related to the study that arises during our interviews will be kept confidential. This means that I will not repeat or disclose any information that is unrelated to the study with anyone. My thesis committee and I will be the only people who can access or read the transcripts from the interviews.

### **Dissemination**

Results of this study will be published in a master's level thesis document. Information from this study will be published and/or presented to academic and non-academic audiences via presentations or publications. Upon successful completion of this research study an electronic copy of the thesis will be available at the MSVU library and/or the CYS office.



**REB Clearance**

This research study has met the ethical standards of the Mount Saint Vincent University (University Research Ethics Board) protocol number 2018-032. If you have any questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak to someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board c/o Research and International Office, at 902 457 6350 or [research@msvu.ca](mailto:research@msvu.ca).

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [matthew.sampson@msvu.ca](mailto:matthew.sampson@msvu.ca) or by calling xxx-xxx-xxxx or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Christine McLean at [Christine.McLean@msvu.ca](mailto:Christine.McLean@msvu.ca) or by calling xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Signing below indicates that I understand the above information and give my consent to participate in this study.

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Participant’s Signature Date (day/month/year)

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Researcher’s Signature Date (day/month/year)

**Audio recording**

Interviews will be audio recorded. Please select one of the following options.

I consent to the audio recording: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

---

Participant’s Signature Date (day/month/year)

---

Researcher’s Signature Date (day/month/year)

**Pedagogical documentation**

I give my consent to have a digital copy of my pedagogical documentation used in this study. I understand that this documentation will be directly referred to in the interviews and parts may be published in the thesis. I realize that once the digital copy of the documentation is collected it will be transferred to password protected computers. I understand that the documentation will be kept confidential and personal information about it will not be released to anyone. I understand that all identifiers including age, gender, names, of anyone referred to in the documentation will be removed or replaced.

---

Participant's Signature Date (day/month/year)

---

Researcher's Signature Date (day/month/year)

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

Questions for interviews:

#### Interview 1

1. Tell me the story of your documentation... what's going on here?
2. Why did you document this?
3. Why did you choose to share this document as your best work?
4. How did this lead to deeper thinking?
5. What could other educators gain from examining this documentation?

#### Interview 2

1. Tell me the story of your documentation
2. Why did you document this?
3. Why did you choose this as your less successful example of documentation?
4. What do you think was missed in this work?
5. Looking back at your documentation, what advice would you give yourself?

What changed between the two examples of documentation?

1. Did you change?
2. Did the situation change?
3. Did the environment change?
4. Did your goals or intentions change?

#### Follow up questions

What advice would you give to teachers practicing emergent curriculum?

How do teachers change their environments to become more supportive of

children's curiosity and emergent interactions?

What is necessary in an environment for it to encourage emergent curriculum?

What challenges in the learning environment have you experienced, and how did you deal with these challenges?

How has your documentation changed?

How have your supports changed?

How has your understanding of emergent curriculum changed?