

Defining Forest School

Defining Forest School Part 2- What do you mean "Emergent Curriculum?"

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June is quickly slipping by, the solstice is approaching, summertime is almost upon us. What many of us do on a daily basis, as educators, parents, and students, will soon shift.

Some folks think the learning ends with the school year. Many of us, however, know that interest-led learning continues into the summer and all year long.

Here is a repost from fall 2015 offering some insight into the idea and reality of Emergent Curriculum. I take this into the work and play that I will be doing with children this summer, and use it as permission to take a step back and to follow the children's lead.

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Emergent Curriculum can be defined as a way of supporting learning that is based on the children's interest. Learning can occur naturally, and children thrive and learn best when their interests are considered and captured.

Okay. So what does that mean?

Emergent means trust:



gathering treasures for building fairy houses

Trusting the land and her creatures to provide provocations

Trusting the students to be inspired, to explore, to ask questions, to be interested and engaged

Trusting myself to be ready to ask questions that deepen a child's interest, and to bring along materials to extend a curiosity



drawing a map of the forest and their special places in it

Trusting that learning is happening even though the child is leading the process and deciding how deep the inquiry delves and how long it lasts

Emergent means noticing:

Noticing where the deer prints, the owl pellets, the mud puddles and ice floes are



pondering and comparing teeth, bones, seeds and shells

Noticing what children sink into so that I can ask about it, return to it, remind them of it when they need reminding



tying and testing an hour's worth of knots

Noticing when the students need me to step in to help keep their play safe and smart, and noticing when they need me to step back and say nothing at all

Emergent means time and space:

Time and space to nurture a child's understanding that their interests and inputs are valued and worth exploring more deeply

Time and space for the students to get to know each other, the land, their own abilities and passions



attempting to start a fire by rubbing two sticks together

Time and space to deeply explore an interest, be it imagining the life of a bear, attempting to identify every kind of mushroom the forest has to offer, or aiding in the decomposition of a fallen tree



looking for birds to feed (in between visits back and forth to the porcupine cave)

Emergent means asking questions:

Asking students open-ended questions like “What do you think happened?” or “Why do you think that is?”; “Do you think you can find a way to do that?” or “How do you think we can find out?”



trying to melt the ice in the sun

Asking myself how I can help nurture a certain path of inquiry, how I can help to feed a glimmering passion

Asking the members of the group their opinions and ideas so that our activities can reflect and feed their interests

Truly emergent curriculum happens when educators believe that children who wander, wonder and play are also learning. It happens when children's interests and passions are respected and nurtured. It happens when educators shift our agenda away from imparting knowledge that we consider worthy to showing students that we value their curiosity, problem solving, questions, and theories; when we say "Wow" and "Why do you think?" instead of "Let me tell you about that."



collaborating in the (mud) kitchen

It isn't always easy to believe that children are competent enough to lead their own learning, or to allow that each member of a group is learning, exploring, and making meaning of different subjects at their own pace. It isn't always easy to explain to visiting educators and questioning parents how this process that shifts the curriculum away from the adults into the hands of the children can work so well and be so rewarding and effective.

It isn't always easy to explain, but once we get into the forest, ensure students know how to make safe choices, step back and set them free there is no need to explain anymore. We watch the process unfold before us.



Emergent curriculum is always possible because children are always curious and interested in learning. We make it possible by getting into the forest and getting out of the way.