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Item Type	Working Paper
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Download date	2026-04-15 21:49:06
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.13012/85

Title of Paper; Going with the Flow: the possibilities of emergent curriculum

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Going with the Flow: The possibility of emergent curriculum

O'Síoráin, C. A & Casey, E. (2021)

Abstract

This article sets out to challenge Early Childhood Educators (in pre-school and infant class settings) in a critical level of reflection on what we have been doing in early childhood education, teaching and learning during the course of the pandemic. The reader will be asked questions to reflect upon and generate responses to prompt further engagement with the challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic. We mean to raise topics such as concepts of childhood and curriculum that will allow us as a collective to reimagine and action change to our practice. The use of language such as 'home-schooling' is also discussed for exploration. Covid 19 has been stressful in a variety of ways, and professionally we have realised how our education practices and structures have not consistently supported the education of our most vulnerable. Somewhere we hear a mantra, maybe in the back of our minds, saying "go with the flow". But... can we visualise a different approach, is it what we don't see that means we cannot do? This article asks that we, as Early Childhood Educators, open our minds to the possibility of leading education into the future with an emergent curriculum and playful pedagogues.

Education Today

It's been a difficult year and as this year 2021 continues things are not looking much better. We hate to be negative but...can we all agree on the following statement? Covid 19 is impacting on the learning experiences of everybody in education and especially of our very young learners (0-8 years) and those

vulnerable from diverse circumstances and additional learning needs (Asbury, Fox, Deniz, Code and Toseeb, 2021; Flynn, Keane, Davitt, McCauley, Heinz and Mac Ruairc, 2021; Nusser, 2021). While we continue to manage the challenges that this pandemic has presented, we are also offered an opportunity to reflect on what we have been doing in our practice and to make plans for a new energised approach. Making one small change might provide a better experience for all. Where can we begin?

One area we should consider relates to our approach to curriculum. In discussing curriculum, we refer to *The Primary School Curriculum and Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Sahlberg, Hasak, Rodriguez and Associates (2017) state that curriculum has the job of meeting the rapid changes of economic and societal demands. So, what will be the economic situation post-Covid? What demands will society have on us as educators and will it be any different than pre-Covid? Well that's a bit far away to be honest, we need immediate action! What we do know is that right now children and their families need us in our varying roles as educators, infant teachers and policy makers to be more inclusive, realistic, creative, and relational in our approach to teaching in this Covid 19 space.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs sustainable development goal 4 (SDG 4) seeks that we recognise the child as the rights bearer in education and provide inclusive and equitable quality education. The *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* is founded on 12 principles of learning and development and position the child as the focal point of the curriculum. These principles are the corner stones of our curriculum construction. All our planning for teaching and learning should reflect and uphold these values. So, a point to ponder in the context of the pandemic: how are we doing nationally in this task? Just because Covid 19 is here doesn't mean we stop looking at moving forward with these targets and principles. In fact, what Covid 19 has revealed is the extremely serious inequalities within the education system at large. Those children marginalised by family circumstances, social, economic, and additional needs (and their families) have fared worse during this pandemic and especially with the closure of our preschool services and primary schools (Darmody, 2020). This evidence suggests that while we may as individuals feel we are rising to the challenges of the pandemic, we can identify clear room for improvement.

Regularly, we hear of the plight of the new Covid 19 home-schooling parents and their children. The media posts show pictures and stories of juggling work, school, home life situations all at the family kitchen table. The stress builds when the Wi-Fi doesn't have the strength to bear the usage, the computer and laptop all in use for different zoom classes and meetings, parents and siblings all trying to help with challenging tasks given for 'homework'. These new home-schooling parents did not opt

in for this new approach to educating their children. Flynn, Keane, Davitt, McCauley, Heinz and Mac Ruairc (2021, p.1) provide evidence of 'negative psycho-social impacts' and the 'exceptional stress' experienced by families as they struggled to support their children's learning while they themselves transitioned to a new work life balance of working from home.

Home-Schooling

Parents under the constitution are the prime educators of their children and they have a constitutional right to educate their children within their own home. They do not have to follow the national curriculum or attend to regular school hours. What is required is that they register with Tusla and identify learning goals and demonstrate evidence of practice and learning achievements in their record keeping. This is set out in the Education Welfare Act (2000) under article 14. Home-schooled children are not required to participate in standardised tests or national examinations. When, on the 12th of March 2020, the government announced that all children would be learning from home they did not require parents to register as choosing to home-school. This means that what parents are doing is not officially home-schooling and their experiences (positive or negative) should not be associated with home-schooling. This may have a serious knock-on effect to education reform as home-schooling for some parents may be a good option. According to research (Neuman & Guterman, 2020) home-schooling is on the increase internationally and the benefits to children reflects the parent/guardian approach to education, which values the role of nature and sustainability. In their research Neuman & Guterman (2020) also found that home-schooling offered more possibilities in learning as it is always changing and never rigid in structure or experience.

Aesthetic Agency

Our national curricula, across all age ranges, values the child's natural sense of awe and wonder. Aesthetic has two meanings: beauty and the appreciation of beauty and/or the personal application of creativity to demonstrate artistic ability. Agency refers to the child's personal actions, ideas and movements that produces a self-desired result. Within the UNCRC we uphold the right of the child to 'act' for themselves. This is not a question of an actor on the stage but an understanding that children will use their own thought processes, play instincts and mental play scenarios to direct their decisions and understandings of the world they live in. von Bonsdorff (2018, p.129) argues 'Aesthetic agency is a way of practicing imagination: exploring the world and creating possibilities. It is then important to be precise about what we mean by imagination'. von Bonsdorff (2018, p.130) further suggests

Play and imagination are ways of making sense and making self: ontologically and existentially relevant practices and modes whereby the child understands the world, creates a life-world, and makes herself visible in that world...knowledge has to be construed and it concerns facts and theories as well as words and worlds. When one does not know, one has to imagine, and imagination is stimulated by themes that are important to one's companions. Curiosity and

creativity go together: a will to explore and a will to create and contribute. Play is, among other things the sharing of imagination.

Imaginings help children to locate understanding. Have we allowed this natural process to happen in how we have planned for and supported parents in their 'home-schooling'?

Now is a time and an opportunity to revisit and reflect critically on our philosophy of teaching and learning for very young children. Let's stop what we are doing and ask ourselves some very important questions. Over the course of the past year have our plans and teaching upheld the uniqueness of the child? What does this mean now in this pandemic?

Many educators and teachers have stated how stressful transitioning to distant and on-line teaching has been; getting packs ready and sent to homes for parents to take a lead. Scanning texts and worksheets to email for 'home-schooling' has created a new route to education. How have we supported the natural awe and wonder of the child in this new learning situation? Have we thought about that first or have we thought about the missed opportunities of being in our education settings? What are the natural education places and spaces of young children? What is the natural curriculum for young children?

Curriculum

Is what we are seeing in this pandemic crisis a result of a rigid system? A lack of flexible approaches to the possibilities of curriculum? In early childhood and teacher education there is much focus on what educators/teachers do in the process of planning for teaching and learning. How curriculum is presented, during initial teacher education and professional learning, influences our definition of 'the curriculum'. We also need to address our own tendency to rely on structure and documentation when faced with planning. If we suggest that you as an educator/teacher develop your professional agency in your approach to planning what will be your response? Do early childhood education students, student teachers and practiced teachers want to think deeply around how, why, for whom or, faced with a heavy burden of assessment do they want a 'quick fix' and rigid structure? So, if you are planning next month's schedule and lessons, stop and ask yourself one question, "what does curriculum mean to you?" We learn during curriculum studies modules about different perspective on curricula (O. N. Saracho & B. Spodex, 2001; S. MacBlain, 2018) that are recognised as;

- 'intended curriculum'- that which school community/policy/plans has identified as important.
- 'written'- laid out as the minimum required level of skills
- 'implemented' – based on the intended and implemented in practice
- 'achieved' – evidenced skills realised and practiced
- 'hidden' – unintended emergence of personal values and abilities

Looney (2014) argues that curriculum aims are rarely a good guide to the actual learning experiences of the learner. Further she posits that curriculum is a social construct. So where is the language of and construction of childhood, inclusion, equality, and equity within 'curriculum'? We need to look at our teaching and practice circumstances and the circumstances of our learners today. We need to refresh our ideas of curriculum. Is curriculum about making sure that the child engages with the subjects and knows how to do 'stuff'? Or can we approach it from co-construction? Would emergent curriculum help in this time of crisis? Can we 'go with the learner flow'? Can we let the child and family own the learning path? In conferencing with learners and their families can we seek how they would generate positive experiences in identified 21st century skills, related to family life and circumstances in the here and now;

- learning skills - learning to explore, learning to do, learning to share ideas, learning to live together and respect difference, learning to grow into unique individuals and collaborative partners.
- literacy skills – family focused intergenerational literacy values, generating family-based literacy projects that strengthen family discourse and fact-finding patterns of behaviour, learning to debate in a critical but harmonious manner; practice agreed, collaborative publishing on a safe internet/media platform; supporting intergenerational learning in use of technology.
- life skills – planning together for current and future events, monitoring involvements and duties, developing support structures to enhance completion of co-operative tasks, identify distractions and prioritise focus, creating social pathways and encounters that protect health and well-being but foster social learning and engagement with extended family and friends.

What we need to acknowledge

We have made good efforts, teachers and parents have worked hard to make immediate changes to support many children, but we can do better. The spaces and places of learning are no longer within our school control. We know that the learning environment is critical to the quality of the learning experience. We are no longer in 'command' of the learning environment. Children are learning in very different situations and circumstances and some children are, reportedly, not making sufficient progress because the online learning space does not work for them. We need to help families support learning from a variety of places and spaces within their homes, not just the kitchen table. We are, after all, partners to families in the education of their children. While we recognise the obvious challenges of learning from home can we also pause to ponder the possibilities? We are presented with the opportunity to engage directly with children in their home environments. Instead of viewing this in purely negative terms can we try to tap into the potential for new learning possibilities. There is an opportunity being presented to us here to learn more about children and from children in their own environments with the distractions of classroom management put to the side. The challenges are obvious, the opportunities maybe less so but although the more tantalising for this.

Education possibilities in a time of Covid

The questions to ask ourselves might be “what should curriculum be in a time of Covid?” “What do children want from curriculum now, at this moment in time, and tomorrow - post-Covid?” “What do their families want?” This is where emergent curriculum could add to a change approach to our practice for better inclusion, equality, and equity. Emergent Curriculum (Jones & Nimmo, 1994) is about the possibilities of learning, built on the child’s reference to the immediate world in which they live. The philosophy of an emergent curriculum is that it is relationship driven. It creates a proactive, responsive, meaningful opportunity for collaborating within a unique learning time and space. From the get-go the child brings their identity and capabilities to the relationship of learning and offers the teacher/parent with a flexible and relational approach to co-constructing meaning. In the emergent curriculum space, a teacher looks to the person most in tune with the child – the parent- and with the parent and the child, they partner a plan for the possibilities of learning within the environment of the home, garden and community (restricted, 5km, on-line and off-line). The continued language used in mainstream media and education circles of parents as ‘home-schoolers’ of their children, as we have evidenced above, is not the case. The teacher is still in the role of co-educator but now the relationship between teacher and parent as co-educators is vital. We can no longer pay lip service to the idea that the parent is the primary educator of their own child. We need to firmly address the need to support parents in this role.

What can we do to support parents?

We are all heading back to school. We are informed that we should continue to social distance and keep our guards up and not let Covid 19 into our education settings. Two priorities for the coming school year will be keeping schools safe spaces in the face of new Covid 19 variants and meeting the needs of pupils and staff. These needs have changed over the pandemic. We must re-examine our understanding of ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ children in the context of experiences outside the normal routines of the school day. However, we also must honestly reflect on how these experiences have impacted on our own mental health and confidence in our abilities. We have missed each other. We can acknowledge the stress and strains of this pandemic and the impact of this in our personal and family situations. We must acknowledge that we need some relief, a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of joyful experiences. As we return to less restricted situations and school life, we must relearn our routines and schedules, or do we? What can we change that will support us in elevating our values in life, education, and the principles of our practices? As early childhood educators we need to be playful. Pinchover, S. (2017) argues that

individuals who are playful are typically funny, humorous, spontaneous, and are more likely to act in a playful manner by joking, teasing, clowning, and being silly. Existing

studies have shown that adults' playfulness is related to well-being, sense of happiness, relationship satisfaction, and higher self-estimates of ingenuity and creativity (Proyer, 2012, 2013, 2014; Bateson et al., 2013; Yue et al., 2016)...Two recent studies have focused on parental playfulness. A study from 32 young adult's perspective reported a positive relation between parents' playfulness and children's adoptive behavior (Shen et al., 2017). Similarly, Menshe-Grinberg and Atzaba-Poria (2017) found that parental playfulness moderate the relation between parental behaviors and child's negativity.

Pinchover (2017) argues that research has highlighted the relationship between the teacher/educator's playfulness and better learning outcomes for children in their approach to creative thinking and problem solving. She cites research that evidences that the playful behaviours of teacher/educators enable children to express their emotional, creative, and unique selves and support 'alleviating emotional distress'. Singer (2013) draws attention to 'teacherly' behaviours and cautions that this instils a rigid set of principles that limit play possibilities and power structures begin to emerge. Therefore, according to Gray (2013), children dislike school. He suggests that school is somewhat prison like where certain tasks are 'forced'. So, let's look back and ask have we approached the 'home-schooling' experience with a 'functionalist' mindset, always looking for a pre-determined outcome?

Our role as educators is to encourage playfulness in families and support parents in valuing the playful engagements they have with their children. Time is an issue across all families and encouraging families to ensure play is safeguarded and fostered as the optimal developmental background to positive child outcomes is beneficial to our goals within education and care. Play is free and does not need to cost anything so even the most impoverished of homes and families can be supported to be playful and create play situation for their children.

The Growing Up in Ireland study (GUI) indicates a serious issue with childhood obesity in Ireland among children under 9 years of age. This can be attended to through play, when play brings children outside or keeps them mobile, sedentary lifestyles have serious negative impacts on children's lives and evidence suggests leads to "obesity, violent and aggressive behaviour, depression, anxiety, earlier sexual behaviours, poor academic performance and self-image, nightmares, tobacco and substance abuse" (Milteer and Ginsburg, 2018, p.208). Coyl-Shepherd, D. D. & Hanlon, C. (2013) have highlighted the different roles family member take in the care-giving and play activities of their children "More often mother-child relationships involve didactic and caregiving interactions in which maternal warmth and sensitivity are associated with positive child outcomes, while father-child interactions more typically involve playful exchanges that include teasing, rough-and-tumble play (RTP), and encouragement of risk taking" (p.255). These role definitions are important as they build the attachments and security systems within the child. It is important to remember the diversity of families in Ireland and the world today, not all parents/guardians are male and female dyads.

Pinchover (2017) posits that a playful teacher/educator can help children in transitions and strengthen attachments and security. Play is the answer to building and strengthening ourselves through this pandemic. Why, because it is what children do naturally. Gray (2013) has written about the detrimental effects of the decline of play on health and mental states of children. So, the answer to moving forward in supporting parents is evidenced from Gray (2013) and Pinchover (2017), we need to be more playful. We could start by educating ourselves and parents of the benefits of emergent curriculum.

We are not throwing the baby out with the bath water

Of course, we are suggesting here that you maintain respect for the agreed practices, policies, and curriculum commitments set out by the setting/school community, however, one small tiny attainable change in approach could lead to new and innovative practice. The power of educational change and quality child outcomes is in the quality of relationship of the educators, the task here is to bring greater supports to the home setting during times of crises. Would an 'emergent' curriculum enable us as partners in education to work smarter? It's important to plan for learning and that is key in an emergent curriculum, because 'while we go with the child's flow' we are creating possibilities for skills development and learning enhancement based on the child's guided instruction. Parents and teachers do not take a back seat in an emergent curriculum, they must be actively pursuing creative possibilities that will respond to the child's innate learning interests and needs in the context of the environment of the child. Home is not school after all.

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