



URBAN CHILD ACADEMY

## Emergent Curriculum in Relationship-Driven Learning Environments

*What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught, rather, it is in large part due to the children's own doing, as a consequence of their activities and our resources.*

—Loris Malaguzzi, *The Hundred Languages of Children*

### **Creating a flexible, relationship-driven learning environment:**

Children construct their own knowledge through a carefully planned curriculum that engages and builds upon the child's current knowledge, recognizing that knowledge cannot simply be provided for the child. Our curriculum, often emergent in nature, is based on the interests of the children. When learning is the product of the child's guided construction rather than simply the teacher's transmission and the child's absorption, learning becomes individualized. Most importantly, teaching becomes a two-way relationship in which the teacher's understanding of the child is just as important as the child's understanding of the teacher.

Emergent curriculum is not a free-for-all. It requires that teachers actively seek out and chase the interests of the children. This kind of teaching environment demands a high degree of trust in the teacher's creative abilities, and envisions an image of the child as someone actively seeking knowledge. It is a perspective that turns structured curriculum, with predetermined outcomes, on its head. A standardized curriculum that is designed to replicate outcomes often eliminates all possibility of spontaneous inquiry, stealing potential moments of learning from students in a cookie-cutter approach to education in the classroom. To teach well, educators must ensure that creativity and innovation are always present. Although good teaching requires organization and routines, it is never inflexible and rarely routine. It dances with surprise. It pursues wonder. It finds joy at every turn.

### **Creating environments that reflect our values:**



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Surprisingly, in our efforts to define best practices, we seldom address the vision of how our values are communicated through our practice. Once we get beyond standards in literacy and numeracy, what do we hope to achieve? What kind of culture do we want the children to experience in our school?

One thing we know for certain is that students thrive in a school environment where the teachers themselves are thriving. The best schools nurture the teachers who work there as well as the students who learn within the walls. Learning from our colleagues deserves time and attention, as it opens up new ideas about what professional development should be.

### **Creating environments that foster creativity:**

Recognizing that at the very core of creativity is our desire to express ourselves, we create environments that inspire and support creative thinking and invention. If building and sustaining relationships are to be the foundation of a learning community, then creativity must always be present. Creativity is the conduit—the instrument that allows us to communicate with and understand others. Teachers place great emphasis on using materials and activities that provoke investigation and group learning.

### **Fostering creativity through investigations:**

Teachers collaborate and communicate about the interests of the children and work going on in the classroom. Although investigations often begin with children representing what they know, it is the process of creating—the enjoyment of creating together—that is at the forefront of the endeavor. Flexible environments allow teachers to be responsive to the interests of the children, freeing them to construct knowledge together. To be sure, the teachers already have an activity planned for the daily circle time; they set it aside to pursue knowledge on a subject that has sparked the children's imaginations.

### **Celebrating the child's identity:**



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Those of us who have been fortunate to teach for years in early childhood know well the elation we experience when our teaching goes well—when everything clicks into place. Our students share this same feeling when they experience success. This sense and level of satisfaction children experience creates an appetite for learning, a hunger to do it again—and again and again.

Project work and investigations easily lend themselves to fostering a child’s sense of identity. As all teachers and parents know, there is a big difference between what a child is capable of doing and what a child is willing to do. You cannot teach someone who does not want to learn or someone who does not believe he or she can learn. If we want to promote the hunger for learning, then we should create environments in which students and teachers feel safe to venture beyond what is already known—environments that reflect our values and celebrate students as uniquely creative individuals.

*Creativity seems to emerge from multiple experiences, coupled with a well-supported development of personal resources, including a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known.*

—Loris Malaguzzi, *The Hundred Languages of Children*