



Education System

Emergent Curriculum

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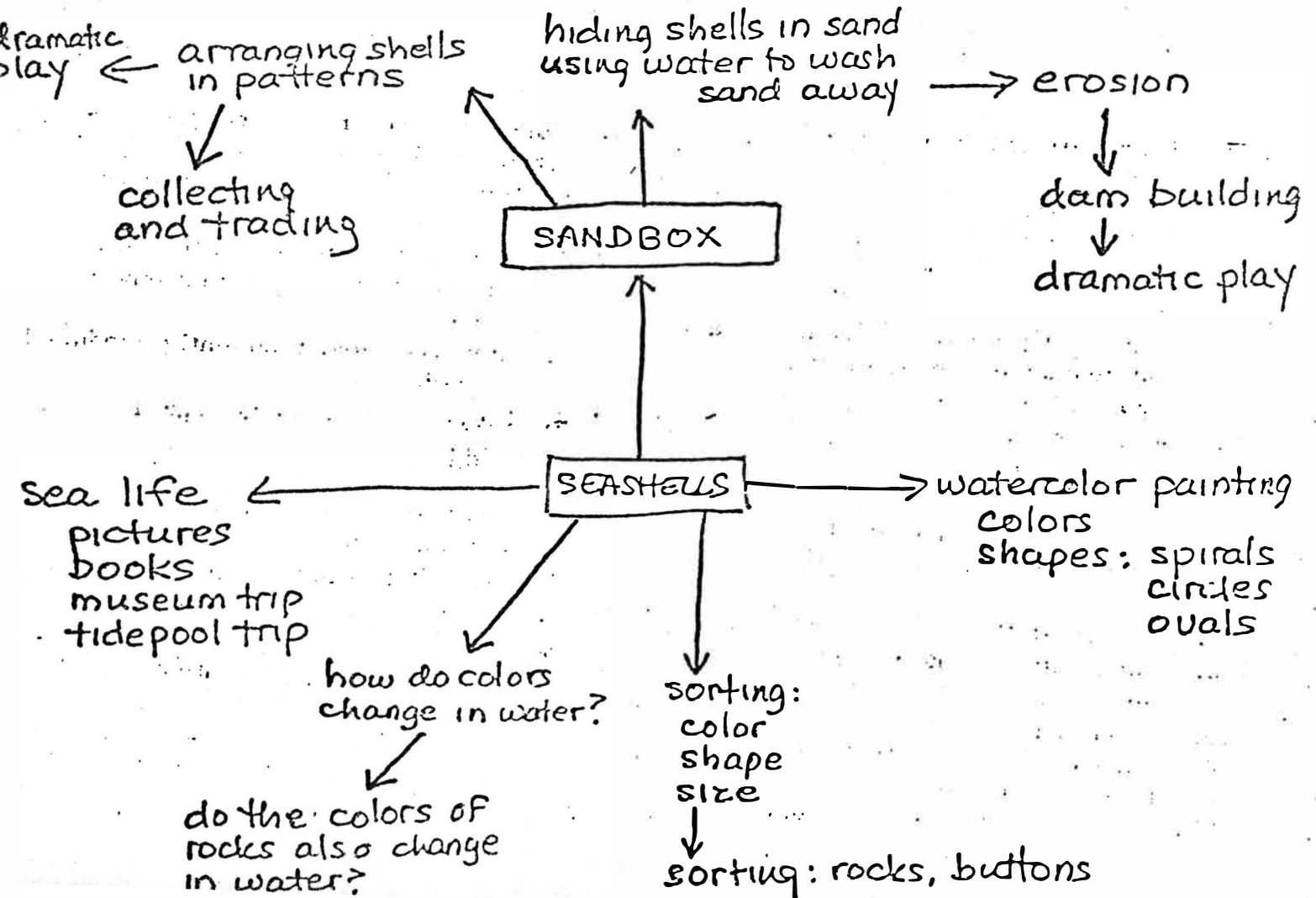
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EMERGENT CURRICULUM

Betty Jones

In explaining the emergent curriculum process, I find that I keep going back to the Muffield Junior Science Series Teachers Guides 1 and 2 (London: Collins, 1967). What they do particularly well is to give diagrams of the ways in which curriculum grows or emerges from a starting point; for example, the teacher brings in a collection of seashells. Some children put them in water to see how the colors change; some try sorting them by color or by shape or by size; some paint seashell shapes; some become interested in other things that live in the sea; interest in the sandbox is re-stimulated when the children are permitted to use some of the shells in the sand, with water. A diagram of this experience might look something like this:



The point of these developments is that the teacher did not plan them all in advance. She brought in some interesting materials, which she was interested in, and she had some ideas of the kinds of learning that might result. While she made some suggestions to the children, she also listened to them and watched them to see what their ideas were and what they were most interested in. In this process, new curriculum ideas developed, some by the children themselves.

The implementation of an emergent curriculum implies a rather different approach than pre-planning a curriculum in detail. All members of the teaching staff need to be trusted as being knowledgeable, interesting adults who have a lot of things they can teach to children. Curriculum begins with the ideas of this staff at this time - What interests you in the world? What would you like to do with children? They need to try these ideas and pay attention to what happens, then evaluating and planning further activities. This implies that the staff meets together regularly and does considerable talking about individual children and their interests and needs, as well as about activities. It also implies that much of the "teaching" which takes place consists of bringing in materials for children to explore, and activities in which the adult participates which are available to children by choice. A relatively small portion of the day involves direct teaching of the whole group. In other words, each member of the staff may prepare an activity and all of these are simultaneously available to children, over a long free-choice period.

Goals for children's learning are met not by a sequenced series of lessons on colors and shapes, for example, but by giving children the opportunity for many different experiences with things of different colors and shapes, and by talking with children informally about the colors and shapes of the things they are playing or working with. Piaget has made it clear

that children need much direct sensory experience with things before words make real sense to them. Generally it is more interesting to both adults and children if curriculum materials are chosen not just for abstract properties like color or shape but for other interesting characteristics as well. Buttons, shells, and blocks all have color and shape properties, but you can do other things with them and learn about those things too.

It is most helpful in implementing such a curriculum if (1) teaching staff members have opportunities to observe individual children carefully - what they do and say and are interested in, what they really seem to understand; and (2) teaching staff members have opportunities to look at themselves as learners. In-service workshops which get adults interacting directly with materials, making choices in a free-choice environment, and then talking about the experience, are more useful for this purpose than lectures. Talking about adults' individual interests apart from teaching children: What do you do in your free time? What are you learning about? What do you enjoy doing with your hands? How do you learn best? is another approach to paying attention to individual differences and also to suggesting ideas for what each adult might share with children. Quality of curriculum, in this approach, depends not on excellence of planning but on continuing staff development. Teachers need to be supported in their decision-making.

This curriculum approach cannot be contained in detailed lesson plans. Staff can make sketchy, flexible plans in advance; but if more detailed curriculum records are needed, they should be written after the fact, not before, because an emergent curriculum is full of surprises.

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