The Plan

Building on Children’s Interests

During outdoor playtime four-year-old Angela discovers a loose metal nut about half an inch in diameter. She shows the nut to her teacher.

Angela: Look what I found. It looks just like the big one on our workbench.

Teacher: Yes, it sure does, Angela. It’s called a nut.

Angela: I wonder where it came from.

Teacher: Where do you think it may have come from?

Angela: Well, actually it is the same as the ones in the workbench inside.

Teacher: This nut looks very similar to the nuts and bolts inside. I think this nut might be bigger than the nuts and bolts we have inside.

Angela: Maybe it came off of something out here.

Teacher: What do you think it is from?

Angela: Umm. I don’t know—something out here.

Teacher: Maybe you should check.

Angela: Okay.

Holding the nut tight in her fist, Angela walks around, stopping to examine the play equipment, the tables, the parked trikes, and anything else she thinks might have a missing nut. She can find only bolts with nuts on the trikes. She spies a large Stop sign, puts her special treasure in her pocket so other children cannot see it, and sets up a roadblock for the busy trike riders so she can check the nuts and bolts on their trikes.

Edmund stops and asks her what she is doing, and she explains. Edmund says he needs to see the nut. When Angela shows it to him, he gets off his trike and starts helping her inspect the other trikes. They eventually find the one that is missing the nut. Other children, curious, crowd around.

While incidents such as this are common in early childhood settings, teachers may not listen for them, seize upon them, and build on them. When teachers do pay attention, these authentic events can spark emergent curriculum that builds on children’s interests. This kind of curriculum is different from a preplanned, “canned” thematic curriculum model. In emergent, or negotiated, curriculum, the child’s interest becomes the key focus and the child has various motivations for learning (Jones & Nimmo 1994). The motivations are intrinsic, from deep within, meaningful and compelling to the child. As such, the experience is authentic and ultimately very powerful.

This article outlines a plan that teachers, children, and families can easily initiate and follow to build on children’s interests. It is a process of learning about what a child or a class is interested in and then planning a positive authentic learning experience around and beyond that interest.

Teachers, children, and parents alike are the researchers in this process. All continuously observe and document the process and review the documentation to construct meaning (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). Documentation is the product that is collected by the researchers. It may include work samples, children’s photos, children’s dialogues, and the teacher’s written interpretations.

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The Plan

"The Plan," as it became known in my classroom, is a simple four-step process of investigation, circular in nature and often evolving or spinning off into new investigations. (See diagram below.) The Plan consists of:

1. **Sparks (provocations)**—Identify emerging ideas, look at children's interests, hold conversations, and provide experiences. Document the possibilities.

2. **Conversations**—Have conversations with interested participants (teachers, children, and parents), ask questions, document conversations through video recordings, tape recordings, teacher/parent dictation, or other ways. Ask "What do we already know? What do we wonder about? How can we learn more? What is the plan?"

3. **Opportunities and experiences**—Provide opportunities and experiences in both the classroom and the community for further investigation. Document those experiences.

4. **More questions and more theories**—Think further about the process. Document questions and theories.

In other words, teachers, children, and parents identify something of interest; we discuss what we know about it or what we want to know about it; we experience it or have opportunities to learn about the idea; and then we discuss what we did and either ask more questions or make new theories. We document our understandings throughout the whole process.

The initial spark can come from anywhere or anything. For example, we might overhear children talking about the lawn mower at the park. The class, or sometimes a smaller group of children, then sits down and devises a plan with the help of interested adults.

### Step 1: Sparks

Sparks can be things, phenomena, conversations—anything that provokes deeper thought. The sparks are what trigger a child (and adult) to want to know more, to investigate further. These sparks can occur at any time. They can be as simple as finding a pebble in one's shoe, grabbing an idea or story line from a book, or finding a nut on the playground. Young children have these sparks of interest all day long.

**How do teachers see/catch these sparks?**

I often hear teachers say, "How can I learn what the children are interested in?" or "How do we find out what the children want to know?" My response is always, "Talk with the children, listen to them, and observe." For some teachers, it can be difficult to sit back and trust that ideas will naturally emerge. But once teachers become familiar with the process, they begin noticing how easily sparks appear.

Teachers in preschools, Head Start programs, and public school classrooms are expected to meet state standards or curriculum content goals. It is possible (although sometimes challenging) to integrate these standards and goals into emergent themes. Teachers who know and understand the "big picture" of standards and goals are more likely to fit a topic or emerging idea/plan into the curriculum. They document the process of The Plan (through photographs as well as descriptive narrative) to provide evidence of meeting standards and content goals.

### Can we provoke the sparks?

Triggering sparks is sometimes helpful and can have exciting implications. Teachers can provoke children's thinking by suggesting ideas through stories, specific items, or experiences. Again, when a teacher is knowledgeable about standards and content goals, she knows when to provide appropriate sparks. For example, reading a book such as *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*, by Laura Numeroff, may trigger thinking and conversations about several different ideas (moose and what they eat and where they live, baking, puppet shows, painting, and others) as well as support literacy development. Owocki, in discussing teachable moments in literacy development, says, "Teachable moment strategies involve knowledgeably observing children and seeking out relevant opportunities to help them extend their understandings" (1999, 28).

Introducing an item into the classroom is another way of triggering sparks of thought. Watch children's eyes light...