



“Planning” an Emergent Curriculum

Bank Street College is deeply committed to a social constructivist theory of learning, which holds that children create meaning and develop intellectually, emotionally and socially as they interact with other people and the world around them. This means that teachers must take into account children’s life experiences and context, their development, and their relationships with one another as they plan learning activities in their classroom. Because

life with the imperative to create meaningful learning opportunities for the children in their classrooms. As they met regularly to plan for their students, they built a shell in which an interdisciplinary study, The Restaurant, could emerge. They did this by drawing from the considerable resources in their school and local communities, attending to interdisciplinary connections within the study, and deliberately creating space for the children’s curiosity to lead them in new directions.

Table	Server	Busser	Chef	Bartender	Cashier	Host
1	Peyton	Anastasia	Maile	Zoe	Sophia L.	
2	Kassidy	Kai	Maya	Zoe	Sophia L.	
3	Yuma	Leah	Chloe	Edgard	Sophia L.	Angelina
4	Dona	Javin	Ryan S.	Kenneth	Andrej	+ Sofia A.
5	Arthur	Wilder	Annabelle	Laura	Andrej	
6	Ryan S.					

The Happy Café’s duty chart.

Constructing a Shell

Emergent curriculum does not spring from nowhere. In order for it to work well, teachers must carefully determine the parameters of a study and clarify the concepts that the curriculum will enable the children to explore. Several weeks before they launched The Restaurant, Kristin and Sarah met to discuss the large themes that would undergird the study, as well as the many logistical supports that would need to be in place in order to pull it

learning happens for specific individuals, in particular settings and as a result of relationships, curriculum must both respond to those factors and emerge from them. Bank Street believes in an emergent approach to curriculum, which is borne from the interests and experiences of children. This means that no two studies ever look exactly the same, because what children study is driven by their own questions.

Often, this stance feels daunting and impractical to teachers when they are faced with the real world pressures of standards, testing and accountability. However, we know that children learn most deeply when they are connected to and take ownership of what they are studying. Sarah and Kristin’s restaurant curriculum provides an example of how two first grade teachers artfully navigated the demands of public school



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Table 6 at The Happy Café ready for new patrons to enjoy the colorful place settings, centerpieces, and atmosphere.



off. The teachers, for example, determined that students would learn about:

- **The interdependence of society by studying the various roles of those who work in restaurants, and by collaborating to open their own authentic restaurant (social studies)**
- **The diversity of their neighborhood by studying a range of restaurants and foods (social studies)**
- **The properties of food and the chemistry and physics of cooking by preparing their own food (science)**



The Happy Café displays some of the food items listed on their menu.

With these broad concepts in mind, the teachers began to build the structure of the study. The culminating event of the “restaurant days” served as the logistical marker to plan all the activities that would allow the students to run their own restaurant. Using backward planning, teachers mapped out the range of field trips to restaurants, and identified the

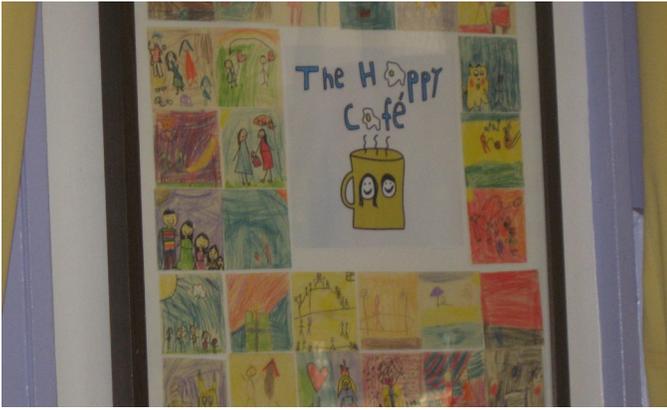
supports they would need from the principal, Peggy, and others in the school community, to ensure the study’s success.

Looking for Interdisciplinary Connections

A key strength of the emergent curriculum approach is its interdisciplinarity. Rather than studying discrete subjects in isolation from one another, emergent curriculum allows students to investigate the world as it presents itself: a tangled web of phenomena that can be understood through the lenses of math, language, social studies, science and art. As the teachers planned for The Restaurant, they were alert to these interdisciplinary opportunities, and sought to build children’s knowledge of multiple subjects within the thematic study. For example, the teachers saw that determining who would take on the various jobs to run the restaurant (the manager, the host, the servers, the cook, etc.) was a perfect opportunity to help children develop their persuasive writing skills. Children wrote short persuasive essays that explained 1) what jobs they would like to do, and 2) why they would be good at those jobs. Another opportunity was presented when the children opened their own restaurant at the end of the study. In order to seat guests, they had to count chairs, and use addition and subtraction to determine which parties could be seated at which tables. Since a restaurant serves food, it was a natural connection to engage students in preparation. Within the study of restaurants, a mini-study of food emerged. Students examined the different ways that food can be cooked.

Drawing from School and Community Resources

The Restaurant study was not only a result of the teachers’ hard work, but of the work of families, restaurant owners, and employees, and other school staff. The teachers at Midtown



The Happy Café's business sign

West stayed with their classes for two years - kindergarten through first grade. The restaurant curriculum was a culminating study that families anticipated for two academic years, and, as a result, many were more than willing to contribute. The teachers found ways to include parents as chaperones on the restaurant trips, as guest presenters when they had knowledge of the restaurant industry, and as helpers and patrons of the restaurant. Children also researched and presented information about restaurants in their own neighborhoods, and shared the many ways their families obtained food, including grocery stores, farmers' markets, bodegas, restaurants and home delivery. Incorporating families allowed the emergent curriculum to unfold based on the children's knowledge and experience with food, and tied what children were learning at school to the strengths they brought from home.

The Restaurant was also supported by local restaurants with which the school and the teachers had cultivated relationships over many years. Local restaurants gave children tours, invited them to interview their staff, and, in some cases, served them food. The students were exposed to a variety of cultures and foods through the field trips to local restaurants. One longtime restaurant participant came to the students' restaurant to eat. The student waiter, chef, and busser nervously served him. For the students it was like a "rock star" had come to the school, they appreciated the ways in which their work was validated. The restaurant owner was able to understand the importance of his role in the education of these students.

Following the Children

While Sarah and Kristin may have set the boundaries for the curriculum to emerge, they took great care to follow the children's lead. In one conversation they had about naming the restaurant, their attentiveness to and respect for the children's perspectives were on full display. Sarah used her planning meeting with Kristin and Peggy to sort through a dilemma: "How should we name the restaurant?" she wondered. Peggy asked her how they had done it in the past, and she replied that in the past the restaurant had a theme, and so it was easier to name. This year, the teachers had decided that a theme would be a distraction from the core restaurant study, so they had to approach the naming process differently. Sarah said, "I don't want to pigeonhole them [into a theme]." From her comment, it was clear that Sarah's focus was on the children, and their ownership of the restaurant. Later, she decided with Kristin and Peggy that the children would brainstorm collective class experiences, and try to name the restaurant out of their shared stories. In the end, the children named the restaurant "The Happy Café" and each contributed artwork to decorate the restaurant with images of what made them happy.

Guiding the Children

At the end of one of their meetings, Peggy asked Sarah to tell her about how the students were using a model they had created of the block on which the school was located. The model was made up of photos the class had taken of restaurants on the block, and then each was labeled on

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an index card. They had also created a key to identify the type of place (restaurant, coffee shop, store, etc.). Sarah indicated that although she wanted the children to play more with the map (which stood on a 4'X5' table in the classroom), she didn't feel they were playing with it very "richly." She explained that they were just marching some toy people around the block, but that it didn't go farther than that. In response, Peggy said to Sarah, "You're a good player. Why don't you offer a suggestion for how they might play with it? If the children choose not to take you up on the suggestion, that is fine, but it is okay to make suggestions."



Ingredients to the drinks at The Happy Café

This advice came only after Peggy had inquired in an open-ended way about Sarah's practice and had listened carefully to Sarah explain her dilemma. Peggy's response included a suggestion for how Sarah might engage the students more deeply but also communicated a set of values about the crucial role of the teacher in emergent curriculum. First, she noted that part of teaching includes "play" and that Sarah was well within her job description to play with the kids. Second, while she respected the children's autonomy by saying they had the choice not to take Sarah up on her suggestions, she stated that there was a role for the teacher to guide children's play and to introduce concepts to them through play. She conveyed to Sarah that the teacher's role in an emergent curriculum, which depends on children's knowledge, interest and willingness, requires thoughtful, deliberate planning and the teacher to actively participate.

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