

Making the Learning of Children Visible in Inquiry Based Classrooms – an evening with Dr. Stacey

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It is no secret that there is a tension between what we as professionals know is good practice and what politicians and bureaucrats, who have little knowledge of how children learn, have decided will take place in the classroom. Those of us who work in the field of early education understand that children learn best when they do work that is meaningful to them. Today, young children are feeling the effects of a “push down” curriculum with a narrow focus on academics that is intended to have them ready for school at an early age. There is a strong emphasis placed on reading and writing even for four year olds. Conversely, current research in the field of brain development and in the ways children learn supports a classroom with an emphasis on social emotional skills in which children explore ideas and concepts together and work through what Dr. Carol Anne Wien calls “cognitive knots”. Engaging in work that is stimulating and meaningful will help children be ready for school, and will provide longer-term benefits. Children’s learning is not about academics, but intellect (Katz 2015).

On May 4, members and guests of NJEEPRE, Inc. were treated to an intimate conversation with one of the leading experts in emergent curriculum in The Little Theater at Kean University. Dr. Susan Stacey joined the group from her home in Nova Scotia via web for a live presentation and conversation on inquiry-based learning for young children.

In an inquiry-based classroom, teachers don’t provide the answers, but instead support children in their investigations. These teachers do not “teach” in the traditional sense. When teachers provide time, materials, and opportunity, they create an environment that helps children to learn. Because inquiry-based learning is an organic process in which children spiral back and forth while attempting to solve problems, teachers must be in the habit of noticing what the children are doing and thinking about how they are learning. This noticing is essential as teachers reflect on and discuss with colleagues what is happening in the classroom. One of the most difficult things about being a teacher in an inquiry-based setting is to stand back and not intervene when children are struggling. Dr. Stacey stated that a teacher’s curiosity and questions about what the children are doing can be even more important than understanding what the children are doing.

Documentation of children’s learning allows teachers to think and grow. Teachers study it and use it for discussion and reflection. Pedagogical documentation is a much richer form of assessment than using checklists, a practice we observe in many early childhood classrooms. However, in order to be evidence of actual learning and growth, it must contain the teachers’ thinking. This makes it more than just a display and allows parents and others to see what the learning looks like in “real life”. For example, in the *Wonder of Learning* exhibit from the schools of Reggio Emilia, teachers used three different fonts on the documentation to ensure the learning was visible: one to describe what is

happening, one for the children's words, and another for the teachers' thinking. This type of documentation explains the process of learning.

NJEEPRES member Joan Buzick, spoke with Dr. Stacey about sharing documentation with parents. Stacey believes that parents and others who have access to documentation will find it easier to "buy-in" to the use of emergent curriculum because they can actually see the learning that is taking place. It is a friendly way to make visible the learning that children are doing.

Linda Howe, artist, teacher, and member of NJEEPRES, was especially interested in *The Movie Project*, documentation of a learning experience in a PreK classroom shared by Dr. Stacey. Ms. Howe brought up the varied materials the children used in the project, including sheets of acetate and an overhead projector. Dr. Stacey maintains that a good early childhood classroom is filled with opportunities for children to try new ways of doing things, to make discoveries, and to use materials they won't find at home. Teachers who spend the supply budget on loose parts at Home Depot rather than ordering materials from a catalog will find their children have more interesting and varied experiences. Often, today's early childhood classrooms look exactly the same, filled with similar materials and commercial products, and don't really reflect the children who live and work there.

Jenna Wagman, NJEEPRES board member, teaches young children in an urban charter school in New Jersey. She previously taught in Brooklyn in a progressive school embracing emergent curriculum. She spoke of the difference between the two settings. Jenna expressed her desire for those in charge of schools to understand why an inquiry-based approach to early childhood education is best for young children. She asked for ways to help communicate these ideas to stakeholders. In response, Dr. Stacey suggested several resources that might be helpful, including *The Play's the Thing* by Elizabeth Jones and Gretchen Reynolds, and Sir Ken Robinson's Ted Talk, *Do Schools Kill Creativity?*

As early childhood professionals we have a responsibility to help decision makers including school leaders, school board members, politicians, and parents understand that the best learning environments allow teachers to give children the freedom to be creative, solve problems, work together, and make mistakes. All children deserve these types of learning experiences to help them be curious, creative, and independent learners.

Jones, E., & Reynolds, G. (2011). *The plays the thing: Teachers roles in children's play*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Stacey, S. (2018). *Emergent curriculum in early childhood settings*. New York: Redleaf Press.

Stacey, S. (2011). *The Unscripted Classroom*. New York: Redleaf Press.

TedTalks – Ken Robinson, Do Schools Kill Creativity?

https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity

