

## The Kitchen Teacher and Emergent Curriculum: How it works

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Nurturing a culture of creativity requires not only paying attention to the interests, curiosity and projects that grow between children and their teachers but also paying attention to the ways we structure our days to enable the possibility of inventive thinking and creative adventures to emerge and catch fire.

When we decided as a staff [many many years ago] that we wanted to take an emergent approach to our learning with children, we also found that we had to actively explore ways to transform from our traditionally prescriptive style schedule (one directed by clocked transitions) to our current open format. During this shift, we invented the role of the Kitchen Teacher, who essentially acts as a steward or guide of our daily program routines. Each teacher has a set day when they are the Kitchen Teacher and knowing who the kitchen teacher is and who is teaching on the floor that day affects how we in the learning community anticipate and organize our daily course of action, in the same way that we would anticipate spending a day with a particular friend. We don't so much rely on the clock to tell us what to do but rather are motivated by the connections and opportunities that arise.

The Kitchen Teacher's focus is on greeting the families as they arrive, answering the phone, keeping track of special circumstances and medications, organizing snacks and lunch, and assisting children with self-care activities. It is a physically demanding job, yet one we find to be quite joyful because it is a teaching day of welcoming, taking time to talk with families, and preparing foods that we make with the children for our family-style meals. This role provides each teacher with experiences creating a strong sense of purpose and satisfaction in caring for the community at large and for each teacher. This happens in the same way that choosing to participate in daily rituals, like cooking and setting the table for lunch, provides a feeling of caring and pride about contributing to the community for each child.

I am learning that the intentional informality and flexibility of our program over all these years corresponds well with how we live outside in the big world. For example, our morning (8:45-9:30 or so) and afternoon snacks (around 3.00 p.m. onward) are offered to children as they are hungry. Children convene around our kitchen table in small groups. Sometimes children like to dine alone, other times children cozy up and share their seats to make room for more friends, and sometimes they have to wait for a spot. Lunch is the only time in the day when we schedule everyone to sit together much like a family dinner. The conversations are lively. We reflect on all the things we did during the morning, we make plans about what we might like to do in the afternoon, we tell knock-knock jokes, or we relax with friends.

Because we do not set our day according to the clock, the Kitchen Teacher role is very important for a couple of reasons. This teacher sets a general rhythm to the day, not only through a unique welcome but through the ways he or she chooses to get the necessary chores

done during the school day. Each teacher has her or his own personal style and rhythm and everyone (staff and children) balances with these differences. This method of engaging in our day and staying organized profoundly influences the culture of our school because it sets the tone for taking care of our basic needs in relationship with a person, rather than with a clock. In this way, children do not typically frame their organizational questions according to time (What time is project time? What time is free play? When will it be story time?). Instead, they tend to inquire about projects and people by asking questions and making plans (Who is the kitchen teacher today? I'd like to be a lunch helper. When Sadie [the teacher] gets here, I'd like to ask her to do sewing. I'm feeling like doing take apart--can we do that now? Who wants to go outside?). This subtle shift in questioning enables the children to inspire, initiate, and create their day based on their developing repertoire of short- and long-term projects, shared interests, and curiosities with peers and teachers. The time the children spend engaging in their plan is uninterrupted by a clocked itinerary demanding quick closures when perhaps they are only just delving below the surface of their inquiry into a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). We want to enable as much open time as possible to allow for the emergence of deep, meaningful, and memorable experiences.

(Excerpts from Rogers, Liz. "The Flexibility of Routines, Responses, and Teacher Roles." *The Unscripted Classroom: Emergent Curriculum in Action*. St. Paul: Redleaf, 2011. 69-85. Print.)