AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR'S EXPERIENCE WITH IMPLEMENTING AN EMERGENT CURRICULUM

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Abstract

This study employs the self-reflective method of autoethnography to shed light on the challenges of one early childhood educator's experiences with implementing an emergent curriculum, past and present. A reflective journal captured past and present experiences that were prompted by the reading of three professional documents. Double-entry journals are used to illustrate excerpts that prompted specific journal reflections. Themes arising from the journals included discussions about scheduling tensions, the pressure of time, micromanagement of the educator, inconsistent messaging and questioning what defines quality. Discussions of these themes resulted in several key understandings related to flexibility, taking a reflective stance, time for planning and reflection and valuing early childhood educators. Implications for professional practice are discussed, as well as the importance of considering quality from different viewpoints.

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Chapter One - Introduction and Background

Introduction

Today, many child care programs in North America practice an emergent pedagogical approach to learning (Wein, 2014). Yu-le (2004) defined such an approach to learning as "constructive curriculum in which teachers, students, teaching materials and environment interact in the context of dialogue… everything is developing" (p. 1). Emergent curriculum, according to O'Keefe (2013), is a contemporary way of educating children that provides opportunities to discover the world in relation to interests. Whaley (2007) added that emergent curriculum allows children to become co-creators (as cited in Wein, 2014). According to Jones (2012), the ultimate goal of an emergent curriculum is to respond to children's interests in open-ended ways that allow for independence and promotes a play-based environment.

An emergent pedagogical approach to learning also supports exploration of relevant and meaningful experiences for children, as they are able to connect and investigate problems and develop theories that are pertinent to their stage in life (Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2014; O'Keefe, 2013). Malaguzzi believed that the environment is the "third teacher" (as cited in Biermeier, 2015, para. 1) and the Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority (2014) explained that topics children show interest in often emerge from their home environment, interactions with peers and adults in their lives, and the experiences they encounter. Children lead their own learning and educators facilitate rather than transmit knowledge. Educators have an opportunity to build on children's strengths by using these strengths to support the development of new skills. By carefully observing interactions and documenting children's play, educators provide opportunities for further exploration and development as they support autonomy and self-expression in children (Baumer, 2013; O'Keefe, 2013).

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years (2014) identifies specific pedagogical approaches, which include: "responsive relationships, learning through exploration, play, and inquiry, educators as co-learners, environment as the third teacher, pedagogical documentation, reflective practice and collaborative inquiry" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 14). In a resource document for administrators, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years: For Leaders,* explains that "pedagogical approaches that support quality programs are those that provide environments in which children learn through exploration, play, and inquiry" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014b*,* p. 2). As an early childhood educator, I have come to believe in an emergent pedagogical approach to learning that follows children's interests and provides opportunities for inquiry-based learning and building a positive environment that involves educators, children, and families as equal participants. However, I have at times struggled to understand what an emergent pedagogical approach looked like, sounded like and felt like in the various settings in which I've worked. In this chapter, I situate myself and my research goals in relation to the purpose of my study, which aims to look more closely at emergent pedagogical approaches in the early years.

Who Am I?

My journey towards becoming an early childhood educator began during a Kindergarten Co-op placement in high school. Recognizing my interest in working with young children, my teacher suggested a second Co-op within a child care setting. I loved this placement even more! It was at that point that I knew I wanted to become an early childhood educator.

After completing my diploma in early childhood education, I worked full-time for three years then felt that I needed more education in the field so I returned to school and completed a Bachelor of Child Development. This degree focused on child development and provided me

with greater in-depth theoretical knowledge on the field of early childhood. It seemed that the more education I received, the more I fell in love with the field of early childhood. I had a passion for supporting not only children but also their families. However, my role as a front line staff member did not allow for me to spend ample time with families.

Soon after obtaining my degree, I began a new position as Supervisor of Before and After School Programs. My position consisted of greater administrative duties, but also allowed me to connect with families and spend as much time as needed to support them. Observing this difference, I began to critically reflect upon my experiences as a childhood educator, in particular the goals of an emergent pedagogical approach, for both myself as an educator and the children and families with which I worked. I also recalled my frustration with one particular document, the Toronto Children's Services Operating Criteria (2009), which at the time, felt contrary to my understandings of an emergent pedagogical approach.

Identification of the Problem

Toronto Children's Services Operating Criteria (2009) is an annual assessment tool that is also referred to as the Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement (ELCAQI) (City of Toronto, 1998-2017). For the purpose of my study, I refer to this document as the AQI. When I was practicing in the Toronto region, the AQI was defined as "a tool used to evaluate the City's expectations of quality. Annual assessments are a 'snap shot' of the environment and events that children are experiencing on the day of the assessment" (Toronto Children's Services Operating Criteria: Introduction, 2009, p. 4). Within a learning environment, the AQI does not evaluate the specific curriculum employed but rather focuses on the physical environment (e.g. materials and displays) and interactions. Updated and revised over time, the AQI currently evaluates the program delivery, physical environment, and interactions between educators and

children across a 5-point quality measurement scale (City of Toronto, Assessment for Quality Improvement - Q&A, 1998-2017). In 2009, a similar 4-point scale was used that ranged from *does not meet expectations* to *exceeds expectations.* The move to a 5-point scale followed a recommendation by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT) "to look at ways to assess the higher end of quality" (City of Toronto, Assessment for Quality Improvement - Q&A, 1998-2017, para. 4).

The AQI criteria are intended to ensure the delivery of high quality child care programs that enhance, nurture, and support children's development. The criteria also serve as a tool to evaluate child care classrooms, nutrition, safety, and quality of interactions. According to the City of Toronto Children's Services, the AQI it is not only an assessment tool that measures standards and guidelines for child care, but also a self-evaluative tool for child care providers (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvements: Introduction, 2014).

However, in my experience, the AQI appeared solely evaluative of program quality with little opportunity for self-evaluation by educators. I did not receive specific training pertaining to the AQI. Moreover, there were areas of the AQI that did not appear to support what I understood about emergent pedagogical approaches, such as the goal of following children's interests and planning for inquiry-based learning. I was confused as to how I could allow the children to lead their own learning while ensuring that I was complying with the AQI guidelines that required me to pre-plan a week in advance. The program plan, as outlined by the Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines (AQI, Preschool Guidelines) (2014) is "an information tool used to ensure all parties involved are aware of the learning experiences to which the children will be exposed" (p. 3). More often

than not, I found myself changing my pre-plans as new interests developed. I was required to document and explain changes in my program plan but I found it difficult to keep up with such changes. It felt as if time was taken away from the children simply to meet the requirement of ensuring that program plans always reflected the activities in the room.

My desire to take an emergent pedagogical approach often felt at odds with the AQI, leading me to wonder what emergent curriculum looked like and how it fit with the AQI. While I agreed with O'Keefe (2013) that children are believed to learn the most when planned experiences reflect their interests and strengths, I felt limited in how to do this while having to comply with the AQI. It is this perceived limitation that I sought to understand better through this study.

Other Governing Bodies for Quality in Early Childhood Education. In addition to the AQI, the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) sets professional standards for registered early childhood educators. Such standards are believed to ensure quality in child care programs. Registration is required to continue practicing as an early childhood educator. According to the CECE (2011), "The College was formed to protect the public interest and focuses on quality and standards in the practice of early childhood education" (p. 5). In doing so, the CECE (2011) is responsible for the following:

> 1. setting requirements for membership in the College, 2. maintaining a public register of early childhood educators, 3. establishing a code of ethics and standards of practice that all early childhood educators are accountable to meet, 4. investigating complaints about the conduct of its members and, if necessary, disciplining members, 5. promoting high standards and quality assurance with respect to early childhood educators. (p. 5)

Annually, I participate in professional development opportunities and continue to re-apply for my CECE membership, as it has become a requirement.

For most of my career, the child care programs in which I have worked in have been licensed under the Day Nurseries Act (DNA) (1990), which provides the criteria for measuring and supporting the quality of child care (e.g. ratios, staff qualifications, etc.) (The Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2006/2007, p. 42). In August of 2014, the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA) replaced the DNA (1990) and all new licenses were governed under the CCEYA (2014). The purpose of the CCEYA (2014) is "to foster the learning, development, health and well-being of children and to enhance their safety" (Purposes and Interpretation, Part 1, Subsection 1(1)). In doing so, the CCEYA aims to ensure all licensed child care programs have a program statement that reflects the stated belief within *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) that children are viewed as "competent, capable, curious and rich in potential" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 90).

There was a staggered implementation of the CCEYA (2014). While waiting for a new license, all child care programs had to ensure that they were in compliance with the CCEYA (2014), which mandated the new criteria for compliance. Prior to license expiry, child care centers remained under the governance of the DNA (1990) until it was time for license renewal. For example, the ratio for kindergarten age children under the DNA (1990) was one adult to every ten children. Under the CCEYA (2014) the ratio is one adult to thirteen children. Only after being re-inspected and licensed, child care centres were allowed to switch to the new ratio.

My current workplace is governed under the CCEYA (2014) but the AQI remains in use in the Toronto region to support the delivery of high quality child care programs. In my experience, the AQI seems to be the most detailed and perhaps most challenging criteria in

relation to the implementation of an emergent pedagogical approach to learning. This led me to wonder how the AQI set its quality standards and whether it limited an emergent pedagogical approach.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore my understandings of emergent curriculum. I focus on the term emergent curriculum rather than emergent pedagogies or emergent pedagogical approaches because this is the term with which I am most familiar from my early childhood education courses. It is also the term with which I began this project as I sought to better understand my practices as an early childhood educator. However, I also recognize that there are related ideas about play, interests and inquiry that speak to the broader terms of emergent pedagogies and emergent pedagogical approaches. Additionally, I explore what has influenced my understanding of emergent curriculum over time. I seek to raise questions about possible connections and disconnections between the AQI and emergent pedagogical approaches. This discussion may support educators, like myself, in better understanding how they can comply with guidelines such as the AQI while still implementing an emergent pedagogical approach to early learning.

Educators working with young children are often encouraged to be reflective practitioners. For example, *Excerpts from ELECT* (2014), a document that provides highlights of Ontario's Early Years Framework titled *Early Learning For Every Child Today* (ELECT), encourages educators to be reflective in their practice in order to engage in deeper thoughts and conversations about programming and children's well-being. O'Connor and Diggins (2002) defined reflective practice as the process of critically considering the motives and reasoning behind the implementation of specific curricula and teachings from multiple perspectives (as

cited in McFarland, Saunders, & Allen, 2009). Additionally, they recognized how current practices can change and morph in time based on new theories or ideologies within the field (as cited in McFarland et al., 2009, p. 506). O'Connor and Diggins (2002) also explained that reflective practice and self-reflection are tools that educators can use to challenge their beliefs within the field and alter their practice based on their new developed perspective (as cited in McFarland et al., 2009).

In the past, I felt unable to fully implement an emergent curriculum in my classroom due to the constraints of the AQI. As I spent further time in the field of early childhood, across different contexts within and outside of Toronto, I began to wonder if it was my lack of knowledge in emergent curriculum and/or the AQI that hindered my ability to recognize areas of interconnection? Thus, my main research question is "As an early childhood educator, what are my experiences with implementing an emergent curriculum, past and present?" To explore this question, I employed the self-reflective method of autoethnography to shed light on the challenges I experienced and how they could be channeled into positive outcomes in the future.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this work was informed by a constructivist, play-based approach to early childhood education. As previously noted, play serves a significant role in emergent curriculum as well as following the child's lead. As such, emergent curriculum and constructivism have similar beliefs and practices. For example, Chaille (2008) wrote,

> …the broad implications of being a constructivist teacher go way beyond 'science education'; the constructivist teacher does not see curriculum as segmented, and engages in a facilitative interaction that involves listening carefully - in the broadest sense of the word - to children's ideas and interests, as well as taking responsibility for provoking

> experimentation and problem solving by providing a rich environment in which children's work can tie place with respect and joy. (p. 4)

Emergent curriculum and constructivism also have similar goals in relation to valuing the voices and ideas of children. Chaille (2008) defined constructivism as "a theory of learning that posits that children construct knowledge through interaction between their own ideas and experiences in the social and physical world" (p. 5). Though not directly linked to emergent curriculum, several theorists in the 1900's believed in the importance of play and the connections children make during play. Platz and Arellano (2011) offered a historical overview of these key theorists and their beliefs. I draw upon their overview, as well as the work of the theorists mentioned, to consider how these time-tested theories, practices, and beliefs may have contributed to emergent curriculum.

To begin, Jean Rousseau believed in a child-centred curriculum that focused on children's interests, thereby allowing for education and development to occur naturally (Platz & Arellano, 2011). By doing so in a natural manner, Rousseau believed children would be able to make connections between what they were learning and their experiences (Platz & Arellano, 2011). Like Rousseau, Vygotsky (1930) identified that play has a great influence on children's development as well as their environment. He highlighted, "From the very first days of the child's development his activities acquire a meaning of their own in a system of social behaviour and, being directed towards a definite purpose, are refracted through the prism of the child's environment" (p. 16). Frede and Ackerman (2007) further highlighted Vygotsky and Piaget's theories of constructivism, stating their belief that constructivism fosters children's reasoning and problem-solving skills. Vygotsky (1930) also noted the importance of social interactions and

the ways children learn and develop. Vygotsky's theories influenced the practices of Reggio Emilia, which I will highlight below.

Platz and Arellano (2011) also summarized the work of John Comenius. Comenius believed children learn best through nature and that knowledge is acquired through real life experiences. According to Platz and Arellano (2011), Comenius believed that the material taught to children should be relevant to them and that play is a critical method of learning for children. Children's natural play allows them to explore and learn from their explorations. Furthermore, children develop social skills through play, which allows them to investigate any questions.

Dewey (1916) believed that education should be child-centred. Discussing Dewey's belief that children lose interest and confidence when forced to learn about a certain concept, Noddings (2012) explained, "They give up the all-important belief that education has something to do with the construction of personal meaning" (p. 32). As a result, children focus on getting the 'correct' answer and seek approval from teachers. Instead, Dewey believed in a non-traditional way of teaching where content is relevant and purposeful (Noddings, 2012). Dewey (1916) discussed how educators were constantly scrutinized and judged by institutional authorities and constrained by community expectations. He explained that these external forces, institutional authorities and the community, placed stress on educators and as a direct consequence, educators passed the same stressors onto the children in their care. This affects educator's authority or free will to work with their group of children outside of the pre-established rules and restrictions created by higher authorities (Dewey, 1916). Due to these impositions on educators, they are forced to focus on the bureaucracy of teaching rather than the main focus of education: positively connecting with their children and pupils on the subjects being explored. The educator's time is consumed with paperwork and maintaining a status quo,

therefore there is a disconnect in the relationship between the educator and student (Dewey, 1916).

Platz and Arellano (2011) highlighted Dewey's views on nature and play in conjunction with children's exploration. Dewey believed that through natural life experience, children will grow and mature and it is important for them to be viewed as active learners. He was also an advocator of play in education as he realized the emotional and psychological benefits for enhancing children's development. By allowing children to explore their theories, Dewey believed children will develop real life connections that will increase their learning and encourage them to continue to develop theories, conduct research and support decision making skills. Education should stem from the natural curiosity of children and educators should guide children when needed.

Another influential individual in the field of early childhood was Loris Malaguzzi, the first director of Reggio Emilia schools. Reggio Emilia employs a curriculum that is described as a "…unique body of theory and practice about working with young children and their families" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 1). Dewey's work inspired the Reggio Emilia curriculum, specifically his view of learning. Rinaldi (2006) highlighted Dewey's view on learning when discussing Reggio Emilia: "…learning is an active process and not a transmission of pre-packed knowledge. Knowledge, he argued, is constructed through children's activities, through pragmatic and emancipated experimentation and participation in activities" (p. 5). Like Dewey, Vygotsky's social learning theories are reflected in Reggio Emilia curriculum, with an emphasis on meaning-making with others. Drawing on Vygotsky, Rinaldi (2006) explained: "the child and the teacher are understood as co-constructors of knowledge and culture" (p. 5). Reggio Emilia educators not only use such theories as inspiration but also reflect and experiment with them to create meaning

and discover implications for pedagogical practice (Rinaldi, 2006). Reggio Emilia is described as "…an experience that embraces, in the words of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, 'a belief in the world' and offers hope for a renewed culture of childhood and for reclaiming the school as a public space of central importance to democratic societies" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 2).

The beliefs of Reggio Emilia greatly inspire an emergent curriculum (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). Building upon constructivism, the Reggio curriculum believes the child is a "capable participant in learning" and that "the image of the child is one of a confidant, capable person" (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011,p. 236). Sharing Dewey's belief of knowledge, Wein (2014) and Dodd-Nufrio (2011) explained that there is no transmission of knowledge by educators but rather children are producers of knowledge. Dodd-Nufrio (2011) underlined, "the child is a knowledge maker" (p. 236). Gandini (2012) recalled an interview with Malaguzzi (1971) in which he shared that, "what children learn does not follow as an automatic result of what is taught. Rather, it is in large part due to the children's own doing, as a consequence of their activities and own resources" (Edwards et al., 2012, p. 44). Biermeier (2015) further emphasized, "Children construct their own knowledge through a carefully planned curriculum that engages and builds the child's current knowledge, recognizing that knowledge cannot simply be provided for the child" (para. 6). Another key aspect to emergent curriculum is that it places great emphasis on building and sustaining relationships (Biermeier, 2015). In his interview with Gandini, Malaguzzi (1971) emphasized that relationships and learning coincide (Edwards et al., 2012).

It is evident that many educators throughout time have emphasized the importance of play for children's well-being and development, as well as the co-construction of knowledge. The theorists noted above postulate that education and experiences must be relevant to children in order to keep them engaged and encourage them to investigate their own inquiry. Emergent

curriculum has adopted many of these beliefs in its practice, and though not directly linked with a certain theorist, many articles that speak about emergent curriculum also speak about Reggio Emilia as an inspiration (Wein, 2014; Biermeier, 2015). I explore the beliefs of emergent curriculum in more detail in the next chapter.

Looking Ahead

In the next chapter, I review the research literature related to emergent curriculum, highlighting the benefits and challenges of implementing an emergent pedagogical approach to learning. I also explore the role of quality indicators within early childhood education. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology of autoethnography, including the research methods employed, data collection process, data analysis process, and ethical considerations. Chapter Four presents the themes that arose from my reflective journal where I pondered my past experiences in relation to documents that played a role in my work as an early childhood educator, including the AQI. In Chapter Five, I highlight four key understandings about emergent curriculum in relation to the themes developed in Chapter Four. I also present limitations of the study and explore recommendations for future research and implications for practice.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

My review of the literature begins with a consideration of the characteristics and defining features of emergent curriculum. Next, I highlight the benefits and challenges of implementing an emergent curriculum. Finally, I explore the role of quality standards in child care programs. I include literature sharing first-person stories based on real-life experiences to highlight educator voices. Throughout, I synthesize shared beliefs and differing views, as well as consider gaps within the literature to set the stage for my proposed research project.

What is Emergent Curriculum?

The emergence of emergent curriculum is outlined by Jones (2012). Reflecting on the role of curriculum in education, Jones (2012) highlighted a trajectory that began in the 1940's with the study of children's social and emotional development. In the 1950's, Erik Erikson's work on developmental stages suggested the need to thoughtfully plan learning environments for active and self-motivated children. The early 1960's discovery of Piaget and cognitive development, as well as national concern for equity, led to the development of Head Start programs in the United States of America and greater accountability regarding curriculum expectations. Jones (2012) also highlighted the emergence of the Reggio Emilia approach created by Loris Malaguzzi in 1960s, which she describes as having become a "world-renowned model of the documentation of children's active learning at play" by the 1990s (p. 67). Jones (2012) summarized: "The goal of emergent curriculum is to respond to every child's interests. Its practice is open-ended and self-directed. It depends on teacher initiative and intrinsic motivation, and it lends itself to a play-based environment" (p. 67). As noted in Chapter One, Biermeier (2015) identified building and sustaining relationships as a key aspect to emergent curriculum. Jones (2012) similarly discusses the need for educators to be responsive to children's interests.

According to Jones (2012), educators play a key role in the co-construction of the environment and development of the curriculum with children. The need to conduct observations and be reflective practitioners in order to plan next steps to support children's development is also conveyed in the literature (O'Keefe, 2013; Excerpts from "ELECT," 2014). Yu-le (2004) explained that emergent curriculum is the product of critical reflection. Coughlin and Baird (2013) within *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) also conveyed the importance of a "critical or essential friend" (p. 18) to provoke and challenge one's reflections and bring forward new perspectives.

Wein (2006) outlined four stages of teacher development in relation to emergent curriculum: challenged, novice, practicing, and master. The *Challenged Teacher* has an interest in implementing an emergent curriculum in the classroom but feels daunted by the task of putting it into action. Teachers in this stage are overwhelmed by the scope of an emergent curriculum and may need more resources to overcome stumbling blocks. The second stage, the *Novice Teacher*, refers to teachers who have implemented some change within the classroom but do not know how to keep the momentum. Although these teachers have minimal success with the concept, they have not fully embraced the understanding of what an emergent curriculum requires. The third stage, the *Practicing Teacher*, has good success in implementing an emergent curriculum along with making documentation visible. However, these teachers find the process of documentation overwhelming. Working alongside colleagues supports the *Practicing Teacher*'s efforts to implement emergent curriculum. The fourth stage, *Master Teacher*, refers to teachers who carefully document children's progress and constantly observe children's understanding. These teachers collaborate with colleagues, creating a community of support and dialogue. The documentation process is extremely regimented and roles are well defined. The learning environment is crafted and organized to motivate children's learning and stimulate

unlimited possibilities. Building upon the role of the educator, I turn next to the benefits of implementing an emergent curriculum.

Benefits of emergent curriculum. Several benefits have been linked to an emergent pedagogical approach to learning, which include supporting children's strengths, providing meaningful experiences, and extending learning beyond the classroom (Early Learning Centre Website, University of Toronto, 2017). Jones (2012) explained that an emergent pedagogical approach to learning is "built on the strengths of the child," and is attuned to each child's interest while remaining "open-ended and self-directed" (p. 67). The Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority (2014) highlighted several important benefits to an emergent pedagogical approach to learning which include: allowing children to be agents of their own learning, supporting decision-making and encouraging problem solving, providing opportunities for children to develop language skills through self-expression, challenging children to investigate their inquiries, questions, and theories about the world. An example of these benefits is found in Friedman and Soltero's (2006) description of a detailed study about snails that was sparked when a group of toddlers found a snail one day. Discussions arose about what snails eat, their habitat, how they feel, and much more. The educator fostered the children's interest in snails and as a result, the children learned about "the world of nature" (Friedman & Soltero, 2006, p. 2). Additional opportunities also arose for them to learn about one another.

Within *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), there are four foundations believed to be important for children to grow and flourish: belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression. These four foundations also coincide with the goals of implementing an emergent pedagogical approach to learning. Children are viewed as "competent, capable of complex thinking, curious, and rich in potential" (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2014a, p. 6). With this belief in mind, children are given the opportunity to be agents of their own learning, which encourages problem-solving, supports self-esteem, and builds trusting relationships.

Additionally, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) recognizes educators as those who support children's learning by creating environments and experiences that foster development. *Excerpts from "ELECT"* (2014) seek to emphasize a similar understanding: "children react to the outcomes of their investigations and create strategies for discovery. Play is the platform for inquiry and exploration" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 12). Educators must be responsive and knowledgeable as they support children's learning and investigations. Within *Think, Feel, Act* (2013), Clinton (2013) added that children flourish in environments that foster positive relationships, which the Canadian Council of Learning (2006) also identifies as a quality indicator. Friedman and Soltero (2006) described the story of a child who liked to push peers. Instead of disciplining the child, the teachers wanted to understand why the child was pushing peers. After meeting with the child's family, they realized that the child liked to watch things fall down. Knowing this, the educators modified the environment to support his interest in pushing, but within a positive focus that valued his interest. They gathered various objects and placed them on top in a climber outdoors and allowed the child to drop them. Eventually this satisfied the child's interest and the pushing stopped. This is an example of an educator who has observed, reflected, and responded to the child's needs.

Tal (2014) offered a powerful example of the benefits of employing an emergent curriculum. In this study, a third-year student teacher was attempting to apply an emergent pedagogical approach to learning in a traditional teaching environment. Data was drawn from documentation of her attempts, along with her final paper. Findings suggested the student

teacher's initial attempts to engage children in a traditional way failed, leading her to explore an emergent curriculum. In doing so, she applied the above approaches, which led the children to be interested in things that they were not fond of in the past. She challenged the children socially and academically and ensured she was following their lead. Tal (2014) explained: "listening to the children helped her understand what the children got out of their participation in the reading and what their interpretations of the book were" (p. 515). Implementing an emergent pedagogical approach to learning also allowed for deeper relationships between the children and student teacher. The children not only developed academically, but also socially. Children that struggled socially had a voice while others developed the confidence to tackle more challenging tasks. It is important to note that in this study, the other school teachers did not employ or carry on this pedagogical method. The student teacher was the only one in the school that did this and still managed to have a big impact on the children.

Similar to Tal (2014), Whaley (2007) identified benefits of implementing an emergent curriculum. Whaley (2007) outlined Jones and Nimmo's (1995) definition of emergent curriculum as: "children become co-creators of and co-players in the curriculum along with other members of the adult-child classroom community" (as cited in Whaley, 2007, p. 4). Whaley (2007) explained that one example of an emergent curriculum is the "project approach" (p. 4). In the project approach, children's investigations are incorporated into the curriculum. Projects can last for several weeks and educators continue to follow the children's lead as they program and provide materials that further the investigation. This approach supports various areas of development such as intellectual development, social skills, and a variety of skill sets that are interdisciplinary in nature and are important to children's future success. "Project work, like other forms of emergent curriculum, also meets many state standards, regardless of the grade

level, simply due to its investigative nature" (Whaley, 2007, p. 5). Teachers are able to cover an array of curriculum areas by implementing the project approach thus making it easier to comply with state standards.

Siry and Kremer (2011) similarly sought to incorporate and expand upon children's curricular investigations through a project approach. Their study examined children's thoughts about natural science and implementing provocations that stemmed from their ideas. This exploratory case study project began as a student teacher internship project for Isabelle, one of the authors. Isabelle drew upon children's pictures, interviews, and conversations with children. The participants included five girls and three boys in their second year of kindergarten. The data emerged from Isabelle's previous research where she examined children's science theories and included children's pictures, interviews and conversations with children. Siry and Kremer (2011) concluded, "young children's conceptualizations about such complex topics are often quite rich, and as we go beyond their everyday experiences we can try to build upon what they know and what they imagine to move towards investigating the science concepts themselves" (p. 653-654). They believed that finding out what children already know is a great tool that should be considered when designing curriculum as it encourages educators to expand children's current knowledge. Siry and Kremer (2011) also highlighted that children should be viewed as individuals that "hold creative, sophisticated ideas of phenomena that can be used and built upon in developing science activities" (p. 654). As noted earlier, a similar view is espoused by *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014). This valuing of children's ideas rings true with my view of children as an early childhood educator.

Challenges in implementing emergent curriculum. According to Wein (2006), educators' development and knowledge in emergent curriculum can present a challenge when

implementing a pedagogical approach to learning. For example, Wein (2006) describes the thoughts of the *Challenged Teacher*: "I like the idea of emergent curriculum but I don't seem to be doing it. I don't know how to do this. What do their interests look like anyway? What would I do if I found one? What should I do that is different from the way I normally do activities?" (p. 2). In my experience, I've similarly encountered individuals who argue that children do not benefit from such a pedagogical approach to learning as too much power is given to the child. Without adequate knowledge of emergent curriculum and its implementation, this approach is often viewed as simply playing all day. Yet, as Biermeier (2015) explained, "emergent curriculum is not a free-for-all. It requires that teachers actively seek out and chase the interests of the children" (para. 7). Yu-le (2004) further explained, "The traditional role of the teacher cannot meet the need of the emergent curriculum. The teacher is not a passive knowledge transmitter, but an active curriculum researcher and creator" (p. 6). Educators have a large role in facilitating learning without making it completely teacher-directed, a difficult concept for some, as it requires a lot of reflection, spontaneous planning, and following the children's lead. Educators may plan for the week but that quickly may change if the children's interests takes a different path than what was predicted (Fuleki & Reynolds, 2003).

Jones and Reynolds (1992) stated that "young children learn the most important things, not by being told, but by constructing knowledge for themselves in interaction with the physical world and with other children - and the way they do this is by playing" (as cited in Fuleki & Reynolds, 2003, p. 1). To make learning visible, educators can document children's play and use this documentation as a tool for educating families and others in the community. Documentation tells a story about how one provocation has led to learning, which many educators use to demonstrate active learning outcomes even though children may seem as they are only playing.

Documentation requires reflection and time as educators connect the dots and support the children's interest through further planning (Seitz, 2008; Excerpts from "ELECT," 2014). Emergent curriculum requires letting go of control and allowing children to direct the path of learning. Educators are then required to respond to interests by providing the tools and opportunities for children to continue their investigation (O'Keefe, 2013). This may challenge some therefore making it difficult to implement without adequate professional learning about documentation.

The lack of an adult's role in play affects children's creativity and imagination as adults play a key part in providing a variety of experiences and resources which support children to further investigate and extend their play (Baumer, 2013; O'Keefe, 2013). Having an emergent pedagogical approach requires educators to be actively involved in play and support emerging theories. Educators are challenged to be patient, flexible, sensitive, and show genuine interest in what the children are investigating as they become co-learners themselves (O'Keefe, 2013). Baldwin et al. (2009) questioned,

> With all of these seemingly contradictory goals and philosophies, is it possible to create positive and enticing environments that meet the developmental needs of preschoolers while also providing access to and understanding of the skills and knowledge outlined in early learning content standards? (p. 72)

Baldwin et al. (2009) described a method used for planning and assessment that aims to support both the implementation of emergent curriculum and educators' informed instructional decision-making. In this study, educator's observations "were used as the base of an assessment supported curriculum framework that would facilitate the documentation of content standards being addressed" (Baldwin et al., 2009, p. 73). Individuals (teachers, administrators, and university

faculty) were assigned a portion of the standards, which they were required to familiarize themselves with. They were asked to ensure that redundancy was eliminated, similar skills were aligned, and indicators were placed in similar categories. The collaborative synergy between teachers, administrators, and university faculty assisted in the implementation of a curriculum model regarding emerging developmental skills and content standards.

Baldwin et al. (2009) developed "a curriculum framework that utilizes children's interests in science topics, authentic assessment to support planning, and integration of early learning content standards" (p. 75). They found the development of the curriculum framework to be an effective way to address state standards while still employing programming that supports emergent curriculum. Though it was a challenge, in this example, educators' combined efforts made it possible to blend both practices while keeping children and pedagogical beliefs at the centre of discussions. Stemming from their understanding of child development, the research team decided that young children learn more efficiently and are more engaged when curriculum stems from their interests which led to the use of the Project Approach as noted previously. Together, they were able to develop a curriculum framework that reflected children's interests, bona fide assessments, which supported planning, and the integration of emergent curriculum.

As an early childhood educator, I have found that some topics of children's interests can be challenging for educators to confront. One such topic is illness or cancer. Wein, Keating, West, and Bigelow (2014) shared how Keating's experience with cancer was introduced to the children. As treatment resulted in obvious physical changes, Keating spoke openly with the children to maintain an honest dialogue. She told the children about her chemotherapy treatments, which led to further conversations about chemotherapy (e.g. What is chemotherapy? What impact does it have?). The children started to make hair for Keating but she refused to

wear it. She wanted to maintain her dignity without the added burden of another's distress at her appearance. Wein et al. (2014) wrote, “when compelling needs of children and adults intersect, it reminds us that the needs and rights of both must always be negotiated and balanced” (p. 96). Keating eventually wore a scarf hoping this solution would work for both her and the children. The children then did the same. However, after some time the children and Keating both decided to stop wearing the scarves. Keating was accepted as she was, without hair. Documentation of this process was shared with the children and families, creating community amongst the educators, children, and parents. Through the documentation, Wein et al. (2014) noted, “Such stories overturn stereotypes about what children can handle” (p. 91). While some educators may avoid a difficult topic, such as cancer, this study demonstrated the use of emergent curriculum to tackle a difficult topic with respect and an understanding of the children’s curiosity. Other educators, such as myself, may have never encountered this challenge but can learn a great deal from how Keating values her relationships with the children.

Another challenge explored by Wein and Stacey (2014) is that of scheduling in early childhood settings. They questioned what happens when educators step away from “the clock” (p. 13) and follow the natural formation of transitions that are set by the children. When adopting “production schedules” (p. 14), teachers dominated the environment and acted as timekeepers regardless of children’s involvement and interest in activities. When children were asked to tidy up and prepare for the next transition, the message sent to the children was that something more important needed to take place. Thus, the simple action of following a schedule has great impact on the children. In addition, each day’s routine was similar and expectations were the same. However, as Wein and Stacey (2014) suggested, “Many practitioners in high-quality early childhood settings work with open schedules that follow children’s interests and needs, and have

done so for much of this century" (p. 13). In one example, the clocks were removed from the classrooms, allowing the children to decide when transitions should occur. Educators kept a journal of the impact this had on them and the children. Initially, educators spoke to their frustrations when this change was first implemented. However, with time, they learned to allow the natural occurrence of transitions to take place. Wein and Stacey (2014) explained, "A rigid kept time schedule undercuts support for children's play, for children's decision making and ownership of their activity, and for children having the opportunity to assume responsibility for their actions" (p. 19). The educators decided on what they felt their specific group of toddlers needed in the program. By doing this, they eliminated many transitions and varied the time allotted for each activity. Wein and Stacey (2014) observed, "When they broke open old scripted patterns and tried out different ways to live events, new discoveries about the children became possible" (p. 17). This question of time spent makes me wonder about my previous experiences with required, non-flexible schedules. The debate regarding the need for and expectations of scheduling vs. building routines is a topic I reflect upon further in this study.

Exploring standards of quality. Apple (2006) concluded that quality child care programs have a positive impact on children's cognitive skills, social and emotional well-being, and school readiness. McCartney (2007) similarly explained that the quality child care programs support children's development of social, language and intellectual skills. McCartney (2007) highlighted the following indicators of quality child care: low child-to-adult ratio, small group sizes, caregiver education, positive interactions between educators, children and their peers, sensitive and responsive educators, language rich environment, and planned activities that promote development. In relation to language rich environments, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) explained children can express themselves and

develop an increased capacity for language development through engaging in stories and books through a variety of ways which include small groups, close relationships, and explorative play.

Discussing the needs of at-risk families, McCartney (2007) noted, "Child care can also function as an intervention for children from at-risk families. Children from families with fewer economic resources who attend quality programs begin school with skills that can increase their chances of academic success" (p. 2-3). *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) also considered risk: "Children are at the greatest risk when the people caring for them are experiencing persistent and severe adversities" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 30). Additionally, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) suggests that quality child care settings allow children to tackle challenges, persevere, and promote the development of coping strategies.

Similar to McCartney (2007), Bowman, Donovan, and Burns (2001) agreed that staff qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, and group sizes are believed to be quality indicators (as cited in Apple, 2006). Within Ontario, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2006/2007) highlighted strategies recommended by the Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources to improve the quality of child care. These recommendations included, "improvements to wages, working conditions, and qualifications of child care practitioners" (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2006/2007, p. 19). Additionally, the Ontario Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources (2007) identified the following principles that guide high quality in early learning and care environments:

- "All children have the right to live and learn in a society that supports their early development, health and well-being.

- All children are entitled to participate in programs that enable them to reach their full potential regardless of family income, language, ability, cultural background, parents' employment status, geographic region, or other potential barriers to access and participation.
- All early learning and care settings are inclusive, and share a commitment to meet the needs of all children in the community, including children from diverse backgrounds and children with special needs.
- All parents are entitled to resources to support their role as parents, to make choices that optimize their children's healthy development and to be active participants in their children's early development and learning.
- Early learning and care practitioners deserve appropriate compensation, working conditions, respect, and opportunities for ongoing professional education and career development.
- All communities benefit from integrated programs delivered by a diverse, knowledgeable, skilled workforce that contributes to the quality of daily life of young children and their families.
- Governments have a responsibility to develop a policy and regulatory environment and provide stable, adequate public funding in order to give all children and families access to high quality early learning and care services." (pp. 24-25)

The AQI similarly aims for inclusion, family involvement, healthy and safe environments, training for educators, along with ensuring the well-being and development of children. Additionally, the four foundations within *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) convey similar beliefs. First, "wellbeing" addresses the physical and

mental wellness of children. Second, “belonging” refers to connections developed and feelings of value. Third, “engagement” addresses involvement in inquiry and the program, and fourth, “expression” refers to the ability to develop skills that foster complex communication and other forms of expression.

Based on current research, the Canadian Council of Learning (2006) identified that licensed and non-for-profit child care settings tend to deliver higher quality of care than those who are unlicensed or for-profit. They indicated “research shows that the quality of the child care is key, that quality is the most powerful promoter of positive child development, early learning and school readiness” (Canadian Council of Learning, 2006, p. 8). Additionally, they identified seven indicators of quality similar to those already discussed. I reiterate each indicator here with examples elaborated by the Canadian Council of Learning (2006).

The first indicator, higher adult-to-child ratio, allows for the adult and child to develop a closer relationship and has been linked to children being more independent when they reach grade school. They also tend to have better cognitive and social skills. Smaller group sizes, the second indicator, leads children to be cooperative and display better behaviour. It is also noted that children tend to have higher social abilities and readiness to read. The third indicator is that of post-secondary education achievement, which has been found to impact educators’ responsiveness towards children as they challenge and stimulate children’s development, also impacting children’s language development. The fourth indicator is positive educator and child relationships. Children are reported to be more engaged in programing and have higher levels of language and play development. The fifth indicator is well-defined space, which is believed to set clear boundaries allowing longer time for exploration. This indicator has been linked with positive interactions between children and adults. Well-structured and planned programming is

another indicator as children respond positively to routines with which they are familiar. Educator planned activities along with opportunities to choose activities have positively impacted cognitive and language skills as well and children's creativity skills. Finally, higher parental involvement, the seventh indicator, has allowed for positive communication and interaction amongst children, parents, and caregivers, which in return builds better relationships. In addition to these seven indicators, the Canadian Council of Learning (2006) suggests that high quality child care should also address children's health and safety along with support their development.

Some of the research on quality indicators considers the impact of quality programs in relation to neurological development. In a study conducted by Sims, Guilfoyle, and Parry (2006), children's cortisol levels were measured in comparison to the quality of child care they attend. This study consisted of 117 children between 3-6 years of age attending long-term child care programs. The quality of the child care programs was also measured using the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). The child care centres selected for this study ranged in quality from high, satisfactory and unsatisfactory and cortisol levels were measured twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Results indicated that children's cortisol levels were influenced by the quality of the child care they attended and that this may have long-term effects on children's neurological development. Lower levels of cortisol were detected in high quality child care programs and the opposite for unsatisfactory child care programs. Sims et al. (2006) noted that children attending programs with lower quality of care were at risk of experiencing undesired neurological outcomes.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) identified:

> ...the quality of a child's early environment and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial in determining the strength or weakness of the brain's architecture, which, in turn, determines how well he or she will be able to think and to regulate emotions. (p. 1)

Sensitive and responsive educators can serve as buffers against toxic stress hormones, which can negatively impact children's developing brain architecture (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005/2014) identified poor-quality child care settings as ones that have large child-to-adult ratios, relationships that are not supportive, and harsh adult-to-child interactions. Children in these settings were more likely to have elevated levels of stress hormones than those in higher-quality child care settings. As discussed previously, low child-to-adult ratio is an indicator of high quality child care (Bowman et al., 2001; Canadian Council of Learning, 2006; McCartney, 2007).

Highlighting the importance of high-quality child care, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005/2014) believed that children perceived to have a shy temperament are at a greater risk of developing symptoms of emotional problems and, therefore, require environments with supportive and responsive educators. *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) similarly highlighted that "Relationships are the active ingredient in healthy development, especially brain development" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 6). *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) also expanded the notion that responsive caregivers are critical to healthy brain development. Within emergent curriculum, O'Keefe (2013) noted that educators are required to be responsive to children and their interests. Biermeier (2015) explained that a key aspect to emergent curriculum is that it places great

emphasis on building and sustaining relationships. Similarly, Tal (2014) explained that implementing an emergent pedagogical approach to learning allowed for deeper relationships between the children and educators. Here, we see that relationships play a key role in emergent curriculum as well as healthy brain development.

Conclusion

This review of the literature has outlined the benefits and challenges of implementing an emergent curriculum, along with an exploration of standards of quality. Learning through play appears to be a central theme in emergent curriculum, moving away from the traditional role of teacher as a transmitter of knowledge to one of the educator as a facilitator. *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) are key educational resources that foster the implementation of emergent curriculum. Educators may face challenges when implementing an emergent curriculum, such as dealing with difficult and sensitive topics that children display interest in. Additionally, educators' development and knowledge of emergent curriculum can present a challenge. Stepping away from the traditional role of a teacher and allowing children to take the lead can be difficult for some educators when it differs from their past practice. However, educators who have stepped back and acted as co-learners, rather than facilitators, have fostered children's social, cognitive, language, and other areas of development which are highlighted in the benefits of emergent curriculum (McCartney, 2007). In addition, quality child care has been found to support the healthy development of children (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014).

Looking Ahead

In the next chapter, I outline the methodology used in my research to share my stories. I begin by defining and describing autoethnography. I then outline the research question explored

and provide an overview of the professional documents that prompted my reflective journals. I describe the data collection and analysis process, and conclude with a discussion of ethical considerations.

Chapter Three - Methodology

Introduction

The birth of this research study stemmed from my curiosity in exploring what emergent curriculum looked like in my past, how it appears in my present practice and what has influenced my understanding of emergent curriculum over time. Much of the literature that explored emergent curriculum uses a qualitative method to explore various aspects of the benefits and challenges of emergent curriculum. A qualitative approach was feasible for my study as it supported readers in understanding how emergent curriculum looks like in my past and present practice. Adams, Ellis and Jones (2013) suggested, "qualitative research offers an understanding of overarching facets of social life" (p. 26). Thus said, it also allowed me to consider various factors that have influenced my implementation of an emergent curriculum and explore these influences in more depth. Additionally, using the self as a lens, autoethnography allowed me to use my own experiences to better understand the self and others within a culture (Adams, Ellis, and Jones, 2015).

In this chapter, I discuss the use of autoethnography as a methodology for considering my past and present experiences with emergent curriculum. I outline my data collection process and analysis. Ethical considerations are also explored.

Autoethnography

"The terms autoethnography invokes the *self* (auto), *culture* (ethno), and *writing* (graphy)" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 46). Autoethnography draws from anthropology and sociology (Creswell, 2013). Bochner (2013) outlined that the term was first referenced in the 1970's with the rise of identity politics as it recognized social and cultural differences (Adams et al., 2015). Several researchers use autoethnography, particularly those in disciplines such as education,

psychology, social work, criminology, amongst several others (Adams et al., 2015). Scientific knowledge is limited in this type of research; however, the researcher connects personal experiences to larger contexts (Adams et al., 2013). Bochner (2013) explained, "as a form writing and communication, autoethnography has become a rallying point for those who believe that human sciences need to become more human" (p. 53). Bochner (2013) continued to explain that autoethnography seeks to identify how life can be made better and invites others to become involved in making a change.

Chang (2013) explained that researchers' personal experiences are what generate the primary data. Chang (2013) wrote, "autobiographic data can be gathered in a variety of ways: recalling, collecting artifacts and documents, interviewing others, analyzing self, observing self, and reflecting on issues pertaining to the research topic" (p. 113). In this study, I made use of recalling as it allowed me to capture data through memories of the past. Journal reflections captured my present thinking and practice. Additionally, Chang (2013) outlined that autobiographical data can be presented from memory, photos, recordings, journals, or interviews. For this research, data was drawn from my memories through the use of journaling. As I wrote my journals, I used professional documents to prompt reflections. These resources acted as stepping-stones for my reflections (Chang, 2013) and helped me look more closely at connections and disconnections between the AQI operating standards and the goals of emergent curriculum.

Chang (2013) described that autoethnography "intends to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher's personal experience" (p. 108), and "readers gain understanding of autoethnographers' social realities and of the social forces contextualizing their experiences" (p. 109). This research aimed to provide awareness of a reality that may be

experienced by multiple educators. I did not talk to other educators for the purpose of data collection. However, upon completion and publication of this research, other educators will have the opportunity to read and reflect on their own experience in comparison to mine. In doing so, my work serves as a prompt for other educators to consider their practice as they critically reflect on ways to support curriculum delivery.

Autoethnography is a complex qualitative research method as it offers specific information about particular topics and lives rather than general information about a large group of individuals (Adams et al., 2015). Adams et al. (2013) explained the following purposes for autoethnography: "(1) disrupting norms of research practice and representation; (2) working from insider knowledge; (3) maneuvering through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty and making life better; (4) breaking silence/(re)claiming voice; (5) making work accessible" (p. 32). Adams et al. (2015) further outlined that "qualitative research focuses on human interactions, motivations, emotions, and general descriptions of interaction" (p. 21). Autoethnography also requires deep self-reflection, referred to as "reflexivity," which consists of looking back at experiences and relationships and seeing how they influence the present (Adams et al., 2015, p. 29). My choice of autoethnography is fitting of the above goals. As I looked back, my insider knowledge as an early childhood educator allowed me to cultivate understandings and describe experiences that an outsider could not (Adams et al., 2015). Additionally, this research method allowed me to employ a narrative approach as a way of telling my story in the first person.

Research Questions

The question that guided this research was, "As an early childhood educator, what are my experiences with implementing an emergent curriculum, past and present?" A secondary question asked was, "What has influenced my understanding of emergent curriculum over time?"

Data Collection

The primary data source in this research was my stories as presented in the form of journal writings. Journal data was produced by me, therefore offering easier access to data as explained by De Vries (2012) (as cited in Chang, 2013). I recounted experiences by memory and transferred them to written journals. The journals aimed to capture my past and present experiences as an early childhood educator seeking to implement an emergent curriculum. I used three professional documents as prompts for my reflective journal: 1. *The Assessment for Quality Improvement*, 2. *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*, 3. *Think, Feel, Act*. A description of each of these documents is presented below. I focused specifically on these three documents for the predominant role they played in the various contexts I had worked prior to the beginning of this study. It is important to note that these documents do not directly refer to emergent curriculum. However, research and theories within them identify similar characteristics of emergent curriculum.

Journal entries were completed weekly between April to July of 2016. Over the span of these 4 months, I read each professional document and reflected in my journal on my own practice, past and present, in relation to what I read. I initially began with *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014). However, after this first document, reflections were not limited to one document at time. Instead, I referred back and forth between the documents when ideas reminded me of previous ones read. Within each entry, I identified the specific quote(s) upon which I was reflecting at the time. In Chapter Four, I use a double-entry journal format to illustrate the excerpts that prompted each journal reflections. Journal entries were cumulative in nature, and were numbered and dated in the order that they were written rather than according to specific documents. When all the journals were complete, I read and re-

read each entry to identify emerging themes. I then colour-coded emerging themes for further analysis. Ongoing professional conversations served the role of a critical friend, including feedback from my supervisory committee.

Professional Documents. The *Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement* (AQI), as previously mentioned, is a set of required guidelines for child care operators in the Toronto region. The goal of the AQI is to ensure the deliverance of quality program in child care through set standards and practices. The AQI highlights six key elements that are fundamental for high-quality child care programs: 1. Sound management practices; 2. Training, experience and stability of caregivers; 3. Group size: ratio of children to caregivers; 4. Family involvement in the program; 5. Health and safety standards of the physical facility; 6. Program content and development (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvements: Introduction, 2014, p. 2). These six elements guide the expectations presented by the AQI. This is a key document for reflection based on my past practice as an Early Childhood Educator and the disconnect I felt between the AQI and the goals of an emergent curriculum. The AQI includes a series of documents with sections focused on Infant, Toddler, Preschool, School Age, Playground, and Nutrition. I refer to the most recent version for each section.

*How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Year*s (2014) was developed by the Ministry of Education and is described as "a professional learning resource guide about learning through relationships for those working with young children and families. It is intended to support pedagogy and curriculum/program development in early years programs" (p. 5). As summarized in Chapter Two, this document highlights four "ways of being" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 7): (1) belonging, (2) well-being, (3) engagement, and (4)

expression" that are believed to be vital conditions for growth in children. Substantial emphasis is placed on viewing children as "competent, capable of complex thinking, curious, and rich in potential" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 6). The Child Care Centre Licensing Checklist: Child Care and Early Years Act (2014) references sections of *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Year*s (2014).

Think, Feel, Act (2013) is authored by Clinton, Coughlin, Shanker, Wein, and Underwood in partnership with the Ministry of Education. The authors are professionals in the field of early childhood and have facilitated professional development opportunities in various capacities. *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) consists of short research briefs that are designed to support educators working in the field of early childhood. These briefs "highlight the latest research in early childhood development, strategies to put the key ideas into practice and reflective questions for educators" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 2). Topics include: (1) The Power of Positive Adult Child Relationships: Connection Is the Key, (2) The Environment Is a Teacher, (3) Pedagogical Leadership, (4) Calm, Alert and Happy, (5) Making Learning Visible Through Pedagogical Documentation, (6) Everyone Is Welcome: Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care.

Data Analysis

Chang (2013) explains after collecting autoethnographic data, the next step is focused on meaning-making. In meaning-making, the researcher must review the data multiple times to become acquainted with it. The next step involves taking notes of "reoccurring topics, dominate themes, unusual cases, and notable statements" (p. 116). After completing these steps, I fragmented the data, also referred to as "coding," based on dominant topics (p. 116). Chang (2013) explained, "Through the process of moving in and out of small and large categories and

of fragmenting, grouping, and resorting activities, researchers will discover bigger themes that hold the fragmented/coded data together" (p. 116). He continued to explain, "Meaning-making is like holding chunks of data against a backdrop and understanding what the data mean in relation to other segmented data and within the broader context" (p. 116). As a final step, I looked for ways to connect the significance of themes to a larger context – that of early childhood research and practice. Throughout the analysis process, I looked for evidence of past and present understanding related to emergent pedagogical approaches. I also considered whether my previous understandings of the AQI changed through the process of this research study.

Ethical Considerations

As Tullis (2013) highlighted, significant consideration must be made when conducting autoethnographical research to avoid "harming self or others" (p. 256). Chang (2013) explained, "In individual autoethnographies, autoethnographers negotiate with themselves and consider 'relational ethics' involving others when selecting material for writing" (p. 111). Relational ethics refers to having respect and valuing other researchers, what has already been researched, and the early learning community. I took each of these aspects into account when selecting material for writing.

For this research project, I wrote about my own experiences and did not refer to the experiences/stories of others. The intent was to focus on my personal understandings of an emergent pedagogical approach over time. Any identifiable features within my journals were removed and coded for my own personal recollection. During my time working with the AQI, I worked with several supervisors. I refer only to the general term supervisor to avoid identification. In addition, stories within my thesis have been recontextualized and reconstructed to further avoid identification of specific settings and individuals. However, I also understood

that if it was deemed that one of my stories/reflections might lead to identification of another, including my own family, I would obtain informed consent from the individual (Tullis, 2013). If informed consent was not given, this section of my reflective journal would not be included.

In writing my thesis, I employed a narrative approach, which allowed me to tell my story in first person. As mentioned, my goal was to share my own story, not that of others. Adams et al. (2013) wrote, "the use of qualitative research methods, particularly narrative and storytelling, are crucial ways of knowing for some populations" (p. 31). Bochner (2013) explained that personal narrative text intends to create a picture of the writer's reality. He continued to explain,

> The stories would show characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusion of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence; and trying to preserve or restore community and coherence to their lives in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call meanings and values into question. (Bochner, 2013, p. 52)

A narrative approach allows the reader to connect with my stories as I have an insider's perspective. Though I have an insider perspective, I shared only my experiences and not those of others. Adams et al. (2013) explained that working with an insider's perspective allows me to use my personal experience to create detailed descriptions, which supports the reader's' understanding of the experience.

Adams et al. (2015) highlighted three narrative voices: first-person voice, second-person voice, and third-person voice. I selected first-person voice as the best fit to share my story/explain my experiences. This type of voice provides readers with what Caulley (2008) described as "I/eye witness accounts" (as cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 78). Additionally, Chang (2013) explained, "individual autoethnography is at risk of privileging one perspective" (p. 111),

which once again highlights the subjectivity of doing an autoethnography. With this in mind, I ensured "a fair distribution of research benefits and burdens" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 57). To do this, I looked at how the AQI both supports and challenges an emergent curriculum. These ethical considerations were at the forefront as I explored connections and disconnections between the AQI and emergent curriculum.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter Four, I expand upon my analysis process and the ways that I became more acquainted with the data (Chang, 2013). I then present and discuss the themes that arose from my reflective journal. I draw upon relevant research literature to support my interpretations and highlight points for further discussion.

Chapter Four - Analysis

In this chapter, I outline and discuss five themes that emerged from my reflective journal. My journal entries were prompted by three key professional documents: *Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement* (AQI) (2014), *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013). As noted in Chapter Three, these documents do not directly refer to emergent curriculum but served as prompts for recalling past memories and capturing present thinking (Chang, 2013) as I considered the following question, "As an early childhood educator, what are my experiences with implementing an emergent curriculum, past and present?"

In total, nineteen journal reflections were written, serving as the primary source of data collection. As I analyzed my journals, I used different colours to highlight emerging themes. I then connected all areas with correlating colours to look for points of connection and disconnection. Where fitting, I have organized quotes from my journals within double-entry charts in order to illustrate for the reader the excerpts that prompted each journal reflection. The five themes presented and discussed in this chapter include: (1) scheduling tensions, (2) the pressure of time, (3) micromanagement of my educator role, (4) inconsistent messaging, and (5) questioning what defines quality. As I share each theme, I first consider the memories and present thinking prompted by the documents. I then consider how each theme related to my understandings of emergent curriculum.

These themes highlight my struggles with the Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) requirements; in particular, times when my curriculum beliefs regarding child development and learning did not coincide with experienced and perceived practices. I also discovered that while I initially sought to understand more about my past and

present experiences with an emergent pedagogical approach, concerns related to time and quality also surfaced within my journals, along with the ways in which I was valued as an early childhood educator.

Important to note, autoethnography is a qualitative method of research and is limited in scientific knowledge (Adams et al., 2015). With this in mind, I do not claim to present scientific knowledge but rather to draw on my insider perspective as an early childhood educator to reflect upon "practices, meanings, and interpretations of cultural phenomenon/experiences" (as cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 31). This insider role allows the researcher to cultivate understandings and describe experiences that an outsider cannot (Adams et al., 2015). Adams et al. (2015) also explain that in autoethnography, researchers focus on "connecting personal (insider) experiences, insights, and knowledge to larger (relational, cultural, political) conversations, contexts, and conventions" (p. 25), which offers readers a unique, firsthand perspective on the subject matter.

To make these connections, I employed Chang's (2013) process of meaning-making to analyze the data. Chang (2013) explained, "Meaning-making is like holding chunks of data against a backdrop and understanding what the data mean in relation to other segmented data and within the broader context" (p. 116). Through each theme discussed in this chapter, I provide interpretations of my experiences as an early childhood educator, and where applicable, draw from literature to support interpretations. In doing so, I aim to expand the significance of themes to a larger context.

Scheduling Tensions

As I read my journal entries about my experiences in implementing an emergent curriculum, the topic of scheduling quickly began to stand out as a recurring theme. My journals revealed multiple reflections regarding scheduling expectations for children and the tension of

not having enough time to meet the demands set by the AQI. Specifically, I noticed my resistance to the AQI criteria in relation to my desire to allow children to guide transitions. For example, as I reflected on the following excerpt from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), I wrote:

Excerpt from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014)	Journal Reflection
"Educators are lifelong learners. They take responsibility for their own learning and make decisions about ways to integrate knowledge from theory, research, their own experience, and their understanding of the individual children and families they work with. Every educator should feel he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor, and deserves the opportunity to engage in meaningful work" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 7).	I remember wanting to scrap the [daily] schedule [of] activities and the whole structure of sequence of events... I was told that wouldn't be allowed as the AQI wouldn't allow it… I didn't have the flexibility to go outside when the children wanted. I had to do it when my schedule said I was going to. Going outside has always been a challenge, especially with the older children (as they were more vocal about their needs).... I wanted to find an alternative so children can still get their physical activity but it didn't seem like an option... (Journal #6).

This reflection sparked the memory of feeling that my voice was not valued when it came to scheduling. I was given little opportunity to contribute to how the daily routine should unravel. Though it may sound as if I did not want to go outside with the children, my frustration stemmed from much more. What about days when the weather was so cold, the children did not want to be outside? Or, what if the children were tired from a busy day of Track and Field and preferred to stay inside (already having physical activity that day)? Instead, if the children felt it was too cold for them to be outside, they did not have the choice to be inside. Initially, I thought this expectation came from the AQI, but noticed in my closer inspection that AQI considered alternatives for physical play: "In the event children are unable to go outside for physical play, a

designated space is available. For example, a school gym, atrium, empty room, the classroom" (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 26). In Chapter Five, I elaborate upon my discovery of the governance for outdoor play.

Another specific aspect of the AQI that I struggled with was the requirement of a visual and daily schedule. The AQI (2014) states "The Visual and Daily Schedules should be accurate and allow for flexibility" (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 2). To me, this goal felt disjunctive within a real classroom setting. A schedule can be accurate (reflective of my current activity), but also limiting in terms of flexibility. If the schedule states that I am to be outside, where is my flexibility to not go outside at that specific time? My solution was to physically make changes by writing down my current activity on the schedule. Yet, trying to ensure the schedule was always accurate became distracting at times. Rather than being able to focus just on the children, I worried about getting in trouble for an inaccurate schedule. That within itself does not reflect flexibility to me, instead facilitating frustration in my experience.

My above perceived rebellion is contrary to the requirements outlined by the AQI to create and follow a daily schedule. Though I agreed with the intent of the AQI (2014) for a posted daily schedule, and the need to keep families and children informed of these transitions, I had a hard time accepting the fact that I could not stray away from it without immediately indicating these changes on the schedule. It is evident throughout my journals that my experience with scheduling presented itself as inflexible, most often due to the interpretation of the AQI by my supervisors or the AQI assessors. For example, the AQI (2014) for Preschool Guidelines explains the intent of providing a daily schedule:

> Intent: Parents, visitors, students, staff and children should always be aware of, and have access to, how the day is scheduled. Being aware of how the day is planned allows for consistency, self-regulation and minimizes negative behaviours. The Visual and Daily Schedules should be accurate and allow for flexibility. Regular use of the Visual Schedule with the children promotes independence and positive transitions. (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 2)

Though this intent suggests flexibility, my reflective journal demonstrated that I did not feel this opportunity for flexibility. For example, I recall having forgotten one day to mark down my changes on the schedule and being questioned by a supervisor. Another time, an AQI assessor indicated that I did not meet expectations as I forgot to make the change immediately. The change would occur because sometimes the plan I had for the children changed as the children's interest took me towards a different direction.

Looking back, I can see that I struggled with the guidelines set by the AQI as I strongly believed that educators should have the flexibility to alter the schedule depending on what best suited the children and their interests. In this next journal excerpt, we hear my explanation for not wanting to go outside on some days:

Excerpt from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014)	Journal Reflection
"Educators are competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 7).	Again I strongly believed in an emergent curriculum and it seemed to be so difficult to simply 'follow the children's lead.' Some days were cold out and the children begged me not to go outside - however, I was always told to make sure we were outside and 'on time' with the schedule (Journal #13).

As I look back over my journals, it seems these moments around scheduling were where my frustration as an early childhood educator began. It seemed I was only following guidelines rather than free to develop a responsive program for the children in my care. As a result, my work became less meaningful to me.

In relation to emergent curriculum, I am reminded of Wein and Stacey's (2014) discussion about putting away the clocks and stepping away from schedules to allow the natural flow of transitions to be directed by the children rather than a set schedule developed by the educators. Following children's interests is key to the goals of emergent curriculum (Jones, 2012; Wein and Stacey, 2014), and natural transitions reduce stress levels for children while also mitigating struggles between educators and children (Wein and Stacey, 2014). Referring to pre-planning a week's worth of activities, Fuleki and Reynolds (2003) wrote, "active children rarely fit preconceived ideas about what our days together will be like" (p. 1). In *Think, Feel, Act* (2013), Clinton (2013) identified that children flourish in environments that foster positive relationships. She then asked, "...how can you build relationships with children if you are always interrupting their work, directing them to the new activity or routine, and correcting them if they don't follow your expectations for following the schedule?" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 7).

With the AQI, I felt powerless to make decisions regarding the schedule. In comparison, the above excerpt from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) places emphasis on the importance of educators' voices within the learning environment. Educators make decisions regarding ways to integrate their experiences, including knowledge obtained from theories, and understandings of the children. Emphasis is placed on the role of educators and the importance of allowing educators to have a voice within the learning

environment. This was something that I did not feel I had. I struggled to understand where my voice fit or why I did not have the power to make any decisions. It felt like the AQI had specific guidelines that I needed to follow and that became the dominating voice.

The Pressure of Time

In addition to tensions around scheduling, another theme that arose in my journals was feeling pressured to complete tasks set out by the AQI, specifically keeping the room up-to-date (e.g. visual schedules for each season, recent activities, materials reflecting children's interests, etc.). This topic emerged several times as a barrier to providing quality programming. My journals once again revealed frustration, such as in the following excerpt:

Excerpt from AQI - Preschool Guidelines (2014)	Journal Reflection
"Reflective of children's recent activities: Three or more children's displays include recent activities. For example, artwork from the previous month. Artwork older than two months is not considered recent" (p. 11).	I found it incredibly time consuming and unrealistic. The pressure was great from my supervisors to make sure everything is up-to-date… [to] do well on our AQI inspection. I only had one employer give me scheduled time away from the children to do paper work, etc. but the others all expected it to be done while I was with the children (Journal #19).

When I was provided designated time to complete these tasks, I was able to fulfill my duties as an educator and not worry about splitting my attention between the children and the room. When I was not provided this time, I often felt concerned about the safety of the children while trying to balance expectations for the environment (e.g. trying to hang up recent artwork). During these times, I received great pressure from those in charge, who I realize now must have also been under pressure to ensure I followed the guidelines. Some days I felt that I spent more

time focusing on how the room looked rather than the quality of my interactions with the children. I began to question how the AQI advocated for quality child care while at the same time, seemingly implementing unrealistic demands that took me away from my actual work with the children.

Research suggests that positive interactions between educators and children are one indicator of quality (McCartney, 2007; How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years, 2014; Clinton, 2013; AQI, 2014). However, my journal entries reveal conflict and pressure in relation to ensuring I was following my schedule and keeping my room up-to-date, tasks that appeared secondary to ensuring positive interactions were being fostered. This led me to wonder why there was not greater emphasis placed on the quality of my interactions.

Rereading the excerpt noted in the chart above from journal entry #19, I pondered whether AQI assessors realized how employers were trying to cope with the expectations by placing pressure on program staff to complete all duties while still being with the children. The AQI (2014) considers the following under the category of "exceeds expectations":

> Evidence of formal programming time given to staff: Meetings are held away from the supervision of children. Evidence may include meeting minutes, posting of scheduled room meetings. Formal planning meetings occur at least once a month. (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 4)

However, by placing the need for formal planning time within "exceeds expectations," it seemed, in my experience, to be taken as a suggestion, not a requirement. The non-mandatory nature of this suggestion therefore, contributed to the tension I felt when being asked to split my attention between the children and administrative duties. If I had been provided time aside from working

with the children to meet these expectations, I may have been more willing to accept being critiqued on these suggestions as signs of quality.

One might ask what the difference is between elementary school teachers and child care educators. To me, the difference is that elementary school teachers are provided preparation time where the children are not in the classroom. They can focus on planning tasks without an obligation to the children in their care. In a child care setting, not all educators are provided preparation time as it is up to the supervisor to determine. Programs often operate for eleven hours per day and the centre is closed on weekends. I recall finding it challenging to plan when the children were in the classroom, even though I was technically 'off the clock.' If a child was hurt or wanted my attention, ignoring their request or behaviours was not an option. With this said, it felt as if I was working all day without time away from the children, which led to feelings of frustration.

Interestingly, the pressure of time only appeared in my journal entries in relation to the AQI. Perhaps this is because the AQI governed my actions and decisions, whereas *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) served to guide my thinking about early childhood pedagogy. Another possible reason is that the AQI was an experience from my past whereas the other two documents guide my present practice.

Wein (2006) identified several challenges that can be faced with implementing emergent curriculum, including educators' development and knowledge in emergent curriculum. Looking back, it may have been my lack of in-depth knowledge of the AQI that hindered my ability to consider how the AQI might align with an emergent curriculum. Instead, it appeared that I relied

on others to transmit knowledge to me, preventing me from seeing flexibility in the AQI. I explore this "aha" moment further in Chapter Five.

Micromanagement of My Educator Role

Another recurring theme throughout my journals was the topic of burnout, more specifically, feelings of suppression and frustration regarding what I perceived as micromanagement of my classroom. My sense of powerlessness was apparent in the following excerpt:

Excerpt from AQI - Preschool Guideline (2014)	Journal Reflection
"Three or more books contain real images of people and/or objects. Three or more books that portray real people or objects are accessible to the children. For example, a book with images of actual food items, animals, people" (p. 18). "Three or more writing materials are accessible. Three or more types of writing materials are accessible to the children to extend learning opportunities for language and literacy and are above items required for creative. For example: pencils, erasers, rulers, paper, word boxes, dictionary, write on/wipe off board, dry erase markers, chalkboard and chalk, Etch A Sketch, magnetic boards/letters" (p. 22).	I've been told exactly how my room should look like, what needs to be posted, and the specific types of activities that need to take place each day. I don't see where room for my expression or decision-making was possible. In comparing the AQI outcomes and the HDLH outcomes, I don't see anywhere in the AQI where educators are being heard and valued. On the contrary, HDLH brings forth a strong educator piece, which recognizes the value and independence of educators (Journal #5).

The AQI guidelines, in column one of the above chart, limited my decision making as an educator. It was not that I disagreed with having books depicting real people and objects, but the way in which guidelines such as these prevented my voice from being heard. For example, monitoring the number of balls or writing materials in the learning environment took away from

my attempts to plan responsively to children's interests, a key aspect of emergent curriculum (Jones, 2012; Wein & Stacey, 2014).

In contrast, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) identifies the importance of an educator's sense of belonging within the learning environment. It highlights, "Every educator should feel he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor, and deserves the opportunity to engage in meaningful work" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 7). This quote resonated deeply with me as the specific nature of the AQI guidelines appeared to limit my sense of belonging with my learning environment. Instead, I felt as if I hit roadblocks each time I tried to make my voice heard.

These perceived roadblocks consisted of not only the restriction I felt with the daily schedule, but also with what I believed was best for the specific group of children with whom I was working with. For example, the AQI (2014) identifies that "Two or more educational play materials reflecting people with disabilities are accessible in two areas. Educational play materials may include toy wheelchairs or guide dogs, dolls with leg braces, puzzles and/or books that depict people with disabilities" (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 9). While I value the importance of having an inclusive environment, I struggled to understand how this requirement determined quality. If a play material was broken or lost and I did not have time to replace it right away, the criteria seemed to suggest that my program was not one of quality. I wondered how such a small item could determine quality. Moreover, such materials were always purchased when big orders for other learning materials occurred. As a result, I used to feel tension and anxiety that an AQI assessor would visit before I obtained the items I needed to replace. While these items may have been required as tangible evidence, there are other ways to acquire such

evidence. For example, to me, inclusivity took on many forms aside from these material items, such as in the ways I ensured I displayed work from all the children, and allowed them to have a voice in the room as they determined spontaneous learning experiences, as well as always inviting families into our learning space, such as to share their profession with the rest of the children. In this way, inclusivity to me, is not only limited to the inclusion of material items and includes the ways in which I involved every member of the learning environment.

Axelrod, Hall, and McNair (2015) highlight ways to create a print rich environment that are meaningful to the children and expand beyond a checklist of criteria. One suggestion that stood out to me as an educator was including children in the display boards. Axelrod, et al., (2015) explained, "Show-and-tell bulletin boards allow children to sign up to bring something from home and write about what they will share" (p. 18). Like Axelrod, et al., (2015), I too believe that displays must be purposeful. Each group of children will be different from the other. Perhaps this is why I struggled to accept the AQI guidelines for displays, as these requirements did not appear to be set with my specific group of children in mind. Meaningful learning is not just about what is in the room but what we do with it to support children's feelings of belonging and expression. With this goal in mind, children become owners of their environment. Their interests, needs, and voices are at the forefront, a distinct difference it appears from my work with the AQI guidelines.

In addition, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) explains that children thrive in environments that support investigations, creativity and problem solving. This goal brings me to a discussion of transitions. As an educator, I feel capable of making the decision with the children as to when transitions should take place. However, I found this was often not the case as this next collection of journal entries reveals. Each entry was

directed to a statement about transitions within *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014). I share them together to demonstrate how I continually returned to feelings of restriction in relation to the AQI:

Excerpt from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014)	Journal Reflection
"...when the schedule allows for long periods of uninterrupted play, with few transitions, children are calmer and more engaged" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 21).	I remember feeling that I cannot explore outside of certain restriction, that being the AQI… This made me feel restricted... (Journal #6). Follow-up Entries: I feel that [the AQI] is restricting me as an educator and not valuing me as an educated individual that is capable of making the best decisions in my practice (Journal #9). Aren't I too 'capable and competent' as HDLH outlines? If so, then why am I being micromanaged by the AQI? This doesn't make me feel competent and capable (Journal #10).

Consequently, these feelings began to manifest themselves in my thoughts and eventually led me to wonder if this was the field for me. I became burnt out and decided to leave my job and go back to continue my post-secondary studies. Despite my struggle with the field, however, my passion for early childhood remained and became the focus of moving forward with a Bachelor of Child Development. I expressed the following:

Excerpt from *Think, Feel, Act* (2013)	Journal Reflection
"What we think, affects how we feel, affects how we act. For example, if we think that our job is to teach children all we can, so that they learn their numbers and letters and how to behave, then we may feel that kids need to do lots of things to learn and keep busy. We may act by setting up a program that mainly consists of adults directing the children through activities. This is concerning for several reasons. An adult-led emphasis on literacy and numeracy means other things need to be left out and what too often gets left out are the opportunities for learning through play" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 7).	At some point in my career as an ECE I burnt out and quit my job… I wasn't a machine; I was an educated, qualified ECE who wanted to facilitate my own room without being told how. It seemed like my behaviour was also being dictated by the AQI. The pressure was too much and I grew more and more unhappy (Journal #13).

I constantly felt that the AQI and its assessors dictated my every move. How then could my learning environment be reflective of the children and myself? Though I understood the importance of ensuring quality, I felt that the AQI was restrictive and moved beyond outlining quality to a monitoring of the environment.

Moreover, my feelings of restriction appeared to relate specifically to what I understood to be important goals of emergent curriculum. Yu-le (2004) defined an emergent pedagogical approach to learning as "constructive curriculum in which teachers, students, teaching materials and environment interact in the context of dialogue… everything is developing" (p. 1). Jones (2012) similarly noted the ultimate goal of an emergent curriculum is to respond to children's interests in open-ended ways that allow for independence and promotes a play-based environment. To do so, an educator needs to be attentive and involved in the classroom as a co-

constructor of knowledge and an equal contributor (Seitz, 2006; Cameron & Bezaire, 2007). Vygotsky (1987) and Wells (1986) highlighted that,

> The effectiveness of the learning environment is determined not only by physical surroundings, but by important social connections. Children need opportunities to collaborate, share understandings and co-construct knowledge with 'more capable others' through the course of everyday activities. (as cited in Cameron & Bezaire, 2007, p. 139)

Interestingly, this is one area where my journals identified an unexpected point of connection with the AQI. This connection is noted in the following excerpt:

Excerpt from AQI - Preschool Guidelines (2014)	Journal Reflection
Learning experiences are based on children's interests. Children are engaged in activities and experiences. This may also include adaptations made to the Program Plan based on children's interests (p. 7).	This statement here supports the implementation of an emergent curriculum. I feel that the AQI acknowledges the importance of the learning environment being reflective of the children's interests. I always felt that the AQI supports the children's interest to ensure optimal development - however I am challenged with things that dictate exactly what needs to be done and how the environment should look like… it feels that as an educator, I don't have much room to make my own decisions (Journal #16).

In this moment of recognition, I felt we were all speaking the same language. However, this point of agreement turns quickly to negative tensions about being told exactly how the environment should be organized. I still questioned how to implement an emergent curriculum when being directed to plan specific things that were not always reflective of the current interests of the children.

A sense of value related to emergent curriculum also arose within my reflections on constructive feedback. In my Early Childhood Education and Bachelor of Child Development programs, I learned that we need to praise children as educators. At the same time, however, I wanted the children to be confident in their own work, not only because I complimented them. I often wondered how else I could praise the children without having them rely on me for that praise. Perhaps this is why I found myself resonating with the following excerpt within *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) as I pondered my role as an educator:

Excerpt from *Think, Feel, Act* (2013)	Journal Reflection
"It is important to reinforce when children have done well and worked hard. Reinforcing this by saying 'you really worked hard on that puzzle, didn't you' or 'I see you've collected all of the cars and put in them in the basket, that's wonderful Jack!' is much more informative than 'good job tidying' or 'you are so smart'" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 8).	...I always thought emergent curriculum focused only on the child and solely following their interests and needs. However, now I am starting to see where the role of the educator plays a part. It is important for me as an educator to be involved and have meaningful conversations with the children as they do with me. I am finding myself placing less emphasis on 'praising' and more on identifying skills and efforts of the children. (Journal #17).

In this quote, I see myself moving past initial misunderstandings about emergent curriculum to a deeper understanding of the educator's role in creating meaningful conversations.

Through the examples in this section, I see a consistent pattern of resistance towards not having a voice as an educator due to the AQI demands. This sense of resistance often appeared as frustration. Looking back, I recognize this may have hindered my ability to see more of a common ground amongst the AQI and emergent curriculum, a recognition I explore further in the next chapter.

Inconsistent Messages

Another pattern that emerged in my journals was that of expectations from others in higher positions, which resulted in inconsistent messages across contexts. Often, I would share an idea for change, only to be directed back to the AQI and a requirement that suggested I could not implement my idea. These ideas included my desire to provide cross-curricular program activities. When it came to looking at Fall colours, for example, I saw the potential of focusing on a handful of meaningful activities (e.g. painting with Fall colours, making leaf rubbings, exploring different leaf textures) rather than multiple activities for each learning area as required by the AQI (e.g. leaf rubbing would not have been viewed as crossing science, sensory and art learning areas).

As I looked more closely at my exchanges with supervisors, I began to realize that my understandings of the AQI expectations often came from others:

Excerpt from AQI - Preschool Guidelines (2014)	Journal Reflection
"The following learning areas are planned and/or documented: One sensory daily One art daily One cognitive daily One language and literacy daily Two science and nature weekly One block and construction weekly One music and movement weekly One dramatic weekly" (p. 4).	As I look back I realize that everything I learned about the AQI and all the limitations were passed down from my supervisors. I was told what I can and can't do...when I questioned things, I did not gear my questions towards the AQI or even try to investigate by myself. My supervisors always controlled what I [did] and always would refer to the AQI as the reason guiding their decision (Journal #8).

Perhaps as an employee, I viewed my supervisors as generally more well-versed on the AQI. I looked to them to help me understand how to use the AQI as a tool to design my rooms and programs in ways that were fitting of guidelines. I do not recall being taught how to use the

criteria. Nor do I remember going through the criteria myself to guide my own decision-making. Perhaps this is why I had a hard time understanding the connection between the criteria and how it needed to look in practice. Instead, I viewed the AQI as the responsibility of my supervisors, who then used the criteria to ensure our rooms and practices were aligned with the expectations. At no time did I receive any specific training pertaining to the AQI.

Yet, I discovered from working in several centres in the Toronto region, that each centre had a different interpretation of the AQI. Often this appeared to be a result of differing information from different assessors. One example that stands out for me was the way program plans were to be completed. Some locations made point-form notes of the activities to be implemented each day. Then, as the days went along, we were asked to indicate which activities were implemented. Other locations wrote detailed descriptions of the intention of each activity and the specific day that it was to be implemented. These details included the specific paint colours that would be available to the children, as well as the outcomes children would reach by using the paint. Sites were told by different assessors that they needed to complete their program plans in these specific ways. Yet, to me, these actions seemed like two different extremes. The use of specific colours of paints to create specific outcomes also raises questions about the role of materials in learning. Cameron and Bezaire (2007) explain that,

> ...the first years of life builds the dendrites, provides experiences on which one can construct further learning, creates self-efficacy and a self-concept which opens up incredible possibilities for future, inspires creativity, and forms identity. Or, it can squelch and squander potential, leaving the child devoid of ideas with a silenced soul. (p. 131)

They suggest that limiting choices limits creativity, and encourage an array of open-ended materials to promote creativity in all areas of the classroom. The intentions behind our plans, however, were not always discussed and it became more about doing what was expected.

These mixed messages over time added to my confusion and rejection of the AQI as I elaborate in the following journal entries:

Excerpt From AQI (2014) – Introduction	Journal Reflection
"1. Sound management practices 2. Training, experience and stability of caregivers 3. Group size: ratio of children to caregivers 4. Family involvement in the program 5. Health and safety standards of the physical facility 6. Program content and development" (p. 1)	It frustrated me as it appeared that each person had a different opinion...certain things that I can do at one site, I can't at the other. (Journal #8). My fear, as before, is that each AQI consultant has a different perspective and translation to the guidelines... one time my practice would be fine, while other times it wasn't (Journal #9).

Interestingly, my emerging knowledge of emergent curriculum was due to my own inquiry and research whereas my knowledge of the AQI came from what my supervisors relayed to me. My knowledge of the AQI was then further complicated and confused when each centre interpreted criteria differently. Several journal entries later, after weaving back and forth between the AQI (2014), *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013), I continued to ponder:

> I recall trying to read it myself - however, I don't seem to come… [to] the same conclusions. It also felt like what was written and what the assessors were looking for were different things, which made it more confusing. It was very challenging to understand the rules… each centre I worked at was told something different about the

> rules… this made it very confusing and difficult to understand expectations. (Journal #14)

As this quote demonstrates, I was sometimes frustrated by the expectations of the AQI, while at other times, I felt limited. Trying to understand what the AQI was requesting was not only time consuming, but as noted above, the AQI appeared to differ from my beliefs and teachings on what really defined quality. I worked in Toronto from 2008 until 2014 and was not able to grasp the expectations set out by the AQI. This is a long time for someone to feel confused about expectations.

Though I struggled with inconsistent messaging, I also realize that I did not seek to discover more about the AQI for myself. Instead, I relied on my supervisors to support its implementation. I now find myself wondering what may have differed if I had attempted to interpret the criteria myself. Perhaps I would have been able to seek clarification or spark dialogue regarding differing opinions? Yet, the impression I had of the assessors was that they were in a position to compromise our license to operate, leading me to feel hesitant to disagree. This leaves me wondering if there is only one correct way to implement AQI expectations or if we can create more opportunities for dialogue.

Questioning What Defines Quality

Throughout my journals, including the examples already shared above, I continually questioned why certain AQI guidelines defined quality. Often, these moments of questioning related to specific expectations of how the classroom should look. However, I also considered the question of quality in broader terms when reflecting on the AQI's six elements of quality. Interestingly, I agreed with some and disagreed with others. For example, as I reflected on the following excerpt, I responded:

Excerpt from AQI (2014) - Introduction	Journal Reflection
"Research in the area of early learning indicates that there are six key elements that are essential for a high-quality child care program, including: 1. Sound management practices, 2. Training, experience and stability of caregivers, 3. Group size; ratio of children to caregivers, 4. Family involvement in the program, 5. Health and safety standards of the physical facility, 6. Program content and development" (p. 1).	In my experience, these six elements have indeed played a large role in ensuring the operation of a high-quality child care program. I found they also impacted the relationships with the children and their families. For example, having a smaller adult-to-child ratio supported me as an educator to work closely with children. I was able to foster specific areas that required extra attention. Involving families in the program helped me understand their values and beliefs, allowing me to connect with the children on a deeper level. As a whole, the elements… supported a steady flow to the day as relationships were fostered and children's needs were met (Journal #3).

McCartney (2007) highlighted similar indicators of quality child care: low child-to-adult ratio, small group sizes, caregiver education, positive interactions between educators, children and their peers, sensitive and responsive educators, language rich environment, and planned activities that promote development. Some of these indicators, such as planned activities that promote development, low child-to-adult ratio, and positive interactions, coincide with the indicators set by the AQI. Importantly, these indicators are specific but broad. They do not dictate the day-to-day operations of educator's programs. This understanding is contrary to what I experienced in the past with specific guidelines being evaluated rather than these broad goals. As a result, I had a challenge understanding why the AQI included such specific guidelines in addition to the six elements. Currently, I am only governed by the CCEYA (2014), which similarly seeks to ensure quality in child care programs but leaves room for originality in each

program. The CCEYA (2014) coincides with *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) in the way the voice of educators are heard and valued.

The AQI (2014) acknowledges that some centres use an emergent method of programming, and therefore, they have allowed those sites to document learning experiences at the end of each day. However, every Monday something must be planned in advance. This is to be done for all learning areas, which include but are not limited to, language development, sensory, science, and gross motor. I do not object to these broader goals but struggle to understand what makes Monday different. I believe all days should be open to co-planning alongside the children.

What I also continue to question are the smaller, more specific criteria that suggest quality is lacking if materials are missing. Responding to a specific criterion related to the required numbers of balls, I reflected:

Excerpt from AQI, - Preschool Guidelines (2014)	Journal Reflection
"Three or more balls are accessible" (p. 3)	I feel that it is outrageous that a simple ball would determine the "quality" of a centre... If children had no actual "toys" outside and only had friends and nature, then that is enough to determine quality? I feel like a puppet where the criteria [are] dictating exactly what I need to do and the way I move. I don't understand how this is an actual indicator of quality (Journal #15).

As this reflection demonstrates, I strongly believed that positive interactions with peers and adults were more valuable indicators of quality than the need to ensure a specific number of play materials were available. As outlined in my review of literature, early childhood proponents

such as Rousseau, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget also believed in the importance of children learning through play as it brings meaning to them through connection with their environment (as cited in Chaille, 2008). Frede and Ackerman (2007) further highlighted Vygotsky and Piaget's theories of constructivism, stating their belief that constructivism fosters children's reasoning and problem-solving skills. Noddings (2012) also outlined Vygotsky's emphasis on the importance of social interactions and the ways children learn and develop. At no point in my reading, have any of these theorists emphasized the importance of having a specific number or play materials or even named specific play materials. I believe this is because play materials are not the key to children's development but rather the experiences and interactions have a greater impact.

I also questioned specific criteria in relation to the types of displays we were expected to have in our rooms in order to promote diversity. As I read *Think, Feel, Act* (2013), specifically the sections on sense of belonging, I once again returned to feelings of being limited by the criteria:

Excerpt from *Think, Feel, Act* (2013)	Journal Reflection
"If, for example, we believe that children are part of our community and their voices should be heard in decisions that affect them (in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), their input should be sought and considered in decisions about the classroom environment" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 12).	Under the AQI criteria, centres are given specific criteria of the type of displays that need to be in the room. These include but are not limited to: pictures of different family structures, different abilities, and different cultures. This must be done in order to "meet expectations" - once again I don't understand why that is an indicator of quality. It doesn't make sense that simple pictures, which can be commercially bought, can be an indicator of quality (Journal #18).

Within this entry, I appear to be struggling to connect the goal of hearing children's voices with the AQI criteria for displays.

Important to note, the latest version of AQI (2014) now includes sections from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), referred to as "inspiring pedagogy." The following explanation is offered as "inspiring pedagogy" within AQI (2014) in relation to the section I quoted in my journal entry:

> Enabling children to develop a sense of belonging as part of a group is also a key contributor to their lifelong well-being. A sense of belonging is supported when each child's unique spirit, individuality, and presence are valued. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 24)

My journal reflections revealed my struggle to understand why displays indicated quality, especially the specific requirements about displaying family structures, abilities, and culture. As I re-read my words, I realized that my frustration was not with the larger purpose of promoting diversity but with specific requirements that seemed to suggest quality was lacking in my program if displays did not always meet these goals. A closer look at the AQI suggests my frustration may have led me to miss the underlying goal of promoting diversity through displays. For example, the AQI (2014) identifies the following intent:

> Displays are inclusive and are changed regularly to reflect the recent interests and artwork created by the children. Displays are at the children's eye level, which promotes spontaneous interactions, logical thinking and memory recall. Displays include parent participation in the program and encourage community involvement. Displays of people with disabilities, diverse cultures and family structures should be staged in an inclusive manner throughout the room and used as teaching tools. Displays should be meaningful

> to the children in the program, for example a picture of a child in the program reading a book in braille. (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 11)

In particular, it is the word "meaningful" that stands out here as my frustration with displays often stemmed from feeling as if I was not allowed to create meaningful displays that responded to my children's interests. I wanted my children to have some choice in what was displayed. To me, this felt more meaningful and inclusive of my children's voices as opposed to ensuring I had specific items, such as a toy guide dog in the room. Valuing the educator's voice allows us to determine how we will display inclusivity and suggests empowerment. However, the opposite also happens when our voices are taken away and we have a tool that dictates exactly what needs to be done. It is not that I question the need for meaningful displays but rather the question becomes "Who decides what these meaningful displays include?" The word "meaningful" is subjective and as an educator, I want to be entrusted to decide what is meaningful to my unique group of children. Additionally, I believe that "meaningful displays" is not just about having an object on display but also how it represents meaning to the children and classroom community.

The above limitations around play materials and displays also suggest a need to move beyond store-purchased materials. In *Think, Feel, Act* (2013), Coughlin and Baird (2013) stated, "This idea of 'playing with materials' can be repeated with any number of other things that are or might be offered to children, such as paint, clay or loose parts" (p. 20). Schaefer (2016) conveyed how open-ended materials expand children's ability to be creative, allow for self-expression and support more complex cognitive function. Perhaps it is not a question of what specific toys and materials we have, but how these materials promote interaction and learning.

In conclusion, this final theme brings to the forefront my ongoing thinking about what defines quality as well as the actions that contribute to quality. As my reflective journal demonstrates, I recognized the importance of the six broader elements of quality as outlined by the AQI. At the same time, I questioned the purpose of the more specific criteria that suggested quality was related to specific toys and play materials. I continue to explore this question of quality in Chapter Five.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter Five, I consider several key understandings about emergent curriculum that arise from the themes shared in this chapter. I revisit my previous understandings of emergent curriculum and reflect upon new perspectives gained through this study. Additionally, I consider how definitions of quality may vary according to differing perspectives. I discuss the limitations of the study, implications for practice and conclude with suggestions for further research.

Chapter Five - Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore my past and present understandings of emergent curriculum. I employed the self-reflective method of autoethnography to recall and reflect upon my experiences in relation to three professional documents that have influenced my work as an early childhood educator. These documents were the AQI (2014), *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy of the Early Years* (2014), and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013). In taking a closer look at these professional documents, I sought to explore factors that have influenced my understanding of emergent curriculum, including points of connection and disconnection. In this chapter, I revisit each of the themes presented in Chapter Four and highlight key understandings that emerged from the themes as a whole. I then explore the limitations of this study along with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Revisiting Themes

The question that guided this research was, "As an early childhood educator, what are my experiences with implementing an emergent curriculum, past and present?" A secondary question asked was, "What has influenced my understanding of emergent curriculum over time?" Wein (2006) suggested that an educator's understanding and familiarity with emergent curriculum creates challenges when implementing pedagogical theories in their approach to learning. Through my study, I learned that some challenges that I faced were due to my lack of understanding of the AQI and emergent curriculum, which I will discuss later in this chapter. My previous understanding of emergent curriculum stemmed from what I was taught in my Early Childhood Education diploma program, and included following the children's interest when planning and implementing play-based activities. As I reflected upon and documented memories in my journals, several themes arose: (1) scheduling tensions, (2) the pressure of time, (3)

micromanagement of my educator role, (4) inconsistent messaging, and (5) questioning what defines quality.

Scheduling Tensions. In this theme, I discussed the tensions and frustrations I experienced with scheduling my day as an early childhood educator. In particular, I saw these tensions as counter to what I had learned about emergent curriculum in my Early Childhood Education diploma program. O'Keefe (2013), for example, suggested that educators must be flexible and involved in play. However, I found this difficult to do when my attention was divided between ensuring the room was up-to-date and supporting the children. My journal was revealing in that I never wrote about experiences where I saw myself supporting children's decision-making, challenging their minds, and promoting self-expression by allowing them to be agents of their own learning (Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2014). I return to the importance of flexibility in this chapter as a key understanding that I have taken away from the themes.

The Pressure of Time. I recognized throughout my journals that time was a barrier to providing a quality program. It seemed that the AQI had many specific, time-consuming demands. I struggled to understand the logic for these guidelines, at times feeling overwhelmed and burnt out. Seitz (2008) reminded us that in emergent curriculum, educators need time for reflection and planning in order to support children's interests. Some AQI requirements, such as documenting children's learning, required time for reflection, but little devoted time was provided. Through my journal reflections, it was apparent that the pressure of time was directly related to the scheduling tensions that I experienced. Without scheduled time for reflection and planning, I found my attention split between the children and fulfilling the AQI requirements. This is not reflective of the goals for emergent curriculum. Within emergent pedagogical

approaches, educators must be involved and engaged with the children (O'Keefe, 2013). In exploring this theme, I recognized that time was a key aspect of the positive interactions we create in early learning spaces. Positive educator and child interactions are also seen to be an indicator of quality programs (Clinton, 2013; *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*, 2014; McCartney, 2007; AQI, 2014). *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) also reminds us "When educators engage in continuous learning and questioning, exploring new ideas and adjusting practices, they achieve the best outcomes for children, families, and themselves" (p. 20). In order to support educator engagement while also fulfilling the requirements of the AQI, it is important to consider the impact on quality. I expand this discussion later in this chapter in relation to the key understandings I have taken away from this study.

Inconsistent Messages. As shared in my journals, I struggled with inconsistent messages as I moved from one employer to the other. AQI assessors were not consistent in their expectations, which created confusion and frustration. In uncovering this theme, I came to the realization that my knowledge of the AQI stemmed from what my employers told me about it. I did not review the document myself and I relied on others for approval. Yet, in reading the document *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), I began to recognize the importance of knowledgeable educators and the role they possess: "They [educators] take responsibility for their own learning and make decisions about ways to integrate knowledge from theory, research, their own experience, and their understanding of the individual children and families they work with" (p. 7). This excerpt led me to feel empowered and capable as an educator, prompting further reflection about my role as an educator. I return to this

discussion as I share key understandings about taking a reflective stance and valuing early childhood educators.

Questioning What Defines Quality. In this theme, I shared my struggles to understand the AQI expectations, especially those that determined the quality of my program. I found myself questioning definitions, such as the definition of a toy, in particular where quality appeared to focus on the number and type of toys rather than the learning opportunities. As I explored this theme, I wondered about the role of open-ended materials and loose parts (Coughlin & Baird, 2013, p. 20), which allow children to experience a range of materials without requirements as to how many or what type. I also questioned expectations around displays intended to promote diversity. This questioning led me to look back more closely at the AQI where I discovered that the expectations did include the creation of "meaningful" displays with children. However, I questioned who decides what is meaningful and how we can value educators' voices in relation to how educators display inclusivity. In contrast to store-purchased materials, I considered the role of open-ended materials for promoting interaction and learning. In conclusion, I returned to the question of what defines and contributes to quality. In this chapter, I revisit the question of what defines and contributes to quality, not only my viewpoint as an educator, but also the viewpoints of children, parents and community.

Micromanagement of My Educator Role. In this theme, I noted multiple times that I felt micromanaged as a result of the AQI requirements, most often due to adherence of these requirements by supervisors and assessors. It felt that the classroom appearance, flow of the day, and type of materials were all dictated by the AQI. I did not feel like I had my own voice in my own classroom. As the classroom educator who knew the children best, I should have been allowed to at least determine the flow of the day without feeling obligated to stick to the daily

schedule. At no time did I feel that I belonged in the space or that my voice was valued or welcomed. *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) outlines that, "Every educator should feel he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor, and deserves the opportunity to engage in meaningful work" (p. 7). Unfortunately, this was not my experience. I felt limited in my decision-making privileges and that the AQI had the final say. This also led me to feel a sense of powerlessness and defeat. I return to these feelings in this chapter as I consider how we value early childhood educators.

Key Understandings About Emergent Curriculum

Next, I discuss several key understandings about emergent curriculum that resulted from the themes summarized above. These key understandings relate to: (1) flexibility, (2) taking a reflective stance, (3) providing time for planning and reflection, and (4) valuing early childhood educators.

Flexibility. In the theme of *Scheduling Tensions*, I reflect on my conflict with trying to implement an emergent curriculum while complying with the AQI. Understanding that emergent curriculum meant following the children's interests, I was troubled by having to follow a schedule that seemed inflexible. As shared in Chapter Four, I was questioned when I mistakenly forgot to indicate changes in my schedule. I began to view scheduling as negative and perceived the AQI to be a roadblock to implementing an emergent curriculum. As already discussed in Chapter Four, Wein and Stacey (2014) questioned what happens when educators step away from "the clock" (p. 13) and follow the natural formation of transitions that are set by the children. They recommend that educators remain flexible and allow for the natural flow of transitions by following the children's lead and prompts. Similarly, Stacey (2009) outlines that in emergent curriculum, program plans are constantly developing. The schedule requires flexibility and

educator planned activities. However, if children are engaged in in-depth investigations, educators must provide "extra time to negotiate, problem solve, and express that idea through play" (Stacey, 2009, p. 20). O'Keefe (2013) also identified the need for educators to be flexible with supporting children's investigations. The snail scenario shared by Friedman and Solterio (2006) in Chapter Two offers an example of this flexibility. Educators fostered the children's interests to learn about snails, which resulted in rich discussion and a growing knowledge about nature and one another. Flexibility is also suggested in Fuleki and Reynolds' (2003) understanding that weekly plans may change as children's interests take on different paths.

In Journal #13, I expressed a dilemma between complying with the AQI, while at the same time, wanting to ensure my children's' voices were heard:

> Some days were cold out and the children begged me not to go outside - however, I was always told to make sure we were outside and 'on time' with the schedule (Journal #13).

Exploring this dilemma further, I began to identify other factors, apart from the AQI, that governed outdoor play. For example, I discovered that the AQI did allow for flexibility with the daily schedule as indicated by the following excerpt:

> The Daily Schedule allows for opportunities to provide structure and flexibility. The Daily Schedule is flexible and can be adjusted to meet the circumstances of the day. For example, time planned for outdoor play is adjusted because the children want to stay outside longer, or washroom routines are completed as required. (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 3)

As a result of this realization, I discovered that during inclement weather, the local weather announcements guided whether or not we take the children out, not the AQI. I researched the

rules around outdoor play and inclement weather by first looking through the AQI (2014) to see if any reference to temperature was made, but none was found. I then researched the Toronto Public Health website for recommendations regarding temperature recommendations and once again none was found. I finally searched under the DNA (1990) but once again, I was unsuccessful in finding specific statements regarding recommendations for outdoor play during inclement weather days. While I recall being told we cannot take children out if it is -15 degrees Celsius or lower, I am unsure where this rule originated. I find it interesting that I always associated this rule with the AQI guidelines. However, as noted above, the AQI (2014) indicates flexibility to meet the circumstances of the day.

In this specific context, it was not the implementation of emergent curriculum that was being compromised, but rather there was a misunderstanding on my part regarding the AQI expectations. To avoid such misunderstandings, in my current administrative position, I will seek to ensure that the guidelines I relay to my colleagues are supported by company policies or other related documents.

Taking a Reflective Stance. I was often referred to the AQI when I presented certain ideas that I felt were important to emergent curriculum. These ideas included the desire to program across the curriculum and wanting to follow the children's lead (Jones, 2012). For example, in the theme of *Scheduling Tensions* I write,

> I remember wanting to scrap the [daily] schedule [of] activities and the whole structure of sequence of events... I was told that wouldn't be allowed as the AQI wouldn't allow it… (Journal #6)

Rather than exploring the AQI document myself, I accepted this message and followed my schedule of planned activities. At times, I also sought approval from supervisors when I was

unsure of an idea but wanted to comply with the AQI. In doing so, I relied on my supervisors to teach me about the requirements. As a result, the information I obtained regarding the AQI was from other sources and never due to my own exploration.

In my current role as an administrator, I encourage my staff to speak up when challenged with regulations or tasks and strive to create an environment where policies and expectations are justified by Ministry (Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014) requirements or agreed upon as a team. In my past experiences, though little in scope, I felt the benefits of these types of conversations when they occurred. As a result of this study, I've gained greater awareness of the importance of creating a positive space for educators to reflect upon their practice. More specifically, I want to create an atmosphere where educators can ask questions, clarify expectations and share their goals for learning in relation to emergent pedagogical approaches. Such discussions would have helped lessen my frustration and the feelings of burnout I experienced when faced with guidelines that felt contrary to what I believed was important as an early childhood educator.

I believe it is important for my staff to have this opportunity so they are able to stand behind their implemented practice. I also believe it is important for my staff to understand policies and regulations directly from the source of governance rather than relying on me to relay the message. When new policies or guidelines are in place, I host a session for my staff to look through documents, reflect and share their understanding of the content. Opportunities for such discussions allow for questions to be raised and help us to have common understandings. As educators, we are encouraged to be reflective practitioners in order to provoke our thinking and engage in conversations about programming and children's well-being (Excerpts from ELECT, 2014). Yu-le (2004) also noted that emergent curriculum requires critical reflection, spontaneous

planning, and following the children's lead which in turn supports educators in facilitating learning without it being teacher-directed.

The act of becoming a researcher through this study has also prompted my reflective stance as an educator. With this in mind, I return to Wein's (2006) stages of teacher development (challenged, novice, practicing, master) to consider the ways in which these roles were found within my journal reflections. The *Challenged Teacher* has the desire to follow an emergent curriculum but is apprehensive about how to implement it within their classroom. The scope of implementing such a curriculum can be intimidating and further resources may be required to build confidence to overcome potential obstacles. Looking back, I had the desire to implement an emergent curriculum, but made excuses when faced with the obstacle of the AQI. The AQI became a roadblock that I felt prevented me from implementing an emergent curriculum.

Similar to the *Challenged Teacher, the Novice Teacher* is excited to implement new ideas into the classroom to engage children but finds it difficult to maintain consistency. Although they are enthusiastic, they cannot maintain an emergent curriculum because they do not fully understand the investment involved to keep momentum. In the theme of *Pressure of Time*, I identify my struggle with finding time to complete tasks, in particular time away from the children. It seemed that either the children, or administrative tasks, occupied my attention and that I did not feel that both were accomplishable. This pressure and lack of ability to overcome frustration prevented me from being the *Master Teacher,* which I will describe later.

The *Practicing Teacher* successfully implements emergent curriculum within their classrooms, including noticeable documentation of children's success and progress. Although their classrooms have visible documentation, these teachers find the constant documentation overwhelming because of its large and continuous scope. For example, the *Practicing Teacher* in

Wein's (2006) stages is one who might express: "I know how to take an idea or theory and make it visible through documentation for children and parents, but there's so much going on I hardly know where to turn. I can't keep up with it. I get bits of documentation done but there's so much that intervenes..." (p. 2). Wein (2006) continued to explain that finding support from colleagues could assist in the teacher's continued effort to adhere to an emergent curriculum. I shared a similar feeling of being overwhelmed in the theme of *Pressure of Time*. I was overwhelmed, not only with keeping my room up-to-date with documentation, but also with other AQI requirements that felt contrary to the goals of emergent curriculum.

The *Master Teacher* carefully documents their children's progress and understanding of new concepts. They work alongside colleagues to create a strong community and create open discourse. Their regimented documentation encourages unlimited possibilities. Wein (2006) describes the thoughts of a *Master Teacher* as follows: "We decide really carefully what to document – we let lots go – and we decide beforehand who will use the camera, who will capture their words, and when we will meet to go over what we have documented" (Wein, 2006, p. 3). This is a stage that I did not achieve at the time, in part due to the challenge I felt to comply with the AQI. I was unable to move past the overwhelming place of the *Practicing Teacher*. Factors that hindered me from moving forward included being overwhelmed with the AQI demands and trying to understand differing interpretations across contexts. I also did not feel that I had power to make decisions such as those spoken of above by the master teacher. Documentation felt like a solitary act rather than a collaborative one. I felt like I had to prove I was doing well at my job. I also remember times when I was excited to share about the learning taking place, but sensed others viewed it as a requirement I had completed rather than a learning moment to talk further

about. In this way, it may also have been my struggle with not feeling valued that prevented me from becoming the *Master Teacher*, a discussion I return to later in this chapter.

Providing Time for Planning and Reflection. Multiple times throughout my reflective journal, I wrote about the pressure I felt to complete administrative tasks. As outlined in Chapter One, Dewey (1916) discussed how educators were scrutinized and judged by institutional authorities and constrained by community expectations. As a result, it was a challenge for educators to work with children outside of the pre-established rules and restrictions created by higher authorities. Time was consumed with paperwork and maintaining a status quo, therefore, affecting the relationship between the educator and children.

I uncovered a similar pressure in the theme, The *Pressure of Time*. Referring to administrative tasks, my frustration is evident in the following journal excerpt:

> I found it incredibly time consuming and unrealistic. The pressure was great from my supervisors to make sure everything is up-to-date… [to] do well on our AQI inspection. I only had one employer give me scheduled time away from the children to do paper work, etc. but the others all expected it to be done while I was with the children (Journal #19).

This left little time for reflection upon my practice as an early childhood educator. Moving past this sense of frustration, I now realize that it was not just about time to do paperwork, but instead, the need to value time for planning and reflection as early childhood educators.

Biermeier (2015) emphasized, "Children construct their own knowledge through a carefully planned curriculum that engages and builds the child's current knowledge, recognizing that knowledge cannot simply be provided for the child" (para. 6). Additionally, Jones (2012) explained that educators play a key role in the co-construction of the environment and development of the curriculum with children. O'Keefe (2013) similarly conveyed the importance

of taking a co-learner role, highlighting the need for not only flexibility but also show genuine interest in children's investigations. In my experience, the role of an educator, as outlined by Jones (2012) and O'Keefe (2013), is challenging to fulfil when designated time is not allotted. Recognizing that educators require time to complete tasks, the AQI (2014) includes the criteria of "evidence of formal programming time given to staff" (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 4). However, as mentioned in Chapter Four, this criteria falls under "exceeds expectations," which means it is not mandatory for employers to provide such time and can still lead to attention being split between the children and administrative tasks.

As a result of this study, I am more cognizant of what I ask my staff to do during the time that they are with the children. I want them to focus on being responsive to children's interests and inquiries (O'Keefe, 2013), and to focus on extending children's development by providing experiences that allow children to be agents of their own learning (Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2014). I also want them to engage in meaningful dialogue with children as outlined by Callaghan (2013). In relation to *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), I also encourage them to develop positive relationships with families and become confident decision-makers with the knowledge that I view them as "competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 7). *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) also identifies that "Every educator should feel he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor, and deserves the opportunity to engage in meaningful work" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 7). I aim to treat every educator as such, and acknowledge that part of this goal is providing

time away from the children to complete professional and administrative tasks (e.g. planning, reflection, ensuring toys are washed, and documentation).

This time not only encourages *Taking a Reflective Stance*, but also supports collaboration with other colleagues, such as the goal for critical friends outlined in *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy of the Early Years* (2014). Critical friends discuss items such as program, children's progress or challenges, and documentation. As I reflected in Chapter Four, I rarely experienced this time for planning, reflection and administrative tasks while working with the AQI. If I had been provided this time, I believe it would have helped with the time pressures I experienced.

Valuing Early Childhood Educators. *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) identifies that "Educators are competent and capable, curious, and rich in experience" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014a, p. 7). This sense of empowerment resonated with me deeply, and was a result of my close reading of *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) through this study. I recall a similar feeling when I was first introduced to this document in September of 2014 when working outside of the Toronto region. I did not feel this opportunity for empowerment in relation to the AQI and it led to much frustration as an educator. The micromanagement of my educator role, as shared in Chapter Four, brought these feelings to the forefront:

> Aren't I too 'capable and competent' as HDLH outlines? If so, then why am I being micromanaged by the AQI? This doesn't make me feel competent and capable (Journal #10).

As a result of these feelings, I felt burnt out and wondered if I was in the right field.

As already noted, Jones (2012) identified the need for educators to co-construct the environment with children. I continue to ponder my role in the environment in comparison to Jones' (2012) point. I recall the following excerpt from one of my journals in the theme of *Micromanagement of My Educator Role*, which identifies the lack of control and significance I felt as an educator when deciding things about my classroom,

> I've been told exactly how my room should look like, what needs to be posted, and the specific types of activities that need to take place each day. I don't see where room for my expression or decision-making was possible (Journal #5).

Similarly, Lightfoot and Frost (2015) described the feelings experienced by educators who faced pressures from external authorities to prepare children for "formal" schooling (p. 401). They wrote, "[educators]…described a range of feelings including disillusionment with their role, a sense of a loss of control over their daily practice and anxiety at a perceived downward pressure..." (p. 401). Through interviews, they discovered that "...all [educators] indicate their need for recognition; for their expertise; their personal qualities; that they do a worthwhile job; and their aspirations for themselves and the children whom they educate and care for" (p. 408).

Having endured a similar experience, through this study I learned that my sense of value was compromised when I felt micromanaged as an educator. As a result of this realization, I am now cautious when I enter a classroom to observe my staff for evaluations. Biermeier (2015) writes, "One thing we know for certain is that students will thrive in a school environment where the teachers themselves are thriving. The best schools nurture the teachers who work there as well as the students who learn within the walls" (p. 76). As a result of my experience, empowering educators is at the forefront of my priorities as a leader. In formal evaluation meetings, I highlight staffs' strengths, as I believe it is important for educators to know that they

are valued and that their hard work is recognized. I want my staff to feel empowered to make decisions with confidence and understand that I value them as educators.

Revisiting the AQI

Through this autoethnographic research, I was able to reflect critically upon the *Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement* (2014) in relation to *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013). The process of revisiting my experiences alongside these documents allowed me to clarify misunderstandings and gain a greater understanding of the intent of the AQI. In doing so, I began to see unexpected connections between the AQI (2014) and *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014), a document that also informs my current practice. For example, it was through this study that I recognized that the 2014 version of the AQI now draws upon *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) to share sections of inspiring pedagogy. This was not part of previous versions. I also discovered both documents advocated for: (1) ensuring "learning experiences are based on children's interests" (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 6); (2) focusing on building positive relationships with children, families, and the community; (3) supporting children's current interests and providing materials for further investigation. Serving a supportive role, *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) helped me understand that my thoughts about the AQI affected my feelings as an educator and, as a result, influenced my actions. I was able to recognize the ways in which I had been frustrated by different messages I received from my employers while trying to understand expectations. Through this study, I also came to recognize that the AQI has made many changes

since my time working in the Toronto region and many of these changes are positive and support the implementation of an emergent curriculum as noted earlier in this chapter.

Defining Quality

Throughout my journals, I questioned the AQI guidelines and its interpretation of quality. For example, in the theme of *Scheduling Tensions* I questioned why documenting an activity immediately on a program plan (e.g. changing the program from painting to leaf rubbing) or having certain displays defined quality. I believed greater emphasis on verbal communication with families, including photo documentation, was far more valuable to support relationship building. This documentation becomes evidence of the learning taking place and supports quality in relation to the four foundations (belonging, well-being, expression, and engagement) found within *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy of the Early Years* (2014). I have observed that children take great pride in their work, and ask for pictures to be taken and later shared with their families. This documentation not only serves as evidence that learning is taking place, but also provokes conversation and builds relationships. As mentioned in Chapter One, documentation supports children's autonomy and self-expression (Baumer, 2013; O'Keefe, 2013), which are quality indicators that the AQI supports as children's development is enhanced, nurtured and supported. The AQI has similar goals for high-quality child care to positively impact children's development, an understanding I have come to realize through this study.

Looking back, I only considered the definition of quality from my perspective as an educator. However, Friendly, Doherty and Beach (2006) suggested that definitions of quality are dependent on who is defining it. For example, the quality of child care, especially in the early stages, is dependent on external factors that include the surrounding community and their collective values and beliefs. Social and cultural constructs also influence collective judgments.

As such, quality is a subjective concept and may differ from the viewpoint of children, parents, educators and the community. In considering these different viewpoints, I found interesting connections to the six quality indicators from the AQI (2014). These six indicators, also highlighted in Chapter Three, relate to management, training and stability, group size, family involvement, health and safety, and program content/development. Next, I discuss each viewpoint and the ways in which they connect with the AQI quality indicators.

Friendly et al. (2006) suggested that for a child, quality might be based on feeling accepted and included in interesting and engaging activities. The AQI (2014) similarly outlines the importance for children and families to feel a sense of belonging. Their guidelines identify items that can support this goal (e.g. children's artwork is displayed, representation of different family structure displayed).

For parents, the definition of quality can evolve more around basic areas of assurance like health and safety (Friendly et al., 2006). Sharing a similar definition, the AQI (2014) promotes positive environments that are reflective of inclusivity to ensure promotion of the health, safety and well-being of children (e.g. environments are inclusive of race, gender, abilities, etc.). Location and affordability can also play a key role in defining quality to parents. Meanwhile, other parents take interest in how the child care will prepare their children for school readiness in areas such as reading, writing, or learning a second language. The AQI (2014) also promotes children's development as educators are to outline developmental goals in the program plan.

Educators working in child care settings may define quality as the amount of support they receive from their peers and program supervisors (Friendly et al., 2006). Their environment can either assist or impede their level of success within the classroom, thereby affecting their overall perspective of the quality of their program. For example, if the educator feels that they do not

have the necessary equipment or space to achieve their teaching goals, their perspective of quality will diminish. Interestingly, I was unable to find a connection between the AQI and the educator's perspective on quality as presented by Friendly et al. (2006). Perhaps this is why I felt disconnected from the AQI as an educator. This was evident in Journal #13 where I express feeling like a machine rather than an educated and qualified ECE.

The final viewpoint is that of the community. Friendly et al. (2006) identified that the community may also have a different perspective on what defines quality. Quality may be based upon how a program reflects their local values, beliefs, needs, and future growth and aspirations. The AQI similarly promotes family involvement such as holding a "family breakfast, summer BBQ, field trips…" (Toronto Children's Services, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement: Preschool Guidelines, 2014, p. 11). Looking back, my questions about quality came from my perspective as an educator and did not consider differing perspectives such as community, parents and children. I now realize that the definition of quality depends on who was defining it.

> According to Stacey (2009), educator's values influence their understandings of quality: As we examine what emergent curriculum means in terms of our daily practices, we will also consider the values we hold dear. When we actively consider our values about what constitutes quality curriculum for young children, we are more likely to be able to translate those values into reality in our classrooms. (p. 6)

Stacey (2009) continued to explain the disappointment felt by educators when their expectations of the field are not the same as those practiced. She wrote,

> All too often, teachers who leave college with a set of ideals become dispirited after entering the teaching world with all of its complexities. Sometimes, even deeply held

> values become submerged by the practicalities of getting through the day with a group of active three- and four-year-olds. (p. 6)

In the theme of *Micromanagement of My Educator Role*, I expressed feelings of burnout as my level of frustration with the AQI kept rising. Perhaps my frustration also related to the dispirited feeling mentioned by Stacey (2009). I came into the field with my own set of values and expectations. I did not expect my time with the children to be consumed with the practicalities of keeping the room up to date. It felt like no one noticed the amazing learning I saw happening, just the practicalities of the job and its requirements.

Understanding the different viewpoints noted by Friendly et al. (2006) has broadened my perspective on quality. Quality is not only important from my perspective as an educator but also from the perspective of children, families, and the community. One document that considers each of these viewpoints is *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014). In this document, quality is defined according to the following characteristics:

- "establish positive, responsive relationships with children and their families;
- value children as individuals and as active and competent contributors with their own interests and points of view;
- recognize the connection between emotional well-being and social and cognitive development and the importance of focusing on these areas holistically;
- provide environments and experiences for children to explore ideas, investigate their theories, and interact with others in play;
- engage with families and support each child within the context of his or her family, recognizing that family and child well-being are inextricably linked;

- provide ongoing opportunities for educators to engage in critical reflection and discussion with others about pedagogy and practice to support continuous professional learning and growth." (p. 11)

This list differs from the AQI quality standards in the way it emphasizes the importance of positive interactions and relationships as central to quality.

As previously mentioned in Chapter One, the College of Early Childhood Educators has developed a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (CECE) and serves as a governing body to ensure quality in the field of early childhood (CECE, 2011) by monitoring early childhood educators who are registered with the field. The College recognizes that early childhood educators are competent individuals who are knowledgeable and current in research. The following excerpt is an example of this recognition: "Early Childhood Educators set goals, make decisions, resolve challenges, decide on developmentally responsive activities and experiences, provide behaviour guidance and work collaboratively in the best interest of the children under their professional supervision" (CECE, 2011, p. 19). Like *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013), I have come to recognize that the CECE also empowers educators. Though I was aware of the CECE in each of my workplaces, it was not a document that we discussed or drew upon specifically in our work as early childhood educators. My discussion above led me to return to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, helping me to recognize its value and importance in the field.

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) explained why the field of early childhood relies on quality assurance experts:

> …in the field of early childhood, we can see a growing body of experts – researchers, constultants, inspectors, and evaluators and so on – whose job is to define and measure

> quality. Increasingly, we reply on this expert system to make judgements for us about the services we want or need for ourselves and our children. We look to these experts to tell us that what we are getting is good 'quality'. Increasingly overloaded, we seek reassurance rather than understandings, we want the guarantee of expert assessment instead of the uncertainty of making our own judgements. (p. 92)

Dahlberg et al. (1999) suggested that educators must learn to cope with uncertainty and move towards a more postmordern discourse such as the discourse of meaning-making. In meaning-making, educators co-construct learning and understanding in relationship with others in order to make sense of what is happening. I return to the discourse of meaning-making when discussing implications of my study.

Defining Emergent Curriculum

Through this study, my understandings of emergent curriculum have evolved. Though I believed this approach to have many benefits, I am now able to voice these understandings with greater confidence. Firstly, emergent curriculum supports a child's learning style and strengths, reinforces meaningful experiences, and extends their everyday discoveries (Early Learning Centre, University of Toronto, 2016; Baumer, 2013; O'Keefe, 2013; Siry & Kremer, 2011). Secondly, Jones (2012) explains that emergent pedagogies are "built on the strengths of the child" (p. 67) and are adjusted to specific interests in an open-ended, play-based environment. Thirdly, emergent curriculum views children as co-creators in the learning environment, offering them an equal voice (Jones, 2012; Seitz, 2006; Whaley, 2007; Wein, 2014). Fourthly, Biermeier (2015) explains that emergent curriculum helps build and sustain relationships between educators, children and families. Through my literature review, I also learned the extent to which

emergent curriculum can be used to tackle sensitive topics such as critical illness (Wein et al., 2014).

I also discovered there are many names or terms for what I understood to be important about emergent curriculum. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the project approach is one example of emergent curriculum (Whaley, 2007). Other characteristics of emergent curriculum include play-based and inquiry-based learning (Jones, 2012). These terms are now the predominant terms used in Ontario to underlie the pedagogical beliefs of teaching and learning in the early years. I have noticed a shift in terminology in my field as the term emergent curriculum is now often rephrased to curriculum that is emergent, reflecting the goal of curriculum that emerges from children's interests. This shift is fitting of the Reggio Emilia approach as Reggio Emilia schools also use an emergent approach in their practice (Edwards et al., 2012).

Implications

Several implications for professional practice arise from my study. First, to prevent frustration from happening to other early childhood educators, I suggest the need for greater professional development opportunities that encourage conversation about early learning, not only quality. As noted above, Dahlberg et al. (1999) explained that we must move beyond the discourse of quality and towards at the discourse of meaning-making. Dahlberg et al. (1999) described quality as a "socially constructed concept" (p. 87), a subjective term where each individual has their own definition. As a result, indivduals place subjective judgments about quality upon others based on personal values. On the other hand, meaning-making, as encouraged by Dahlberg et al. (1999), is defined as constructing and deepening our understanding. One way to engage meaning-making is in dialogue with others. Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot and Sanche (2015) offered several suggestions for how to

create an atmosphere for dialogue amongst early childhood educators. These suggestions include the use of "learning circles", "sharing circles", "online discussions", and "site visits" (p. 2-3). In a "learning circle" (p. 2), educators have the opportunity to come together each month and critically reflect on their work and "challenge postfoundational critical approaches to practice" (p. 2). In a "sharing circle" (p. 2), educators come together annually or semi-annually to learn about each other's work. In doing so, educators are exposed to different perspectives, allowing for professional growth and critical reflection on each other's work. Online conversations are another way to bring together educators and early childhood researchers to share material for professional growth. Lastly, site visits allow for one-on-one discussions and support between early childhood researchers and educators regarding what is being done at the individual centres.

Second, I suggest AQI assessors join the learning circles noted above to participate in meaning-making dialogue with early childhood educators. Initially, I wanted to recommend a space to talk about the AQI and what determines quality, but through this study, I have come to believe that larger conversations about curriculum and early learning are also needed, and that AQI assessors might benefit from joining in these discussions. Third, I recommend ongoing conversations about what defines quality. These discussions do not have to be specific to the AQI, and should involve other quality indicators, such as those set out by the Ministry of Education in the Child Care and Early Years Act (2014). As this study demonstrated, I often wondered why specific guidelines were outlined by the AQI, especially when some of these guidelines did not appear related to quality assurance. Further conversations would help to raise and address these questions.

Another implication of my study surrounds the education of early childhood educators. To better prepare early childhood education students for the field, I suggest we begin by

empowering them and educating them on their rights as educators. For example, in my experience, I did not feel that I was able to make decisions, such as when I felt micromanaged. However, the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (CECE, 2011) outlines, "…Early Childhood Educators set goals, make decisions, resolve challenges, decide on developmentally responsive activities and experiences, provide behaviour guidance and work collaboratively in the best interest of the children under their professional supervision" (p. 19). We must remember that early childhood educators are professionals. Though I remember being young when I first began working as an early childhood educator, I was also capable of greater decision-making and desired a space to share my thinking, especially when practices I was asked to implement different from my pedagogical beliefs.

Strengths and Limitations

Though this study focused solely on my personal experiences as an Early Childhood Educator, my autoethnographic considerations offer other educators an opportunity to reflect on their own practices in relation to understanding emergent curriculum and emergent pedagogical approaches to learning in the early years. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2013) highlight that scientific knowledge is limited in this type of research; however, the researcher connects personal experiences to larger contexts. Additionally, Bochner (2013) explains that autoethnography seeks to identify how life can be made better and invites others to become involved in making a change. In this study, I aimed to support other educators who have similar questions or concerns by sharing my experiences. It is my hope that this discussion will support educators, like myself, in better understanding how they can continue to work with, and perhaps challenge, specific assessment requirements such as the AQI while still implementing an emergent pedagogical approach to learning.

My journal entries often expressed frustration, presenting a possible hindrance to my ability to dig more in-depth into my understandings of emergent pedagogical approaches in relation to the AQI. At the same time, my reflective journal became an important tool for uncovering themes. Professional resources served as prompts for exploring connections and disconnections as I employed Chang's (2013) meaning-making process to reflect on these early years' texts in relation to my experiences. This process involved reviewing the data multiple times and taking note of recurring themes and notable moments. During the analysis phase, the use of double-entry journals served as an additional tool for revisiting my journal entries to determine connections "to the realities of other people with similar experiences and to existing research" (as cited in Adams et al., 2013, p. 116). In following this approach, I moved past frustrations and recognized assumptions for further discussion as I shared my story as an early childhood educator. I also ensured "a fair distribution of research benefits and burdens" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 57) by considering ways that the AQI both supported and challenged an emergent pedagogical approach. Only three professional documents were used in this study, however, other governing documents such as the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (CECE, 2011) would also be valuable to this study. The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (CECE, 2011) would have provided me with a greater opportunity for reflection in my journals, not only in regards to emergent curriculum, but also in my role as an early childhood educator in relation to my work environment and expectations of other educators.

Suggestions for Future Research

Looking ahead, ideas for future research include adding further voices to my exploration of emergent curriculum. For example, conducting interviews or focus groups with other early childhood educators will broaden understandings of emergent pedagogical approaches beyond

my experiences, offering points of further reflection upon theory and practice. Further research might also focus on quality indicators in order to look more closely at what defines quality, both in documents such as the AQI, and within the broader context of early childhood education. Considerations might include ways to revise the AQI to make it more practical and workable for educators. Areas for further support might be identified with the goal of clarifying confusions and bridging gaps between the AQI, other similar structured early years assessment criteria and emergent pedagogical approaches.

Concluding Thoughts

This study provided me the opportunity to recall personal stories and reflect critically upon these stories in relation to the professional documents that I reviewed. Though I felt that the need to adhere to the AQI hindered my ability to implement an emergent curriculum, I learned that there was more to explore and understand about my feelings of frustration and resistance. In doing so, I gained a broader understanding of the relationship between *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) and the AQI (2014). *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) reinforced my beliefs that educators should have time scheduled away from children to reflect and plan in response to children's interests. All three documents became significant to my exploration of what defines quality. For me, positive adult-child relationships are paramount to creating high quality learning environments. Callaghan (2013) within *Think, Feel, Act,* (2013) explained that many decisions made about the physical environments of children are focused on safety rather than creating stimulating environments to promote exploration and inquiry. She noted a scenario where educators reduced rules and as a result, they were more available to spend more time engaging with the children. The AQI had a similar effect on me as an educator. An expectation of an overwhelming focus on materials limited my interactions with children.

Taking a closer look at the AQI in relation to *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) and *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) has also strengthened my understandings of the need to create an environment where educators have the opportunity to voice their concerns. I conclude with a quote from *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* (2014) that serves as a continual reminder of who I am as an early childhood educator reflecting on my practice: "Every educator should feel he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor, and deserves the opportunity to engage in meaningful work" (p. 7).

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Appendix A - REB Approval

April 04, 2016

Mrs. Maria Nasim
Schulich School of Education
Nipissing University

File No: 100947
Expiry Date: ***April 04, 2017***

Dear Maria,

It is our pleasure to advise you that the Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed your protocol titled 'An Autoethnographical Journey of an Early Childhood Educator's Experience with Implementing an Emergent Curriculum' and has granted ethical approval. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year.

Modifications: Any changes to the approved protocol or corresponding materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation.

Adverse/Unanticipated Event: Any adverse or unanticipated events must be reported immediately via the Research Portal.

Renewal/Final Report: Please ensure you submit an Annual Renewal or Final Report 30 days prior to the expiry date of your ethics approval. You will receive an email prompt 30 days prior to the expiry date.

Wishing you great success on the completion of your research.

Sincerely,

Dana R. Murphy, PhD
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Appendix B - REB Final Report

Project Info

File No: 100947

PI: Scheffel Tara-Lynn (Schulich School of Education)

Project Title: An Autoethnographical Journey of an Early Childhood Educator's Experience with Implementing an Emergent Curriculum

Submitted: 2017/04/02 08:29 PM

Submitted by: N/A

Event Info

Event No:100947-25972

Notes:

Common Questions

1. COMPLETION DATE

#	Question	Answer
1.1	Please provide the date you completed your research.	2016/08/31

2. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

#	Question	Answer
2.1	Provide the number of participants that have completed the study	1
2.2	Advise the number of participants that have withdrawn from the study.	0
2.3	If the withdrawal rate was higher than anticipated, please describe any know circumstances.	Not applicable.

3. PROJECT INFORMATION

#	Question	Answer
3.1	Have any research participants suffered any serious or unexpected harm?	No
3.2	Have any ethical concerns arisen while conducting this research?	No
3.3	Since the original ethics approval was granted, have there been any unidentified risks or benefits to participants?	No
3.4	If you answered Yes to any of the above questions, please provide details and what safeguards were provided to participants.	Not applicable.

4. RECORD RETENTION

#	Question	Answer
4.1	Please provide specific details as to the disposal of data (WHO, WHAT & HOW) collected in this project (records, video, audio, data etc.) and/or the time frame for record retention?	Data was stored in a journal form as I reflected upon my experiences in connection with key emergent curriculum resources. The data will not be destroyed as the reflective journal is authored by myself as the researcher.

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Student Information:

Surname: Nasim Given Name: Maria

Department: Graduate Studies

Degree for which Major Research Paper/Thesis was awarded: September 2017

Date of Birth (optional) August 24, 1988

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Signature **Date**

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Family Name: Nasim	Given Name, Middle Name (if applicable): Maria
Full Name of University: Nipissing University	
Faculty, Department, School: Graduate Studies, Schulich School of Education	
Degree for which thesis was presented: Master of Education	Date Degree Awarded: September 2017
Thesis Title: An Autoethnographic Journey of an Early Childhood Educator's Experience with Implementing an Emergent Curriculum	
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Maria Nasim