



Building on **Emergent Curriculum**

The Power of Play for School Readiness

Sarah Taylor Vanover, EdD

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chapter

1

Theme-Based Units in the Preschool Classroom

If the title of this book is *Building on Emergent Curriculum*, then why start with a chapter on theme-based units? As an analogy, imagine going to an unfamiliar city to visit a friend. Your GPS stops working when you are still twenty minutes from your friend's home, so you call her for directions. Her first question will probably be, "Where are you now?" You both need an accurate understanding of your starting point so your friend can guide you to your destination.

On our journey to learn about emergent curriculum, theme-based units are our starting point. They are one of the most popular methods for creating preschool lesson plans, so you probably have used them at some point in your career and perhaps still use them. This chapter examines what theme-based units are, why so many teachers use them, and why they fall short as a method of teaching young children.

What Is a Theme-Based Unit?

To create a theme-based unit, a teacher selects a topic to focus on for one or two weeks, depending on how broad it is, and plans all classroom activities for that period around that theme. Years ago, the theme may have been something whimsical, such as the circus, but today's preschool classrooms often use science or social-studies themes, such as neighborhoods, community helpers, or life cycles. Then the teacher looks at each content area on her lesson plan (such as art, dramatic play, fine motor skills, literacy, music, and math) and chooses activities for each area that link to the chosen theme. If the theme is, for example, community helpers, the lesson plan may indicate that all music selections for the week will focus on firefighters, bus drivers, and postal workers. The teacher might add dress-up clothes for doctors, grocery-store workers, and park rangers to the dramatic-play area. She might place books about cooks, teachers, and hairdressers in the classroom library. And so it goes for the remaining areas of the classroom.

Unpacking the Popularity of Theme-Based Units

Why do we commonly take a thematic approach to teaching young children? One major reason is that themes simplify lesson planning. Given an almost infinite number of possible activities to engage in with the children in her care, a teacher can more easily choose among them if she knows that they all must relate to, for example, the seasons. Beyond this key factor, several intertwined trends and concerns have contributed to the popularity of theme-based units.

The Rise of Academic Concerns in Preschool

The history of preschool in the United States really began in 1965, when the federal government first implemented the Head Start program for children living in poverty. Because only a small number of students qualified for Head Start's services, individual states began to implement their own programs to serve other low-income students. During the 1980s, as the Women's Bureau of the US Department of Labor notes, the percentage of women of all socioeconomic classes who worked outside the home rose year by year. As a result, child-care centers became more prevalent throughout the United States. The vast majority of these programs focused on keeping children healthy and safe while introducing social and emotional skills that the children would need in kindergarten. Preliteracy and prenumeracy skills did not become a focus of child-care programs until over a decade later.

From 1998 to 2010, the University of Virginia conducted a study with the US Department of Education to look at the work demands placed on kindergarten students. Researchers Daphna Bassok, Scott Latham, and Anna Rorem explain that over this twelve-year period, academic content in kindergarten—such as holding a pencil, writing one's first name, reading simple words, identifying numbers, and doing basic addition—continued to increase. This increase occurred because during the same period, standardized testing became increasingly important in elementary school. Motivated by rewards for high scores on these tests, schools began teaching academic skills earlier so that students would have more time to practice them before having to take standardized tests and therefore could score higher. Meanwhile, kindergarten students began using workbooks more frequently, and fewer play centers were established in kindergarten classrooms than in previous years.

As the demands of kindergarten increased, preschools responded. In their efforts to prepare children for kindergarten, preschool teachers began to focus on group activities in which every student did the same thing. Because teachers had so many skills to teach and so many children to teach them to, this format made it easier to make sure that every child heard the same information, regardless of individual developmental abilities. For example, though most preschool teachers did not use worksheets, many teachers began asking students to complete "art" projects in which each student arranged the same reproduced parts using the same methods to create nearly identical works.

At the same time, families became more interested in kindergarten preparation. They began wanting their children to learn more about academic content, such as handwriting and prereading skills, than about group play and taking turns. Furthermore, many family members began using full-time child care during this period and spent most of each workday away from their children. Understandably, these family members wanted to see what their children did all day. These trends led families not only to want but also to expect their children to bring home handouts and art projects, which families could use to gauge children's academic success.

Past Teacher Training

In the 1990s, when many of today's veteran preschool teachers received their training, large-group or circle time was considered the primary tool for educating young children. Therefore, teachers learned to do most of their teaching by using storybooks, dances, songs, and fingerplays focusing on a selected theme. This way, at least in theory, all the children would learn the desired content no matter what specific activity they were doing. Art projects in particular had to focus on the theme, perhaps because most children participated in daily art activities or because the finished products went home to families and helped show what the children were learning about at school.

Teacher, Administrator, and Family Expectations

Teachers' own expectations can lead them toward the use of theme-based units. For one thing, they may have experienced theme-based units in their own early childhoods. Additionally, at least in the United States, popular culture tends to portray preschool teachers as happy adults who work in brightly colored classrooms and enjoy music and art. Movies, TV shows, and books frequently depict these teachers creating beautiful bulletin boards, giving children lots of hugs, and sending home colorful handprint turkeys at Thanksgiving. Furthermore, these portrayals typically show classrooms using teacher-created, theme-based units. Such pervasive media messages can strongly influence teachers, even when they desire to do things differently.

Administrators also contribute to the use of theme-based units. For instance, a given child-care program may use an established theme-based curriculum that the teachers must follow. This curriculum may be used to recruit families and provide diverse topics for teachers to discuss with children throughout the preschool or calendar year. This way of doing things may reassure both administrators and families that the children learn about a wide variety of content areas and therefore become more prepared for kindergarten.

Family expectations also contribute to theme-based units in another way. When families pay for full-time child care, they may want concrete evidence of what that money goes toward each day. Thus, families and administrators may ask teachers to choose activities that result in papers and artwork that children can take home. Teachers can easily plan these kinds of projects when using theme-based units. Unfortunately, some important content that early childhood professionals teach—such as problem solving or math and science concepts—does not typically lend itself to making physical products.

The DIY Generation of Teachers

Because theme-based units have been the standard for so long in preschool education, we can find many curriculum books full of preplanned two-week lessons that include thematic activities for every learning center in the classroom. These books appeal to busy educators, particularly those who feel burned out or who lack experience in lesson planning. And with these resources available, who can blame these teachers for not wanting to reinvent the wheel, as it were?

These books feed into the popular do-it-yourself (DIY) movement, with intriguing implications for teaching. In many DIY endeavors, someone creates step-by-step instructions to show how simple a project—anything from home improvement to cake decorating to arts and crafts to gardening—can be. Once these instructions launch on the internet, commonly as a video or as a post on a community bulletin-board site, anyone can recreate that project at home.

The DIY movement has given millions of men and women the confidence to take on previously intimidating projects—including teaching. Combining DIY resources and theme-based units makes lesson planning go quickly. A teacher can simply open a bulletin-board site and search for, say, “easy preschool nature activities” and instantly find all the ideas and projects she could ever want, complete with instructions and pictures of finished samples. She simply has to decide which activities to use on which days.

The Pitfalls of Theme-Based Units

While theme-based units are traditional and popular, they are not the best way to teach young children. Let’s explore some of the reasons why.

Lack of True Creative Expression



Case Study: “Creative” Dinosaur Art

Vaani wants to arrange some art projects for her class’s unit on dinosaurs. She searches a bulletin-board site and finds an activity that involves gluing cut-out shapes onto a sheet of paper to create a dinosaur. Vaani cuts out many identical shapes so that each child can have a full set. Then she glues one dinosaur together and mounts it by the art table. At learning-center time the next day, as Vaani gives the directions for the art center, she says, “It’s your turn to make dinosaurs, just like that one,” and points to her creation.

The problem with this DIY-style art activity is that creative expression is actually removed from the equation. DIY projects, contrary to popular belief, do not really create anything new. They simply have the user copy someone else's work in hopes of producing an identical result (which is virtually impossible in a classroom full of young children). In this case, the children all have the same pieces, and Vaani expects them to look at the assembled dinosaur and determine where to glue their own pieces to get the same results. This process does not require any creativity; in fact, it discourages individual expression, because the children's dinosaurs will not "look right" unless they place the pieces exactly as Vaani did.

Lost Learning Opportunities

Although Vaani's lesson does teach the children to follow directions, it does not truly teach them art skills. The children have no opportunity to experiment with chalk, paint, crayons, or other media, as Vaani's example does not include them. They also do not get to work with various art tools (paintbrushes, easels, and so on) that would help them develop fine motor skills. They cannot even practice using scissors, because Vaani pre-cut the pieces for them.

After the children assemble their dinosaurs, Vaani posts them on the wall outside the classroom for families to see. As is often the case, the families are thrilled to see and later take home these physical pieces of work that they can save for generations to come. However, they do not see the missed opportunities for learning that occurred in the process of creating the pictures.

Similarly, while a theme can tie all classroom activities together, it can also lead to many duplicated activities with only slight variations. These redundant endeavors take the place of new opportunities for learning.



Case Study: Sand-Table Struggles

Brent typically has trouble finding a way to link his classroom's sand table to his themes. He often resorts to hiding small plastic toys in the sand, such as woodland creatures for his forest unit and cars for his vehicles unit. Although the children may enjoy finding both types of toys, both activities involve improving fine motor skills. Thus, the children do not really learn anything new at the sand table from one unit to the next, and they may become bored.

At the same time, Brent does not take advantage of certain learning opportunities at the sand table because those activities do not fit any of his themes for the year. For instance, children can learn about volume and measurement by filling measuring cups and other containers with sand, but Brent does not see what this activity has to do with forests, vehicles, or any of his other units. Thus, he views this activity as a waste of time and never offers it to the children.

Incongruity with Children's Interests

Strictly thematic units require that all classroom activities relate to the theme and that the whole class participate, whether or not individual children want to know more about that topic. If preschoolers are not interested in classroom activities, they try to create their own fun—which is usually not the teacher's idea of fun!



Case Study: Insect Unit Gone Wrong

Satina has scheduled a two-week unit on insects for her class. The science center has magnifiers and dead insects that she has found, the library has books such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and so on. But from the beginning of this unit, several children refuse to participate, squealing, “Ew! Bugs are gross!” To make matters worse, the rest of Satina's class loses interest in the insect activities after just a few days. Satina finds herself dealing with children throwing toys, climbing furniture, wearing books as hats, and exhibiting other challenging behaviors.

Although theme-based units can reinforce concepts by having children use them in each learning center (for instance, putting alphabet blocks in the block center and hiding plastic letters in the sand table), all this interconnected content does no good if the children do not want to participate in the activities. To avoid this problem, monitor the children's interests and rotate classroom materials as those interests change. If you use activities that engage the children, they will learn, whether or not those activities relate to a specific theme.

A Note about Crafts

The point of this section is *not* to say that you should never have children make crafts. Handprint turkeys and so on are fine for an occasional holiday gift, and families will adore them. However, beyond the issues we have already discussed, crafts have some other key drawbacks that make them problematic for everyday lessons:

- With all the available ideas for crafts, you can easily spend more time choosing one than it takes for the children to actually complete one.
- Many crafts require that an adult create pieces (such as cut-out shapes) in advance, a fact that adds a great deal to your workload.
- If a craft is too complicated for the children to complete on their own, you or another adult will have to supervise the entire project, limiting your availability to supervise and assist children in other parts of the classroom.

We explore this issue further in chapter 11.

If Not Theme-Based Units, Then What?

If theme-based units are not the best way to teach young children, then what is? The following principles can guide us:

- Balance thematic and open-ended activities.
- Choose themes that matter to the children.
- Use open-ended materials and conversations.
- Use emergent curriculum to build school readiness.

Balance Thematic and Open-Ended Activities

Thematic units are not bad in and of themselves. In fact, they work well when children have a strong interest in learning about a certain topic. The keys to using themes well are to select them based on the children's interests, not the teacher's, and to avoid making every activity in the classroom focus on a theme. Effective classrooms balance thematic and open-ended activities to maximize learning and problem solving. This practice can help you in several ways.

Engaging Everyone

Not every child in your classroom will want to learn about dinosaurs, transportation, or whatever theme you might choose. Having neutral, creative materials available enables all children to engage in the classroom. This way, the children will always be learning something, regardless of whether they choose to participate in thematic activities.

Avoiding Round Pegs in Square Holes

Some activities, while important to expose children to, typically do not mesh well with themes. For example, color mixing is a typical activity in a preschool classroom. It helps children identify cause and effect as well as learn about the color spectrum. But if you try to force this activity to fit into a theme, you can create more work for yourself without providing any additional benefit to your students.

For example, imagine that your class is learning about how cars can move. To fit a color-mixing activity into this theme, you might cut out thirty or forty construction-paper cars. Then you might have each child put a spoonful of paint on one end of a car, place a spoonful of another color on the opposite end of the car, fold the car in half, and unfold it to look at the results. While this activity does have the children combine colors and does incorporate cars, it offers little else. You have spent a great deal of time cutting out the cars, and the

children can see that the colors have mixed. But they do not necessarily understand why or how it has happened, so how much have they really learned?

In contrast, a nonthematic approach to a color-mixing activity would require much less work from you, accomplish the same goals (teaching about cause and effect and about the color spectrum), and even provide some additional benefits. For example, you might place empty ziplock bags on a table along with containers of paint in primary colors. Then you could encourage each child to put two colors into a bag, seal it, and “mush it up” to see what happens. Children love seeing what new colors they create this way, and they get to see the process of the colors combining. Furthermore, by using the bags, you might be able to engage children who typically do not like messy play.

Providing Comfort

Some open-ended materials give comfort to young children simply because they can repeatedly use those items the same way without having to meet any adult expectations. For example, it calms some children to sit and build with wooden blocks with no agenda, so the classroom should provide such options.

Choose Themes That Matter to the Children

When choosing a theme, pick one that is relevant to the children in the classroom. For instance, if a teacher plans a two-week unit on the circus for a classroom of students who have never attended the circus, the children may not engage with that theme. Themes work best when the children have a small amount of knowledge about the topic and desire to learn more. In these cases, once the teacher has selected the theme, she needs to decide which activities should relate to it and which ones should be open-ended. Science and social-studies activities relate well to thematic content; art activities and block play can easily be open-ended.

For example, a unit about hibernation could include flashlight play in the dramatic-play area and science activities about different types of food and how they make the body feel (tired, energetic, and so on). The teacher might choose a book about hibernation for circle time, but she uses the rest of the classroom activities to encourage all children to explore and to help individual children pursue their goals. The classroom library contains books about a variety of topics to appeal to all the children. The art area focuses on learning to use different types of materials, such as fingerpaint or watercolors, instead of on painting pictures of bears or other animals that hibernate.

Playing *is* learning



Children are expected to read, write, count, and sit still at younger and younger ages. As these unrealistic expectations mount, family members and teachers alike continue to believe that these activities will prepare young children for school. But there is a better way—one that helps children build school readiness through developmentally appropriate activities. Best of all? The children can have fun!

Building on Emergent Curriculum: The Power of Play for School Readiness guides preschool teachers to tap into young children's natural inclination for play to build their skills, promote their development, and, ultimately, prepare them for elementary school.

Sarah Taylor Vanover, EdD, demonstrates that playtime is full of rich, interdisciplinary opportunities to teach children new ideas and help them develop new skills. You will discover key early learning concepts in this book, including:

- ❏ Why traditional theme-based units don't work
- ❏ What school readiness really looks like
- ❏ How to recognize and capitalize on the many teachable moments that arise during play
- ❏ Ways to train teachers and involve families in emergent curriculum
- ❏ Tips to help children develop crucial social-emotional, handwriting, and problem-solving skills—all while having fun!

Play and learning aren't mutually exclusive. *Building on Emergent Curriculum* will help you give preschoolers a solid foundation for elementary school while they do what children do best: play!


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