

We Skoolhouse

# Why No "Theme of the Week"





## **The Ineffectiveness of "Theme of the Week/Month" in Early Childhood Education**

Predetermined themes in early childhood education can often be ineffective because they impose rigid structures that may not align with the children's current interests or developmental needs. These themes may rush children through topics, limiting their ability to fully engage, explore, and understand concepts. Unlike emergent or play-based approaches, predetermined themes often lack the flexibility to adapt to the spontaneous interests and curiosities of young learners, which are crucial for deep, meaningful learning and engagement.

### **Several reasons why "Theme of the Week" is Ineffective:**

- Insufficient Time to Grasp Concepts
- Developmental Readiness and Variability ("One-size-fits-all" Approach)
- Greater Focus on a Theme Rather & Not the Actual Learning
- Reduced Engagement and Motivation (Look to the Kids, Not the Calendar)



## **INSUFFICIENT TIME TO GRASP CONCEPTS**

when adopting a pre-determined thematic approach, whether weekly or monthly, it can actually contradict the principles of how young children learn best. This structured methodology often **fails to account for the necessity of reviewing, revisiting, and repeating experiences, which are crucial for deep and meaningful learning.**

Research in brain science highlights that young children's brains are incredibly dynamic and malleable, a state known as neuroplasticity. Unlike adults, who may need fewer repetitions to grasp a concept, **children require numerous repeated experiences to form strong neural connections.** This repetition is essential for solidifying learning and developing a deep understanding of concepts.

**A thematic approach, with its rapid transitions from one topic to another, can disrupt this natural process.** Themes are often introduced, explored briefly, and then replaced by a new theme (which may have no relationship to the previous theme), leaving insufficient time for children to revisit and internalize the concepts. This can lead to superficial learning, where children might remember isolated facts or activities related to the theme but fail to develop a comprehensive understanding.

In contrast, **allowing children to engage with concepts over extended periods facilitates the formation of robust neural pathways.** When children have the opportunity to revisit and reflect on their experiences, they can build on previous knowledge, make connections, and deepen their understanding. This process aligns with the principles of brain development, where repeated and varied experiences strengthen synaptic connections, leading to more efficient and effective learning.



## **DEVELOPMENTAL READINESS & VARIABILITY**

Predetermined themes in early childhood education often fail to account for developmental readiness and variability among young children, making them ineffective for fostering meaningful learning experiences. These themes are typically designed to fit a rigid schedule, dictating the content and activities regardless of the children's individual developmental stages and interests. As a result, the curriculum may be too advanced or not challenging enough, leading to disengagement or frustration.

Children develop at varying rates and have unique learning needs, which a one-size-fits-all theme cannot address. Predetermined themes impose a uniform approach that may not align with each child's readiness to engage with specific concepts or activities. For example, a theme centered around complex scientific concepts may be developmentally inappropriate for younger children who are still mastering basic sensory and exploratory skills.

Moreover, when themes are set in advance, there is little room to adjust or adapt the curriculum based on the children's emerging interests or developmental milestones. This lack of flexibility can result in missed opportunities for deeper exploration and connection to the children's lived experiences, ultimately hindering their ability to engage meaningfully with the content. A more responsive and adaptable approach, such as emergent or play-based curriculum, better supports developmental readiness by allowing learning to unfold organically in alignment with the children's individual needs and interests.

# GREATER FOCUS ON A THEME & NOT THE ACTUAL LEARNING

So while we can be so strongly focused on themes and what they should be, in actuality, the theme itself is the least important thing; **it's the thinking and learning that happen around that theme that matter most.** For instance, even a seemingly simple and random theme like "cheese" can become highly constructive and engaging. It's not about the theme but about the skills and concepts children develop through their exploration.

Imagine at lunch time children were comparing their lunches, and somehow cheese seemed to be of particular interest and questions about this food item began to surface. The teacher can lean into their wonders and questions, in which the class might **start researching** different types of cheese, asking questions about how cheese is made, and **finding solutions to problems** like why some cheese has holes or why they taste and look different. This process naturally involves **critical and creative thinking**, as **children compare** different types of cheese, **make connections** to their daily experiences (e.g., the cheese they eat at home), and **expand their vocabulary.**



Because of the flexibility in this model, their inquiry could lead them to discover that cheese comes from milk, which comes from cows. This realization could spark a new line of investigation into farm life, the process of milking cows, and other foods we get from animals. And/or from there, the learning can branch out even further to explore different habitats. They might compare farms to forests and deserts, leading to questions like what lives in each environment and how those environments differ from their own. Maybe that leads to a specific study of a particular animal or animal group - endless possibilities.

By allowing for an organic and flexible flow, with prolonged experiences to breakdown content, slowly expand upon, and revisit concepts, the learning becomes rich and multifaceted. Whether the theme is cheese, butterflies, things that move, pigeons, or water, the **value lies in the depth and breadth of cognitive engagement it stimulates. Any subject can be a springboard for higher-level thinking skills, provided it is relevant, meaningful, and interesting to children.**



## **LOOK TO THE KIDS, NOT TO THE CALENDAR**

Don't look to the calendar; look to the kids. So often, we allow the calendar and holidays to dictate what children will explore. These events may not be relevant or meaningful to the children. For instance, a theme centered around a holiday may be imposed simply because it aligns with the time of year, rather than because it resonates with the children's current interests or developmental needs - handprint turkeys come to mind? Let's consider, is a toddler really associating a handprint turkey craft their teacher helped to create with the sliced up turkey they may or may not eat on a holiday they don't quite understand yet?

This calendar-driven approach can hinder genuine engagement and learning. When we prioritize holiday themes, we might overlook the everyday curiosities and passions that naturally arise in the children. These spontaneous interests are often the most fertile ground for deep, meaningful learning. For example, children might be fascinated by a bug they found on the playground, sparking a potential deep dive into entomology, ecosystems, and nature. But if we're rigidly following the calendar, we might have to abandon this authentic interest to move on to the next holiday theme, such as Halloween or Thanksgiving.

Even when there is a holiday or event that genuinely interests the children, we often don't slow down to explore it fully. Instead, we rush to the next calendar event. This practice prevents children from fully processing, reviewing, and revisiting what they've learned. It limits opportunities for them to delve deeper, ask more questions, and expand their understanding. For instance, if children show a keen interest in a cultural holiday, exploring its traditions, foods, and stories, we should allow them the time to immerse themselves in it. However, the pressure to move on to the next scheduled theme can cut this exploration short, reducing the depth and richness of their learning experience.

# RECONSIDERING THE TRADITIONAL CALENDAR

Let's compare the first five months of a traditional model thematic calendar to a contrived progressive / emergent curriculum.

## TRADITIONAL WEEKLY THEMES (EXAMPLE)

Week	September	October	November	December	January
Week 1	Welcome & All About Me	Fall & Harvest	Family & Community	Winter & Holidays	New Year & Goals
Week 2	Colors & Shapes	Pumpkins & Halloween	Transportation	Winter Traditions	Winter Wonderland
Week 3	Apples & Orchards	Spiders & Insects	Healthy Habits	Christmas & Holidays	Space & Planets
Week 4	Community Helpers	Bats & Nocturnal Animals	Gratitude & Thankfulness	New Year Celebrations	Arctic Animals
Week 5	Fall Leaves & Trees	Creepy Crawly Critters	Food & Nutrition	Winter Celebrations	Snow & Ice

## PROGRESSIVE EMERGENT OR PBL CURRICULUM (EXAMPLE)

Week	September	October	November	December	January
Week 1	Bird observation station with binoculars, bird seed, & bird guide.	Bird feeders with pinecones, peanut butter, birdseed.	Large-scale nest building with hay, sticks, fabric.	Trace migration routes with maps.	Winter scene with bird figurines, natural materials.
Week 2	Bird pictures and drawing materials.	Display pictures of local birds, nests.	Bird song recordings, instruments.	Mapping table with world maps, bird stickers.	Bird story sequencing (of a bird's life cycle or migration)
Week 3	What makes something a bird? Comparisons	Nature table with leaves, twigs, nest-building materials.	Create bird calls with whistles, shakers.	Make winter bird feeders (suet, seeds).	Display models of bird adaptations (beaks, feet).
Week 4	Bird nests and feathers for exploration.	Habitat diorama (forest, desert, wetland).	Different nests, materials for exploration.	Habitat models with sand, water, plants.	Do all birds migrate? What does migration look like compared to hibernation?

When observing the traditional example of curriculum with new weekly themes, children often rush through predetermined topics, depriving them of the necessary time to fully process new vocabulary, concepts, and materials. This approach leaves little room for the children's contributions and no opportunity to expand, revisit, or dive deeper into subjects of particular interest. Predetermined themes can also be irrelevant or meaningless for the children, making it hard for them to stay focused and engaged. In some cases, these themes may even be developmentally inappropriate, such as exploring "space" in a toddler classroom.

In contrast, the emergent or project-based curriculum allows for more meaningful and relevant learning experiences. For example, if children show an interest in birds, this topic is observable in their everyday environment and can be continuously revisited and expanded upon. This approach allows children to explore and evolve their understanding at a natural pace. Over the course of at least a week, children can revisit their observations, build on past experiences, and gradually introduce new concepts related to birds.

Think about it this way, **it would never make sense or be productive for an adult in college to take on a new subject every week.** College students, who have significantly more developed prior knowledge, processing skills, and attention spans, would find it overwhelming and ineffective to switch topics so rapidly. Yet, somehow, we expect this rapid turnover of subjects to work for our youngest demographic—young children—who are still developing these fundamental cognitive skills.

**Young children need the most amount of time with one subject or theme, and delivering new themes at an exceptionally weekly or monthly rate is counterproductive.** This age group benefits immensely from prolonged engagement with a single topic. They require ample time to explore, revisit, and deepen their understanding of new concepts. Switching themes too quickly does not allow children to fully process new vocabulary, ideas, and materials. It can lead to superficial learning, where children are exposed to many topics but do not develop a deep understanding of any of them.





## **OUR CHALLENGE: GET COMFORTABLE WITH NO THEMES**

We challenge you to consider feeling comfortable with not always having a theme. Guess what? Children are actually learning in the most optimal manner through child-led play, which should already constitute most of their day. When children engage in self-directed play, they are developing critical thinking skills, creativity, and social-emotional competencies far beyond what any formal lesson or theme could achieve.

Even in the absence of a specific theme, children are immersed in an environment rich with resources, open-ended materials, toys, books, and peers. This setup naturally promotes exploration, problem-solving, and collaboration. Higher-level thinking is constantly happening as children navigate their play, make decisions, and interact with their surroundings and each other.

In instances where there is no obvious and observable interest, it's still perfectly okay. The classroom environment itself serves as a catalyst for learning. The role of the educator is to document what the children are doing, learning, and saying, making their learning visible. This ongoing observation and documentation process highlights the learning journey and provides insights into each child's development.

Such documentation is just as valuable, if not more so, than a monthly "theme board." It captures the authentic learning experiences and progress of each child, offering a deeper understanding of their growth. By embracing a child-led approach, we honor the natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation of young children, creating a more meaningful and impactful learning experience.



## ALTERNATIVES TO PREDETERMINED THEMES

- **Emergent Curriculum** is responsive to children's immediate interests and incorporates play-based learning by using play as a foundation for exploring evolving topics.
- **Project-Based Learning (PBL)** involves structured, long-term projects and integrates play-based elements to support hands-on exploration and problem-solving.
- **Play-Based Learning** focuses on self-directed play as a primary method of learning and development, enhancing both emergent and project-based approaches.

### Emergent Curriculum

- **Focus:**
  - **Child's Interests:** Emergent curriculum evolves from children's interests, questions, and observations. It is designed to be responsive to what children are curious about at any given time.
  - **Flexibility:** It adapts continuously based on the children's immediate and changing needs.
- **Implementation:**
  - **Observation-Based:** Teachers observe and document children's interactions and play to guide and shape the curriculum dynamically.
  - **Responsive:** Learning experiences are adjusted based on what is happening in the classroom, allowing for spontaneous and fluid changes.
- **Examples:**
  - If children are intrigued by bugs, the curriculum may include bug-themed activities/provocations and explorations that evolve as their interest deepens.
  - Activities and topics may shift based on new questions or discoveries from the children.



## Project Based Learning (PBL)

- **Focus:**
  - **Extended Projects:** PBL involves children working on a specific project over an extended period, driven by a particular question or problem.
  - **Structured Investigation:** The project includes multiple stages of exploration and learning, focusing on deep, sustained inquiry.
- **Implementation:**
  - **Project Development:** Projects are planned with specific goals but remain flexible to accommodate children's findings and evolving interests.
  - **Long-Term Engagement:** Children engage in a structured, multi-faceted project that involves research, hands-on activities, and problem-solving.
- **Examples:**
  - Children might create a classroom garden, involving activities such as planting, studying growth, and presenting their findings.
  - The project allows children to explore the topic in-depth, integrating various aspects of learning.



## Play Based Learning

- **Focus:**
  - **Exploration Through Play:** Play-based learning emphasizes children's natural tendency to explore, experiment, and learn through play.
  - **Holistic Development:** It supports cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development by allowing children to engage in self-directed play.
- **Implementation:**
  - **Learning Centers:** Classrooms are equipped with various play-based materials and centers that encourage exploration and creativity.
  - **Teacher's Role:** Teachers support and extend learning by observing play, asking open-ended questions, and introducing new materials based on children's interests.
- **Examples:**
  - Children might engage in dramatic play, building with blocks, or exploring sensory tables, each providing opportunities for learning.
  - Teachers might introduce new play materials or scenarios based on what children are interested in at the moment.



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