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Schools as Places Where Children Learn to Make a Better World: The Possibilities of Exploring Themes in Curriculum

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*Schools as Places Where Children Learn
To Make a Better World: The
Possibilities of Exploring Themes in
Curriculum*

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"The [monarch butterfly] project, helps the children connect to the environment and have an impact upon it. I hope it will help them to see school as a place where they can learn to make a better world. We will all see butterflies quite differently in the future." (*Pets & Me*, 1991, p10.)

The quote above comes from one of the teachers who worked with us in developing *Pets & Me*, a thematic unit exploring the question, "How can we understand the relationships among humans, other animals, and nature?" It summarizes her thoughts and feelings at the end of an extended "lesson" during which her fourth-grade students had raised monarch butterflies, planted a garden to attract butterflies, and released the butterflies.

Learning about monarch butterflies and the environment provided the factual content for the project. The teacher and children started with planning, planting, and caring for a butterfly garden--learning which flowers and plants attract monarch butterflies. All the while, the students raised the butterflies from caterpillars. Students learned about the chrysalis and purpose of the "gems" on it, watched the butterflies emerge, learned to let the wings harden, and released the butterflies. This work provided the opportunity to learn a wealth of information. But the information was not simply a series of facts to acquire. The teacher and students located this activity within a discussion of whether or not the monarch butterflies could be pets as they addressed the topic question, "What is a pet?" Through reflection on the topic question, the activity became linked as well to the theme of human-animal relationships as applies to the monarch butterflies and their environment.

The butterfly project and the teachers' and students' reflection on its meaning was one of many ways of addressing the topic question, "What is

a pet?" and the broader thematic question, "How we can understand the relationships among humans, other animals, and nature?" Together the combination of activity and reflection on the topic and thematic questions provided the context in which the students "learned to make a better world." The study engaged the teacher and students intellectually with each other and gave both a perspective on ways that school learning could connect with moral purpose.

Defining Thematic Units

In this paper, we share our emerging perspective on thematic curriculum. A thematic unit is a set of learning experiences that are designed to help students integrate their learning around an important human question. Thematic units most often include activities from a variety of different disciplines giving students and teachers the opportunity to explore the central question from a variety of perspectives. For example, students may look at a given question from scientific, historical, literary, aesthetic, and personal experience points of view. Through linking experience and reflection students and teachers gain new insight into the original question.

Within the thematic unit, "facts/information," "topics," and "themes" serve different functions in children's learning. By "facts and information" we mean discrete bits of knowledge about a given thing, event, or procedure. For example when working on the *Pets & Me* unit, children learn facts about selected animals such as their life span, natural environment, and needs for food and shelter. "Topics" are broader classes of knowledge and tend to be those studied under traditional disciplines.

"Topics" provide a framework for organizing facts and information. In *Pets & Me* the topic is pets, and it is important to note that pets are often a topic for study in pre-school and the elementary years. "Themes" are broad human or existential questions that allow us to connect "topics" within an exploration of the role of humans in the world. In *Pets & Me* teachers and children explore the theme of relationship not to arrive at a "right answer" about the relationships between humans and the natural world but to better understand the possibilities inherent in these relationships and in that way to improve the world.

As distinct and hierarchically related elements of curriculum development these three concepts represent different layers of context and meaning with facts and information at the center, while topics and themes are successively broader rings in a set of concentric circles. (See figure 1.1)

INSERT FIGURE 1.1 ABOUT HERE

Within this representation, the boundaries that separate the different levels are somewhat fuzzy and yet intimately connected. Each level can stand alone, but when used alone in curriculum projects, an individual layer leads to an incomplete learning experience. What strikes us as important about working across all three layers is the potential to reconnect school learning with moral purpose and thereby engage students in making a better world.

Our experience developing and testing *Pets & Me*, demonstrated that teachers and children worked within this hierarchy in different places at different times. Conceptually and practically, it did not seem to matter

whether their study began at the level of theme, topic, or facts and information. What mattered was that teachers and children moved across all three layers, being conscious of the connections among them through the careful use of activity and reflection. Indeed, key teacher responsibilities include making those connections and transitions from layer to layer and making the moves clear to the students.

While the connections among the rings are important, it is also necessary to be clear about the substance of each ring. In the next section, we present what emerged over the course of the *Pets and Me* project as key features of each of the rings. These conceptions should be helpful to teachers as they design thematic units. They help us explain both how and why to include all three layers.

Facts/Information<-->Topics<-->Themes

Analysis of and reflection upon the group's curriculum development process and the *Pets & Me* thematic unit lead us to the following generalizations about the respective roles of facts/information, topics, and themes in curriculum.

Attention to Facts/Information in Curriculum:

- * focuses on basic information and narrowly defined questions and ideas
- * focuses on "the three R's," contained in most textbook units
- * pays little attention to a larger context that gives meaning to facts

Attention to Topics in Curriculum:

- * helps us decide what information is important for children to learn
- * provides a potentially meaningful context for facts, often in terms of standard disciplines
- * provides a way of organizing facts and discrete bits of information into classes of experiences
- * allows teachers to guide children's engagement with the world and provide them with categories that adults have used to make sense of their world
- * provides a context for understanding more broadly and across disciplines

Attention to Themes in Curriculum:

- * provides ways to go beyond the disciplines to integrate the information and the topic within a context of the full range of human experience
- * encourages examination of issues from multiple perspectives and wonder about their meaning for their lives often in terms of fundamental human (existential) questions
- * provides opportunities to learn something about ourselves, our society and what it means to be human
- * provides a context to explore the moral dimensions of emerging understandings of the world
- * supports the development of communities of learners based on inquiry, speculative discourse, and deliberation
- * provides the opportunity to engage students in a celebration of life, a conversation about what it means to be human, and a joint exploration of the world with their teachers. (Freeman and Sokoloff, 1994)

PETS & ME: As A Thematic Unit

Pets & Me is a thematic unit for pre-school through grade five based on a constructivist approach to learning (Brooks and Brooks, 1993; Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1993). It uses the human-animal bond as a multi-level topic. At one level, the topic involves exploring the question "What is a pet?" (See Figure 1.2)

INSERT FIGURE 1.2 ABOUT HERE

Within the question, students explore four narrower topics: (a) the values of animals as pets, (b) the kinds of pets available, (c) the responsibilities of pet ownership, and (d) health issues related to pet ownership. In order to explore these more narrowly defined topics, students engage in serious study of a wide range of facts and information about the classes of animals and individual animals that people in their communities, as well as in other parts of the country and world, keep as pets. As students and teachers grapple with developing answers to the question "What is a pet?" they begin to refine their understanding of the theme: relationships among humans, other animals, and nature. Figure 1.3 presents an overview of the facts/information, topics and theme for the *Pets & Me* unit.

INSERT FIGURE 1.3 ABOUT HERE

It is important to note that the thematic unit is explicitly designed to be descriptive, not prescriptive. In this way we encourage teachers to develop their own lessons or to modify and adapt the suggested activities. Each lesson provides multiple and multi-sensory approaches to teacher

and student learning. We integrate work in language arts, math, science, social studies, physical education, art and music. Children use a variety of tools including observation, computer data bases, library books, role playing exercises, and interviews with pet care professionals as they try to make sense of the information they are gathering, organize it under the topics of study, and integrate it within the thematic question. We also include multiple opportunities for school-wide activities that are designed to foster the growth of the school as a learning community. The intent is to provide teachers with a curriculum tool that engages them as well as their students in meaningful learning.

Bruner hints at the intellectual and moral power of this sort of thematic approach when he writes,

the language of education must express stance and must invite counter-stance and in the process leave place for reflection, for metacognition. It is this that permits one to reach higher ground, this process of objectifying in language or image what one has thought and then turning around on it and reconsidering it. (Bruner, 1986, p. 129)

Bruner makes clear the important difference between education and indoctrination, training, or conditioning. Yet, it is not always easy to know how to go beyond standard or traditional practice and create learning environments and activities that truly engage students and their teachers in meaningful exploration. Looking at the relationships among facts/information, topics, and themes in constructing curriculum and how activity and reflection provide ways to link these layers of context gives us a road map toward that higher ground.

PETS & ME: A Developmental Note

It is important to note that when we began our collaboration with eight pre-school and school elementary teachers, we thought that we knew what thematic units were and how to write them. We shared a sense that thematic teaching is important and leads to integrated learning, but we learned over the course of the project that our original conception confused topics and themes and that we were not clear about the role and importance of learning facts and information in a thematic context. We began with a set of topics (which we thought were themes), and it took two years of curriculum development and testing as well as many hours of struggling as a group with a persistent question--"Aren't we really talking about relationships here?" before we realized the difference and came up with a clear statement of the theme. We hope that by sharing our experience and new perspective, we will be able to help other teachers who are trying to develop thematic units.

When we started the project our perspective was similar to that of many other authors and researchers interested in thematic units. We believed that what we needed to do was to identify our topic, develop a visual representation (a web or flow chart) of related ideas and facts, and identify materials and activities that would engage children in exploring the topic (Altwerger and Flores, 1994; Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988; Mills and Clyde, 1990; Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik, 1990; Perkins and Blythe, 1994; Pigdon and Wooley, 1993). We wondered if we could write a thematic unit that would be useful in classrooms beyond those of the teachers on the project team because so much of the literature on thematic units advocates planning units almost exclusively at the classroom level

and including the children in the planning (Altwerger and Flores, 1994; Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988; Mills and Clyde, 1990; Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik, 1990). We found that teachers who agreed to test the unit made it their own through adaptations based on their settings and children. We also found that many of these teachers went beyond the search for "right answers" and engaged with their children in speculation about what animals could be pets. They also explored the theme of human-animal relationships (Freeman and Sokoloff, 1994).

We see thematic units as one of many effective approaches to organizing ideas for teaching and learning in schools. Although our work to date has been with an exploration of the human-animal bond, we think that the understanding of the relationships among facts/information, topics, and themes that has emerged from this work is applicable to other areas of curriculum. By taking a thematic approach, teachers and students organize what they know--facts and information--within a framework of what they know about--topics. They also explore how what they know and know about can be used to both understand and improve the world around them.

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Figure 1.1
Relationships Among
Facts/Information, Topics and Themes in Curriculum

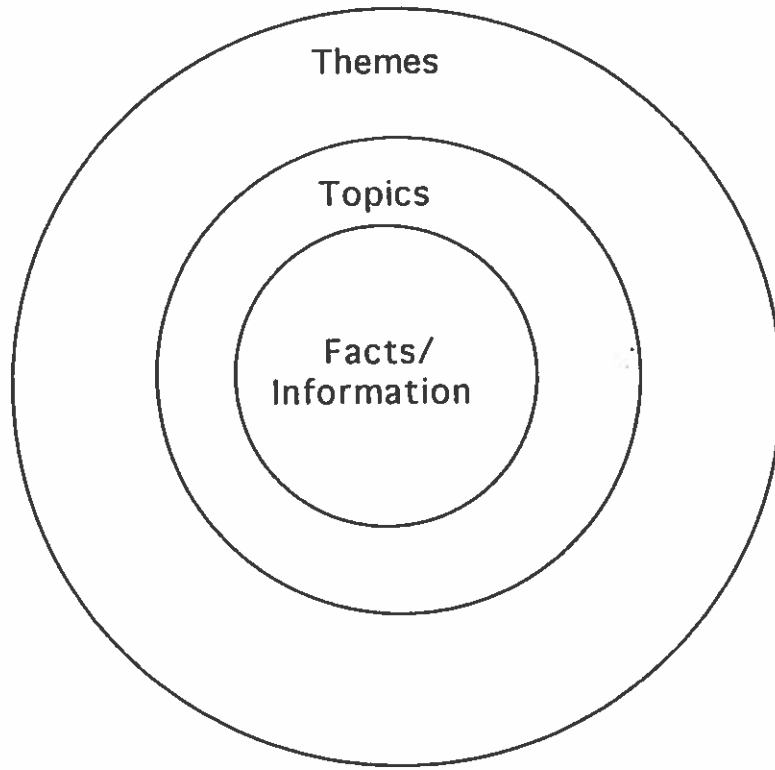


Figure 1.2

**Three Cycles:
Structure of *Pets & Me***

1. Lessons begin with what children already know by asking "What makes a pet?" This knowledge is used to structure a broad conceptual and practical framework about pets. Children are then asked to find out what others know. What makes a pet, the values of pets, and observation of pet behavior in the man-made and natural environment are explored throughout the unit.
2. The second part of the spiral begins with a lesson that returns to the question, "What makes a pet?" Children are given opportunities to collect factual information about pets. The goal here is to encourage them to reflect on what they already know about pets, to increase their knowledge, and to modify their original thinking.
3. Lessons end by synthesizing what students have learned from the factual information they have gathered about pets and developed into a broad framework. This is done by returning once again to the question, "What makes a pet?"

Figure 1.3

Content of *Pets & Me*

1. Facts and Information: Classes of animals and individual animals as pets.
 - a. Information about the ways selected animals live in the world
 - b. Information about selected animals' lives and needs
 - c. Information about ways humans and other animals interact
 - d. Information about the environment where selected animals live
2. Topic: What is a Pet?
 - a. Values of animals as pets
 - b. Kinds of pets available
 - c. Responsibilities of pet ownership
 - d. Health issues related to pet ownership
3. Theme: How can we understand the relationships among humans, other animals, and nature?