
UNIT 27 THE THEME-BASED APPROACH

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27.1 INTRODUCTION

The curriculum can be planned in various ways. Can you plan a curriculum around a theme, such as ‘plants’, ‘friends’, ‘colour blue’, etc.? If you were to plan a curriculum for grade I children, what themes would you choose for different subjects? Share your response in the space shared below.

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While you read in Unit 25 of this Block, that curriculum development involves four major elements – goals, content, pedagogy and assessment; this Unit onwards you will study various approaches that can be adopted to ensure that these elements get incorporated into a curriculum. In this Unit, you will read about the thematic planning of the curriculum. This Unit will discuss the meaning, planning and implementation of a theme-based curriculum for young children.

Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- define theme-based curriculum planning;
- identify and discuss the steps involved in planning a theme-based curriculum;
- plan and implement a theme-based curriculum; and
- discuss the strengths and challenges of a theme-based curriculum.

27.2 WHAT IS THEME-BASED CURRICULUM PLANNING?

In the theme-based approach to planning curricular content, one theme is selected for transaction in the class with the children for a particular period of time. Here the term '**theme**' is understood as a broad topic of study or a general unifying idea. During this time, most of the learning experiences planned by the teacher (including play, activities, field visits, projects) are centred on the theme. The physical environment of the centre is also created to reflect the theme. Thus, the children are immersed in the theme in different ways. Using this theme, children are provided learning experiences that help to develop various concepts, abilities and skills in different domains of development or subjects/areas. In other words, the learning experiences based on a theme help to achieve the goals of learning.

The plan around any one theme describing what content will be covered and the activities that will be carried out to transact this content is referred to as a '**Theme-based Unit Plan or Thematic Unit**' plan. The duration of the thematic unit plan depends on the learning goals that can be achieved: the amount of content that is relevant to that theme for the group of children; children's age, needs and interests as well as the resources available to transact the theme. If a theme is fairly broad with varied content, it is a good idea to think of sub-themes within it. This makes the content meaningful for the children. So, if it seems that there is a month-long worth of content in a thematic unit, you may identify sub-themes that would be of a shorter duration under the larger umbrella of the unifying theme. For example, when planning the curricular content for four-year-olds, a preschool teacher took up the theme of '*Pashu-Pakshi*' for a period of a month. She identified weekly sub-themes as 'Wild Animals', 'Domestic Animals', 'Birds', and 'Insects'. This way, the children were involved in an in-depth exploration of the sub-themes.

The duration of the theme is generally decided by the teacher. While there is no fixed rule regarding the duration of a theme-based unit plan, usually with young children, a theme (or a sub-theme in case the theme is broad) can be transacted over 5-6 days. It is a good idea to be flexible and to adjust the time period based on the needs and interests of children.

27.3 STEPS IN PLANNING A THEME-BASED CURRICULUM

The following are the steps in planning a theme-based curriculum or a thematic curriculum. Each step has been explained further.

- a) Know the learning and development goals of children
- b) Selecting the themes
- c) Generating the theme's content possibilities
- d) Selecting the theme content
- e) Identifying activities that would help in reaching learning and developmental goals
- f) Organizing the learning experiences for a theme-based unit
- g) Preparing the learning space for the theme
- h) Implementation of thematic curriculum and assessment.

27.3.1 Know the Learning and Development Goals of Children

You need to be familiar with the learning and development goals that have been identified for children for whom you plan the curriculum. Learning and development goals specify the concepts, abilities and values you want the children to develop and acquire during one/two years that they are with you in the pre-primary centre.

Once you are familiar with the goals, you can identify themes that will help you to achieve them. In fact, if the goals are broadly worded, then most of the topics that young children usually find interesting can be selected as themes because there is a potential to achieve these broad goals through almost any theme. The more important thing to be done is to identify what specific concepts, skills and abilities you are focussing upon through a theme. It should not be that across all themes only specific developmental domains get attention, while others are not focussed upon. So all the goals of development should be addressed across the various themes.

27.3.2 Selecting Themes for the Year

The selection of themes is primarily done by the teacher. Usually, at the beginning of the year, the teacher selects the different themes that would be explored during the year and develops a broad idea of the content she will include in each theme. The selection of the theme and the content within it is based on the teacher's estimate about what is appropriate and interesting for children. In this sub-section, we will discuss how to select themes and in the next sub-section, we will describe how to identify content to be included under a theme.

Besides keeping the learning and development goals in mind while selecting themes, as discussed above, there are other aspects you need to be mindful of while selecting themes. These are discussed further:

a) Children's Context

By 'context', we mean children's physical/geographical, social and cultural environment. You would need to take this into account when deciding upon themes. The children will take more interest in and participate more in a theme that is interesting and meaningful for them. For instance, children living in a village or rural area where agriculture is the main source of income for families will readily accept the theme 'Farming'. On the other hand, children living in an urban area are not likely to be familiar with farming but will probably respond more to the theme 'Gardening', as many may have gardens at home or would have visited community gardens or parks. In other words, we need to keep children's prior experiences in mind when selecting a theme. It depends on the skill of the teacher as to how she is able to shape a theme so that the children connect it to their existing knowledge and also build upon it further.

To take another example, your approach will be different, depending on whether you are located near a desert, a sea or the mountains. For example, most children living in a community located in the mountains of Sikkim would not have experienced a sea. It is very difficult to describe the ocean to someone who has never seen it, especially young toddlers and pre-primary learners who rely on concrete experiences to learn about the world. Thus, for younger children, it would be wiser to pick themes that focus on the environment around them.

Young children respond more to themes that they can directly experience; in other words, **concrete themes**. Abstract themes like 'My Country' or 'Freedom' will be difficult for the preschool child to understand. 'My village' or 'My School' are more appropriate themes for children as they can see and experience these directly. Also, avoid taking up 'cute' themes like 'teddy bear' or 'fairies' and instead focus on themes related to real life.

b) Respecting Cultural Diversity

Festivals are often taken up as themes in the early childhood curriculum. Sensitivity and respect for all cultures and communities must be shown while taking up themes related to culture and festivals. It should not be that only the festivals of the dominant group in the community are celebrated. The festivals of all the communities represented in the class must be celebrated and discussed.

c) Time Period of the Year

When you identify a theme for the transaction during a particular time period of the year, ensure that it is relevant for that time of the year. For example, it is best to take up each season as a theme, when that season is ongoing during the year. Children find it more meaningful to discuss a season when they are actually experiencing it. Similarly, festivals are best taken up for discussion when a festival is approaching. Putting the discussion of all festivals together in a week or two is not meaningful. Themes that are not related to a specific time of the year can be transacted at any time.

Sources for Identifying Themes

The themes for toddlers and pre-primary learner should come from the children's daily experiences, which are concrete and support their developing abilities. So when looking for topics, you do not need to search for topics that are unique or unusual, but rather consider themes related to the child the family, and the community.

a) Themes Related to the Child

The curriculum plays an important role in helping the child understand herself, her self-worth and her capability. Children enjoy learning about themselves. So themes that help children learn about their body, emotions, likes/dislikes, skills and uniqueness can take up a significant amount of the curriculum's time.

b) Themes Related to Children's Families

The family of children is also a treasure trove of themes that interest children. They can learn about their own family members, food preferences, occupations of parents and festivals. They can build an understanding of how other families are similar or dissimilar from their own. These topics help to understand diversity and respect differences.

c) Themes Related to the Child's Community

Such themes help in expanding children's understanding of the larger world. Children learn about their community and the people of their community through topics like transportation, post office, railway station, health services, community helpers, parks and festivals. Community-related themes help children appreciate inter-relatedness between various people in the community.

d) Themes Related to the Environment

Children are curious about the physical and biological environment. They are attracted to the animals and birds around them and trees and plants. Different seasons bring different fruits, flowers and vegetables. Taking up such themes for transaction help the children to build an understanding of their world.

Some common themes taken up in the early childhood curriculum include 'Myself', 'My Family', 'Plants', 'Animals', 'Birds', 'Transportation', 'My Helpers', 'Water', 'Seasons', 'Sky', 'Day & Night' and 'Air'.

Look at Table 27a to see how Bhavna, a preschool teacher working with a group of four-year-olds in a Jaipur (Rajasthan), distributed the themes she had identified over the whole year.

Bhavna created a matrix representing the entire year, dividing each month into four weeks. She blocked the weeks when children would have extended vacations and slotted the themes in the remaining weeks. Check whether the various aspects we have discussed above regarding the selection of the themes are reflected in the themes selected by Bhavna. Compare your analysis with ours given after the table.

Table 27a: Bhavna’s Annual Theme Plan

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
April	Settling down in the Preschool		My Self	Five Senses
May	Summer		SUMMER HOLIDAYS	
June	SUMMER HOLIDAYS			
July	My Family	My Family		Rain
August	Garden		Insects and Worms	Insects and Worms
September	Water		Trees	
October	Our Helpers	Our Helpers		Fruits
November	Vegetables		Market	Market
December	Animals (Domestic)	Animals (Wild)	Sea Animals	Winter
January	WINTER HOLIDAYS		Colours	
February	Birds		Air	Jaipur Landmark: <i>Hawa Mahal</i>
March		Transport (Land)	Transport (Water and Air)	Sky
Optional Themes: Clothes, Flowers, Shadows				
Celebration of Festival: The festivals which are celebrated by the families of the children will be taken in the relevant week.				

Bhavna has selected very specific themes which are concrete and meaningful for children, and where there are many possibilities of direct first-hand experience. She has chosen the time periods for the theme very carefully keeping her context in mind.

For example, she placed the theme ‘Rain’ during the last week of July which coincides with the rainy season of Jaipur. She kept the theme ‘Birds’ during February which is the time when more birds are visible in Jaipur because of winter migration. She included the theme ‘Jaipur Landmark: Hawamahal’ as it is a major landmark of the city the children live in; and she kept it in February when it would be pleasant in Jaipur to go out for a day trip.

Did you notice that Bhavna has kept left one week in a month free when no theme has been allocated? She has done this to give space in case children want to extend a theme. These ‘free’ spaces or ‘gaps’ also give her the option of introducing a theme not thought of during planning, but which emerges during the transaction of the curriculum either from the children or the teacher. These spaces also enable the preparation of the classroom for the next theme. Bhavna has also thought of some ‘Optional Themes’ that she can introduce during the ‘free’ weeks or in case some themes conclude earlier than a week.

27.3.3 Webbing: Generating the Theme’s Content Possibilities

After you have identified a theme, the next step is to explore what content can be covered under it. To understand what possibilities the theme offers, one would need to gather information on the theme by reading books and

researching on the internet. After all, a teacher is not expected to know everything about a theme beforehand. A good way to brainstorm what content can be covered under a theme is to make a web. A web is a graphical representation of the possible content that can be covered under the theme. Let us read in detail how to develop the 'web'.

'Web' is a planning tool that is used to visually represent key ideas and concepts linked to a theme. The process of web-making begins with writing the name of the theme in the centre of the paper/board and brainstorming what topics can be explored under the theme. These topics are written around the theme, with lines connecting the topics to the central theme. Then each topic is expanded further by brainstorming what sub-topics and ideas can be transacted within it. In this way, one idea leads to another and the spider-web-like diagram emerges. If different topics/sub-topics are related, they can be connected with dotted lines, showing possible inter-connections. You could involve other teachers in developing the web. Collaboration adds to the enhancement of ideas and brainstorming, and you can share ideas, information, skills and resources with each other.

When you are thinking about the content and concepts that can be covered under a theme do not be critical of what ideas come to your mind. This will not let you think of ideas in the first place. Brainstorm freely without thinking about whether the content would be relevant for children or not. The screening of content and topics in terms of whether they are relevant for children is the second step.

Creating a web enables the teacher to get a bird's eye view of all the content a theme can include. Now from these topics and sub-topics, the teacher can select the content which would be relevant for her group of children. How to do so has been discussed in the next Sub-section. Furthermore, having this overview in front of her helps the teacher to get an idea of the tentative time frame she would need to transact the theme.

The web can be directly created on paper as described above. There is another way of creating the web which gives the teacher more flexibility during the webbing process. In this method, you write the various topics and sub-topics under a theme on small paper cards. Then, you organize and group these topics in a way that you feel is most suitable for the children. In this way, the topics and sub-topics can be re-arranged as you get more ideas and different perspectives emerge. Only after you have completed brainstorming for ideas and grouping them, do you draw the web on the paper, by keeping the theme in the centre and connecting it through radiating lines to the topics and sub-topics. Thus, you save the effort of drawing and re-drawing the web.

While creating the web, some topics under a theme may get detailed more than others. This may happen because some topics under a theme naturally have more content or because you are aware of more content related to that topic. Webbing is just a planning tool. It is not the final list of topics you will transact with the children. It is not necessary that all the aspects you have detailed under a topic in the web have to be transacted with children.

Remember that as more ideas are generated, you can expand the web even at a later stage. In fact, it is a good idea to finalize the web after discussing with

the children what they would like to explore within the theme. This discussion can be done on the first day when you introduce the theme to the children. The focus of the discussion on the first day when a theme is introduced is to find out what children already know about the topic and what more they would like to know. This has been discussed in the next Sub-section.

To understand how to develop a web, let us see how Bhavna along with another teacher brainstormed for ideas on the theme ‘birds’. Refer to Figure 1.

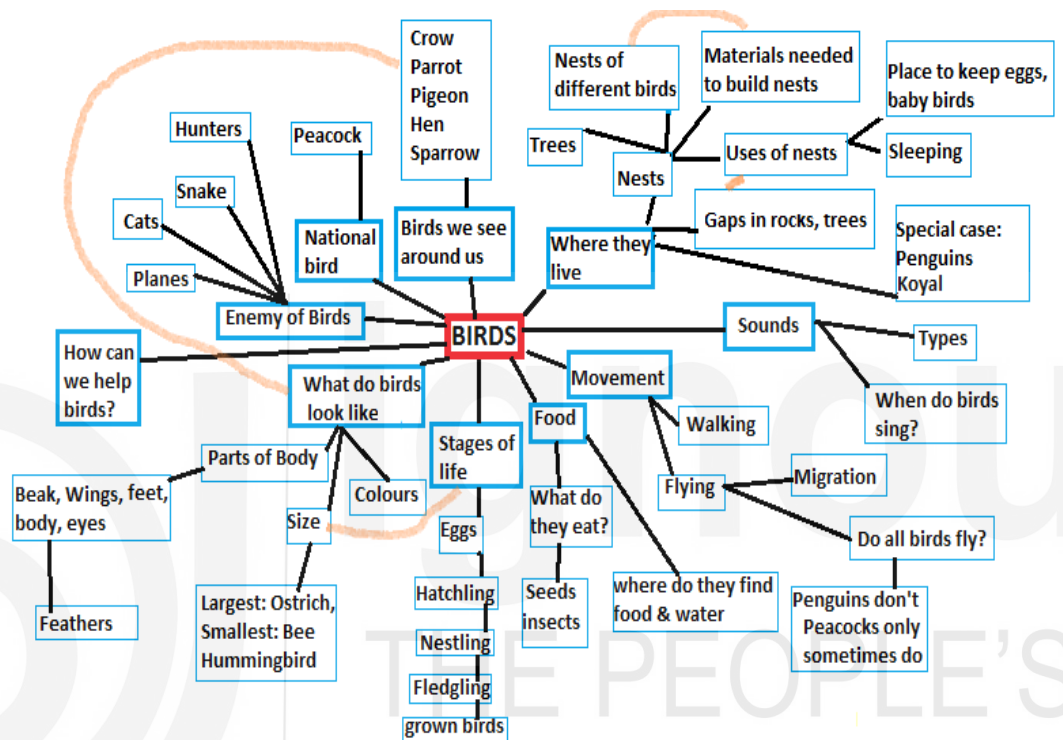


Fig. 1: Web on the theme ‘Birds’

Bhavna identified many topics on the theme ‘Birds’, which on the web are noted in the boxes with the blue outline and connected with black lines. For each topic, she further brainstormed and thought of sub-topics – these have been written in boxes with orange outlines. After the web was completed, Bhavna felt that some topics/sub-topics were also related to each other. To remind herself of these additional connections, she connected these topics with lines drawn in another format (curved). For instance, to indicate the concept that ‘birds are of different sizes at different stages of life’, she connected the boxes of ‘size’ and ‘stages of life’ which are in different branches of the web.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Fill in the blanks by adding the steps required to plan a theme-based curriculum or a thematic curriculum.
 - a) Knowing the learning and development goals for children.
 - b)
 - c) Generating the theme’s content possibilities.

- d)
- e) Identifying activities which would help in reaching learning and developmental goals.
- f)
- g) Preparing the learning space for theme.
- h)

2) List some themes that can be taken up in the curriculum for young children?

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3) With reference to theme-based planning, explain what is a 'Web'?

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27.3.4 Selecting Relevant Content for the Theme-based Unit Plan

After creating the web, you have to select the content (topics and sub-topics) which you will transact with children.

A theme-based unit plan begins with identifying the themes. Let us see how Bhavna selected the content/topics for transaction with children after she had created the web. Refer to Figure 2.

Bhavna decided that she would transact the theme 'Birds' for a week with the children. She selected the following topics on the theme, based on her estimate and understanding of what children would find interesting and what would be relevant for them:

- a) *Parts of the Body*
- b) *What Birds Eat*
- c) *Bird Movements*
- d) *Where do Birds Live*

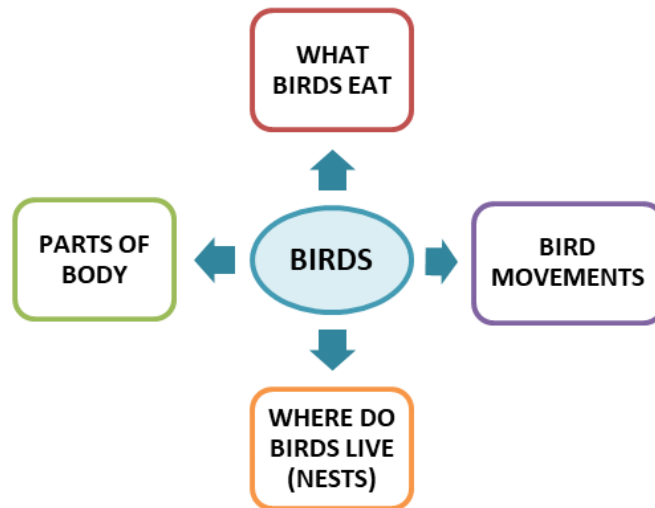


Fig.2: Sub- themes determined by Bhavna on the theme ‘Birds’

Making Theme-based Planning more Child-Centric

To make the above scenario more child-centric, the teacher could have introduced the theme to the children wherein she carries out a whole group discussion with the children. This introduction is to be done as a large group teacher-initiated discussion. During this introductory discussion, the teacher may try to find what the children already know about the theme (referred to as ‘children’s prior knowledge’) and what more are they interested in knowing about it. In this way, she can counter-check whether what she have broadly planned to transact with children in the theme-based unit plan is appropriate for them and she can add topics and activities suggested by them, in case she have not already included these. If possible, before finalizing the content to be transacted with children, she can take inputs from some parents regarding content and activities they may like the children to be involved in. When parents and children are involved in creating curriculum content, she can ensure that content is meaningful to their context and that their interests and ideas are also included in the curricular content. Based on this discussion, the teacher may decide to add new content to the earlier web. Now after this web is modified or expanded after this introductory discussion with the children, the teacher has to finalize what content has to be selected from the web to be transacted with children. Let us see if Bhavna would have taken up this approach, how she would have done it.

Bhavna decided that she would make a final list of the topics to be transacted under the theme after the first day’s introductory discussion with the children on the theme.

During the introductory discussion, Bhavna found that most children identified two or three birds (most commonly, crow, pigeon and sparrow). She had actually expected them to be aware of some more birds, and so had not included the topic ‘Birds Around Us’ for the transaction. However, after seeing the response of children in the introductory session, she decided that to enhance children’s awareness about birds, she would include the topic ‘Birds Around Us’. During the introductory discussion, Bhawna realized that children wanted to know where birds live. One child had asked – “Where do they sleep?” So she added the topic ‘where do birds live’ to her list of selected topics for the

transaction. She decided to omit the topic 'what birds eat' which she had earlier included, as the list of the topics was becoming too long. Based on this discussion, as well as the programme goals, Bhavna finalized the following topics for the transaction under the theme-based Unit 'Birds' with her class of four-year-olds. These topics are represented in Figure 3 below:

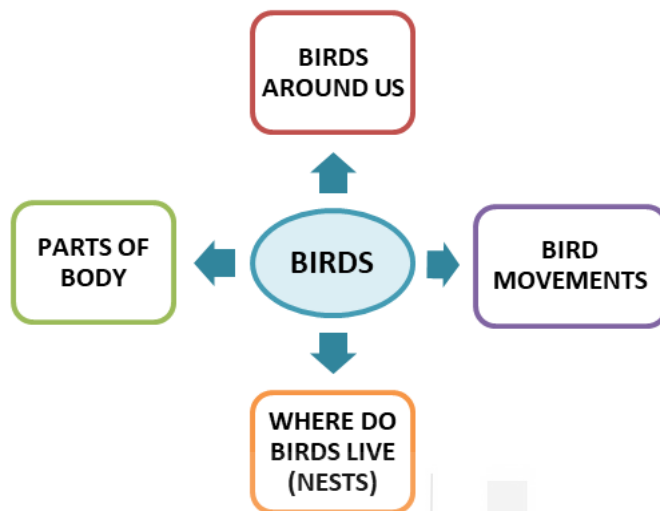


Fig.3: Sub-themes revised by Bhavna after discussion with children

27.3.5 Identifying Activities for Selected Topics

The next step is to decide on the specific activities you will carry out with children on each topic. To think about what activities could be done under each topic, you can again create a web. This second 'activity-web' would represent the different activities that can be done with respect to each topic.

Remember that the purpose of a theme-based curriculum is not merely to give the children information on a particular topic. The activities selected for them should be such that they help the children to develop the concepts, abilities and skills which you have identified as goals of learning and development.

While planning the activities for a theme, you have to keep the following points in mind:

- Various activities planned around a theme should help children achieve goals in each domain. No domain should be left out or over-emphasized through the activities. Remember that it is possible that one activity is relevant for more than one topic and that one activity fosters development and learning goals in more than one domain. At this point of time, you will have to have a fairly clear idea about how you will carry out each activity. Only then will you know what development domains will be fostered through that activity.
- There should be a balance between individual, large group and small group activities.
- There should be a balance between quiet and active time indoor and outdoor activities.

- Most activities should involve children in hands-on learning experiences; in other words, children should be doing something.
- The activities should provide children opportunities for exploration and discovery.
- The activities should be developmentally appropriate.
- The activities should build on what children already know and should lead the children to increase their knowledge and skills.

Let us see the activity webs Bhavna created for her four selected topics as depicted in Figure 4, 5, 6 and 7. As you examine the activity webs, notice that the activity included for a particular topic is not limited only to that topic. It helps in understanding other topics too. For instance, the ‘dramatic play’ encourages children to think about the topic ‘movements/ actions of the bird’ and at the same time encourages the child to think about the topic bird’s ‘body parts’.

Remember that at this time, it is only a list of activities that can be done on a topic. The order in which you will carry out these activities with children over the five days will be planned later. This aspect has been discussed in the next unit ‘Planning Schedules’.

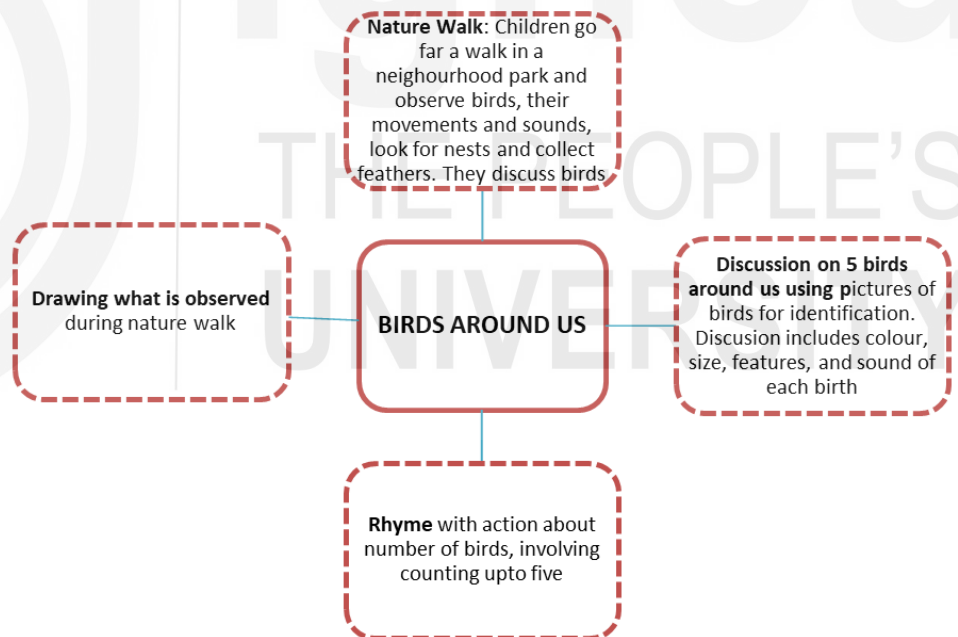


Fig.4: Activities for the Sub-theme ‘Birds around Us’

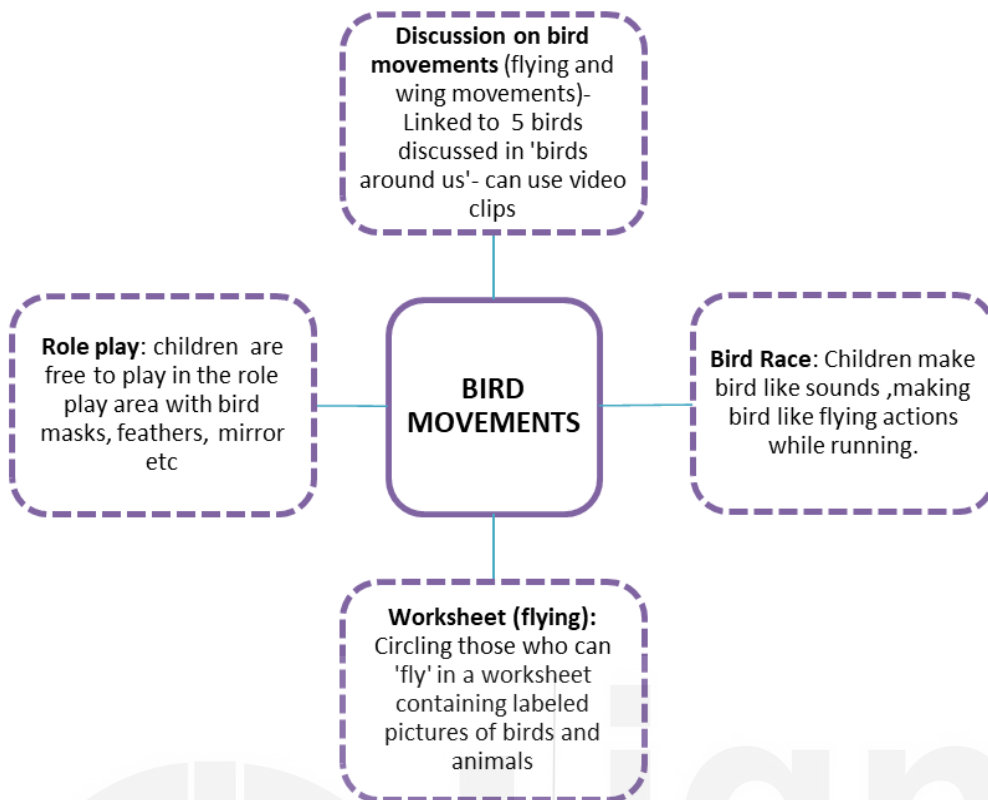


Fig.5: Activities for the Sub-theme 'Bird Movements'

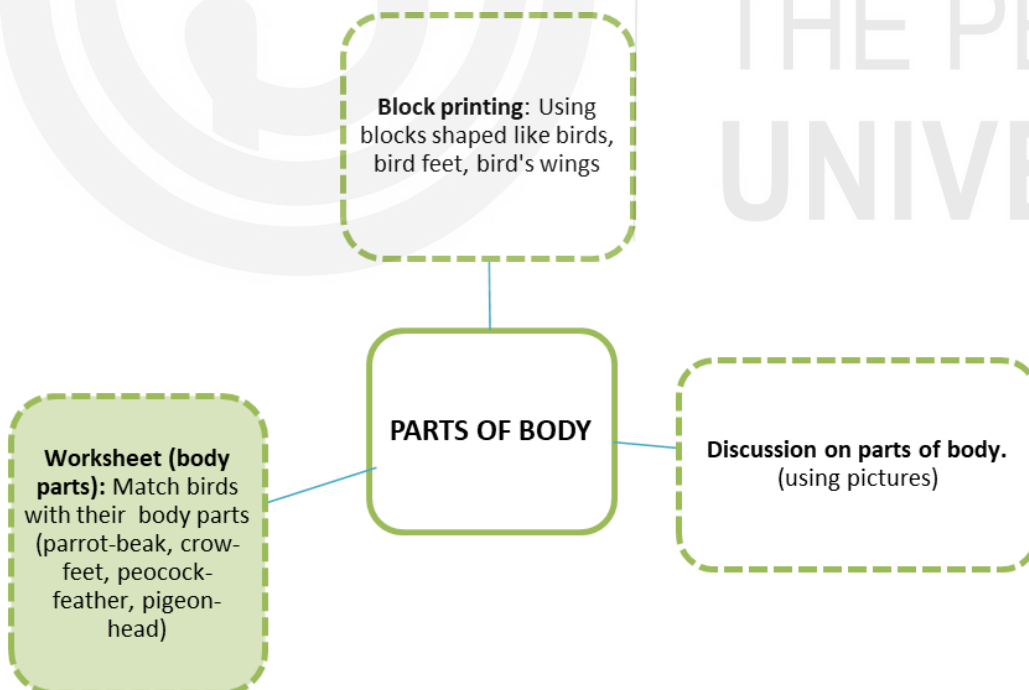


Fig.6: Activities for the Sub-theme 'Parts of Body'

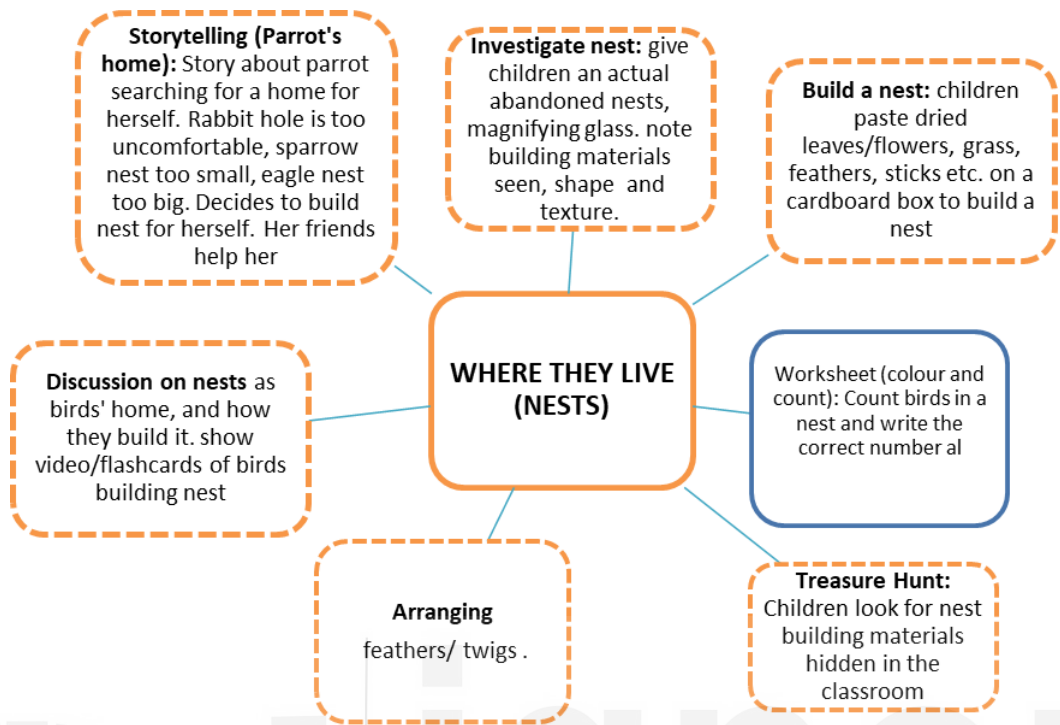


Fig.7: Activities for Sub-theme ‘Where do Birds Live’

For each activity, Bhavna identified:

- The major domains of development fostered through the activity
- The skills, concepts and values which children learn through the activity
- The type of activity — whether it was an indoor or outdoor activity; quiet or vigorous activity; large group, small group or individual activity
- The materials required to do the activity.

She used the following chart to represent this information and also mentioned the adaptations needed for any activity in this matrix.

Activity	Domains of Development fostered	Skills, Concepts and Values Learned	Group size (Large group, small group and individual)	Energy level	Indoor/ Outdoor	Adjustments for the child with a disability (if needed)
a)						
b)						
c)						

Let us see whether the activities selected by Bhavna on the topic ‘Where do Birds Live’ cover these various aspects. Refer to Table 27b.

Bhavna had some children with special needs in her class. Ganesh, who had polio and uses a wheelchair to move around, and Monica who had visual impairment. Bhavna wanted to make sure that Ganesh and Monica were not left out during the class activities, and so she also noted areas where some adjustments were needed to ensure their inclusion.

Table 27b: Activities on the Sub-theme ‘Where do Birds live’

Activity	Domains of Development fostered	Skills, Concepts and Values Learned	Activity group size	Indoor/ Outdoor and energy level	Adjustments for children with disability (if needed)
Discussion on nests as birds’ home and how they build nests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language • Cognitive • Socio-emotional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary • Description • Sentence structure • Conversation skills • Observation • Differentiation • Identification ➤ Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nests are of different shapes, sizes • Different types of materials used in nest building • Be aware of how birds build nests ➤ Values <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the value of a nest as a home 	Large group activity	Indoor Medium Energy	Suitable activity for all
Investigate a nest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation • Identification • Differentiation ➤ Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shapes and size • Materials used in nest building ➤ Values <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciate bird’s hard work/ task persistence 	Small group activity	Indoor Medium energy	Suitable activity for Ganesh. Monica can explore the nest with her fingers to know the building materials and understand the nest’s structure.
Storytelling (Parrot’s Home): The parrot visits his friends to find an appropriate Home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language • Cognitive • Socio-emotional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative structure • Listening • Comprehension ➤ Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison (big/small) nests • Types of homes ➤ Values <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing empathy for the protagonist’s problem • Understanding the value of friendship through a story 	Large group activity	Indoor Medium energy	Suitable activity for all

Worksheet (colour and count): Count birds in a nest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive • Fine Motor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills ➤ Fine motor coordination ➤ Eye-hand coordination ➤ Concepts • Counting • Association of quantity and number name with a written numeral 	Individual activity	Indoor Quiet activity	Suitable activity for Ganesh. Monica can be given bird-shaped toys to count.
Treasure Hunt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive • Socio-Emotional • Gross Motor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills • Identification • Problem-solving (where to search and find materials) • Movement ➤ Concepts • Understanding of space (in, under, top, below) • Identifying nest building materials ➤ Values • Teamwork 	Small group activity	Indoor/ outdoor Vigorous activity	Activity should be carried out in an area with smooth flooring and enough space so that Ganesh's wheelchair can be freely moved around. Monica can hold a teammate's hand while they look for materials. She should get time to hold the nest building materials and explore them with her fingers when they are located.
Build a Nest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity • Socio-Emotional • Fine Motor Language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills • Pasting • Following instructions ➤ Concepts • Nest building materials Values • Teamwork • Creativity and aesthetic appreciation 	Small group activity	Indoor Vigorous activity	Suitable activity for Ganesh. Monica needs help. She should get a chance to touch and explore the nest once completed.
Arranging 4-5 bird feathers/ twigs according to length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive • Fine motor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Skills • Seriation • Estimation of length • Fine motor ➤ Concept • Long, short, longer than, shorter than ➤ Value • Team Work 	Small group activity	Indoor Quiet activity	Suitable activity for Ganesh. Also suitable for Monica, who may require some guidance.

We can see that all the aspects mentioned earlier are included in the above activity plan.

27.4 PREPARING THE LEARNING SPACE FOR THEME

From your earlier readings, you know that the physical learning space contributes to the child’s learning. It would be good to arrange the learning space to reflect the theme. This can be done by ensuring that the theme is well represented in the given aspects:

- Classroom displays including the class notice board, display on the walls, etc.
- Play materials and books in the activity corners
- Indoor/ outdoor area

Bhavna planned the following arrangements in the learning space in line with the theme ‘birds’.

- Display on Notice Board:** *She planned a display showing different types of birds and their nests. She made sure that commonly seen birds were represented in this display.*
- Display of Children’s Work:** *She decided to arrange the drawings of birds made by children on the theme on a wire tied across the ends of the wall of the classroom. It would appear as if the birds drawn were sitting on a wire. A common sight in the neighbourhood!*
- Additions to the Outdoor Play Area:** *Bhavna placed a bird feeder as well as a bowl of water for birds in a corner of the outdoor play area.*
- Adding Materials Related to the Theme ‘Birds’ in Existing Activity Corners:** *Bhavna added specific materials compatible with the theme ‘Birds’ in the already existing ‘activity corners’ in the classroom. It should be noted that while many materials kept in the activity corners were related to birds, that was not the sole focus of the activity corners. In fact, Bhavna was careful to include other materials including those related to previously explored themes as well as the theme she had plans to begin next. Seeing children explore and interact with materials in the activity corner would allow the teacher an opportunity to identify their interests and needs and further expand the theme-based curriculum. Figure 8 shows the additions she made pertaining to the theme ‘birds’ in the various activity corners of her room.*

<p>Reading Corner Story books and information books on birds</p>	<p>Drama/Role play Corner Bird face masks, bird wings made of paper/cloth, toys and puppets of different types of birds</p>	<p>Math Corner Different coloured and shaped birds feathers, clay eggs for children to count, seriate or classify</p>
<p>Art Corner Printing blocks of different birds, bird's feet. Bird feather pens</p>		<p>Science Corner Empty bird's nest</p>

Fig.8: Various learning Corners in Bhavana’s Classroom.

27.4.1 Creating Themed Activity Corners

While Bhavna decided to add materials to already existing classroom activity corners, Jyotsna, also a pre-primary teacher planning for the theme 'Birds', took another approach of arranging her activity corners. Instead of adding new theme-based materials to already existing theme corners, Jyotsna decided to have a special 'theme corner' in her classroom, which she would change every week according to the theme of the week. For the theme 'Birds', she decorated the theme area with pictures of birds. She placed books on birds in this area, kept the role-play materials like bird face masks, bird wings made of paper/cloth, puppets of birds. She placed an empty bird's nest she had found lying on the ground in this place and decided to also place the bird's nest created by the children after the activity.

You will read more about planning classroom space including activity corners in Unit 29.

27.5 IMPLEMENTING THE THEME BASED PLAN

After you have a list of activities that you want to conduct under the theme, you have to arrange these in a daily schedule for a week. This again requires you to keep some principles in mind. We have discussed how to plan daily and weekly schedules in Unit 30.

Let us consider an example of a web created by a teacher for younger children on the theme 'Colour Red' (Figure 9).

Nidhi teaches a class of 2-3-year-old children. She selected the theme 'Colour Red' as she wanted the children to be able to recognize and identify the colour red. She created a web and fleshed out the possible activities that she would cover under the theme.

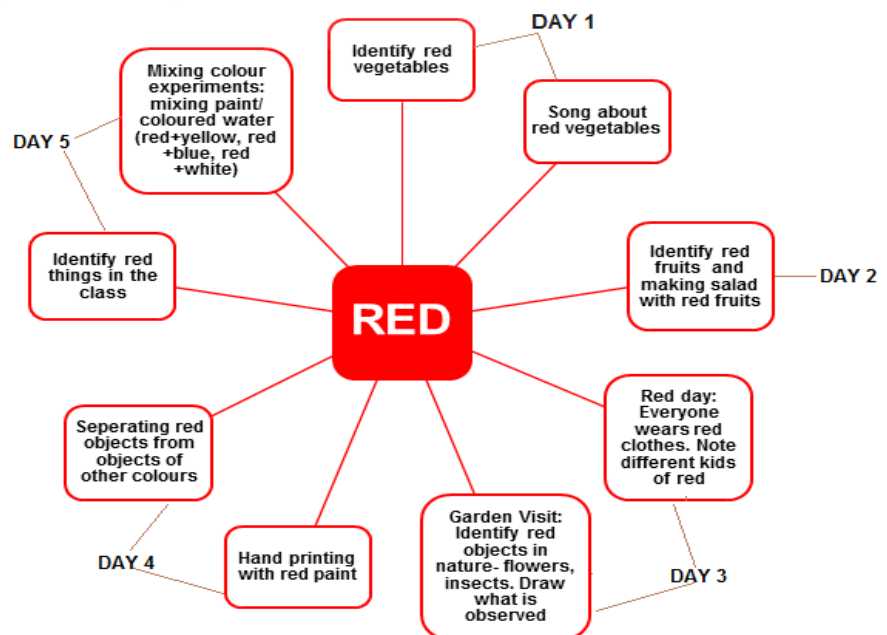


Fig.9: Web on the theme 'Red'

Here she did not identify sub-topics but instead brainstormed about activities on the theme ‘Colour Red’ directly.

Webbing is only one planning tool. You can also make lists, tables and other visual aids as planning tools to create the curriculum.

Though Nidhi’s focus was on helping the children to learn to identify and colour red, children learnt many other concepts, skills and values. Examine Nidhi’s web and fill the table below.

Activity	Domains of Development fostered	Skills, Concepts and Values Learned	Activity group size	Indoor/ Outdoor and energy level	Adjustments for children with disability (if needed)
Activity 1					
Activity 2					

27.6 STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF THE THEME-BASED CURRICULUM

Theme-based curricular planning is generally a well-accepted curricular approach in early childhood education. This approach has both strengths and challenges.

Let us first discuss the strengths of theme-based curricular approach.

27.6.1 Strengths of Theme-based Curriculum Planning

Given below are some of the key strengths of theme-based curriculum planning:

- a) **This approach helps create an integrated curriculum.** This approach gives children the opportunity to develop concepts and skills related to different developmental domains (and different subjects) simultaneously in a holistic manner by engaging in meaningful activities which are related to each other. Since the themes are selected keeping children’s interests and the context in mind and these relate to children’s immediate experiences, the learning is realistic and holistic. You would remember reading about the benefits of an integrated curriculum in Unit 25.
- b) **It helps children make meaningful mental connections.** Since the activities children are engaged in within this approach are related to each other through the common thread of the central theme, children get many opportunities to make linkages between different experiences and make their own meaningful connections to construct concepts. When children learn to make connections between different experiences, they can use knowledge and skills learnt in one situation in another situation. So for example, when children see the birds outdoors, then have a discussion on the features of birds using these picture cards/ video and then match the bird picture with the picture of its body parts (like beak/claw) they related these different experiences to form the idea of types of birds.

- c) Theme-based planning allows exploring **a concept through different methods and media**. So a theme-based unit plan supports multiple intelligences and learning styles.
- d) The thematic approach allows for an **in-depth study of a topic**. Themes can stretch for a long time depending on the interest of the children and the willingness of the teacher.

27.6.2 Challenges of Theme-based Curriculum Planning

Given below are some of the key challenges of theme-based curriculum planning:

- a) Traditionally, planning of the theme-based curriculum is usually done in advance before the academic year begins. The teacher decides on themes for the entire year beforehand and generally decides on a fixed time frame for each theme. While this process helps the teacher to have clarity about how the entire academic year will progress, and also satisfies the requirement of many school administrations to have a written yearly curriculum plan, it is not without problems. The **disadvantage of planning so much in advance** is that it becomes very much teacher-directed.
- b) Another critique is that this approach is that when handled by an inexperienced teacher can lead to a **narrow and restricted focus on children's learning**. A teacher who does not fully understand the philosophy of integrated learning through the theme-based approaches may simply do lip service to this approach. She may select a topic, plan some activities around it and think that the approach has been effectively implemented. This is a superficial approach. For example, consider a classroom setting where the theme of 'apples' is guiding the activities. On a particular day, children are counting apples drawn on the tree depicted on the notice board, or writing their names on paper cut-outs of apples, or the teacher is demonstrating to children how to make *fruit chaat* with apples. All these activities include 'apples' but ask yourself these questions — these activities. Encourage children to ask questions about apples. Are the children exploring, researching to find out answers to questions they have about apples? Are they using their skills to increase their knowledge about apples in any way? This problem in theme-based curriculums is effectively tackled in emergent and project-based approaches about which you will read in the next Units.
- c) It is the **teacher who is primarily making all the curricular decisions** in this approach. She decides what the children will learn and how they will learn. The teacher with her knowledge and experience would try to create a curriculum that she feels is best for the children, nonetheless, the children miss out on making decisions regarding their own learning.
- d) After developing theme-based units for one year, some teachers start to repeat the same old theme plans every year with the next batches of students. This **recycling of old plans** is convenient for teachers but leads to a stale learning experience for the fresh batch of children, as the themes simply become 'syllabus which needs to be covered'.

27.7 MAKING THEME-BASED PLANNING CHILD-CENTRIC

Theme-based planning is only effective when pertinent to the current interests of the children and then elaborates upon the theme and creates the web with children's inputs. When the teacher invites/takes note of children's ideas and includes their interests while selecting themes or deciding upon the content to transact within a theme, a theme-based curriculum becomes a **developmentally appropriate curriculum**.

Remember that the activities are not set in stone. Rather, while implementing the activities, the teacher should be flexible. You may find that ideas for expanding the theme and making it more interesting may happen from the end of the children while the activities of the theme-based unit plan are being carried out. Let us continue with the example of Bhavna discussed at the beginning of this Unit and see what happened during the nature walk to understand how theme-based planning can be conducted in a child-centric manner too.

During the 'See birds' activity, Bhavna noticed that one child kept jumping so that he could get a better view of a parrot sitting on the tree. This reminded Bhavna that carrying binoculars would have been a good idea for the activity. Also, this led Bhavna to expand the web by adding a new concept of 'Bird-watchers' (see Figure 10 for Bhavna's revised web). She now added a pair of binoculars in the 'Science activity corner'. She planned to show the children how to use the binoculars during the next outdoor activity.

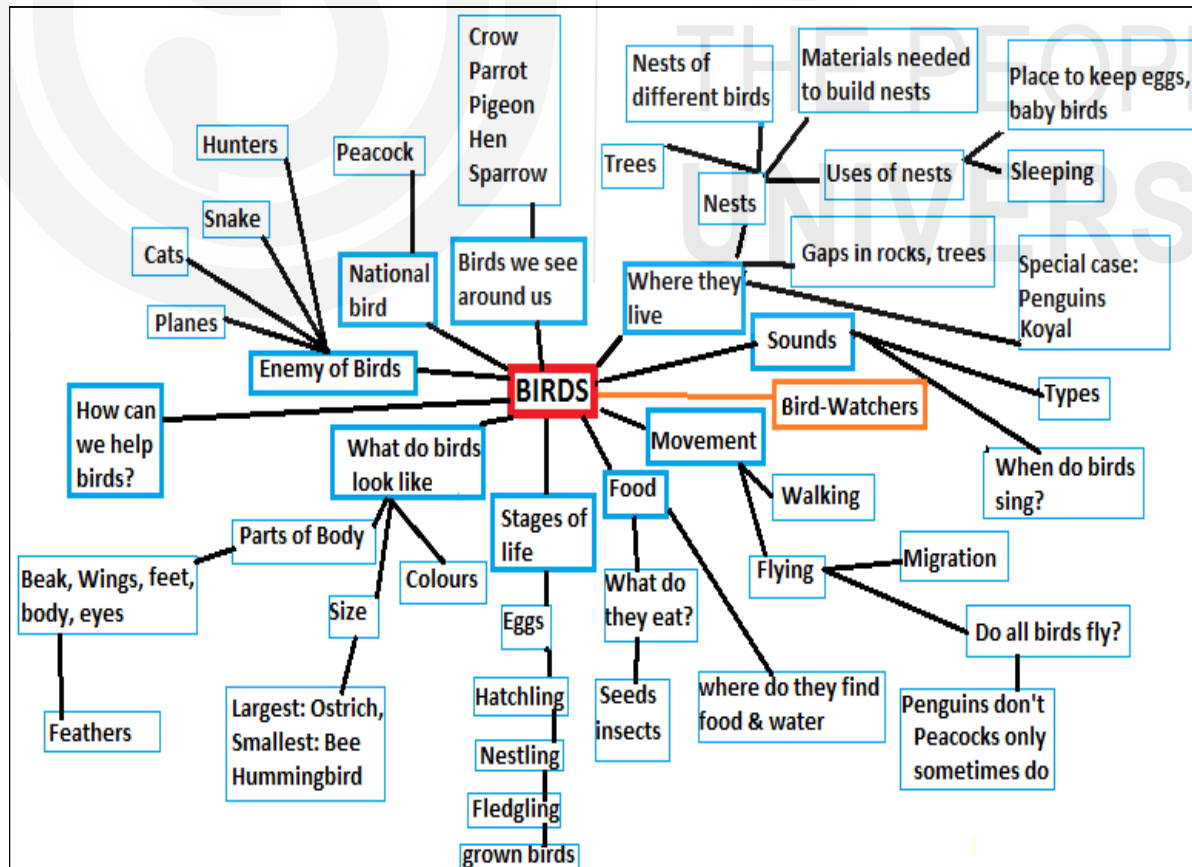


Fig.10: Bhavna's Revised Web

So while generally, theme-based planning is done at the beginning of the year, it is a good idea to schedule a review time for a theme during the middle of the week. It is because the teacher cannot possibly guess what the main interest area of the children would be at a particular time in the future. For example, it may be that the children are interested in the topic of 'Insects', but the teacher has not included such a theme or the children may want to take more time to explore a theme than the time frame the teacher has assigned to it. During implementation time, the teacher may feel reluctant to move away from the plan she has already worked hard on creating. The defined time frame of the annual curriculum may also lead to the teacher to feel an urgency to 'complete' or 'cover' the curriculum. However, being flexible with planning themes allow the teacher to reflect on observations of the children, and think about what is working, what needs to be changed, and what resources are needed. It may lead her to add a new theme/ activity, delete a theme she had included or shift the time period when the theme/activity would be implemented.

Therefore, to overcome this limitation of too much teacher direction, the teacher should leave some room for flexible planning in the annual curriculum by having backup planned themes, keeping 'gaps' or free spaces in the annual curriculum plan, so that children's inputs and interests can be accommodated. Also, some planning should be done every week so that the teacher can make necessary adjustments to the curriculum by getting children's input.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) What are the most important points to be considered while selecting the topics/content from the web?
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
- 2) Identify the strengths and challenges of theme-based curriculum planning from the given options.
 - a) Helps create an integrated curriculum
 - b) Helps children make meaningful mental connections.....
 - c) Allows exploration of a concept through different methods
 - d) Possibility of recycling of old plans for the new batch of learners
 - d) Allows for in-depth study of a topic
 - e) Allows planning in advance before the academic year begins
 - f) Includes developmentally appropriate content
 - g) Teacher primarily makes all the curricular decisions in this approach

27.8 SUMMING UP

In the theme-based approach to planning curricular content, one theme is selected for transaction in the class with the children for a particular period of time. Using this theme, children are provided learning experiences that help to develop various concepts abilities and skills in different domains of development or subjects/areas.

The plan around any one theme describing what content will be covered and the activities that will be carried out to transact this content is referred to as a 'Theme-based Unit Plan or Thematic Unit' plan. There are specific steps in planning a theme-based curriculum or a thematic curriculum:

- Know the learning and development goals for children
- Selecting the themes
- Generating the theme's content possibilities
- Selecting the theme content
- Identifying activities that would help in reaching learning and developmental goals
- Organizing the learning experiences for a theme-based unit
- Preparing the learning space for the theme
- Implementation of thematic curriculum and assessment.

The physical learning space contributes to the child's learning and the learning space needs to be arranged to reflect the theme. This can be done by ensuring that the theme is well represented in the classroom displays including the class notice board, display on the walls, etc.; play materials and books in the activity corners; and indoor/ outdoor area.

While implementing the activities the teacher should be flexible. The theme-based unit is planned by the teacher and it can be enhanced by children's input, i.e., by including theme-related activities which interest them.

Theme-based curricular planning is generally a well-accepted curricular approach in early childhood education. This approach has various strengths, such as it helps to create an integrated curriculum, helps children make meaningful mental connections, allows for in-depth study of a topic, and so on. However, there are challenges too, such as being planned well in advance so tends to be more teacher directed than children-centric, it can lead to a narrow and restricted focus on children's learning, if dealt with by inexperienced teachers, etc. To overcome the challenge of teacher-directed theme-based planning, it is best to let the themes emerge from discussions with children, or by observations of children's activities.

27.9 REFERENCES

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27.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1)
 - a) Know the learning and development goals for children
 - b) Selecting the themes
 - c) Generating the theme's content possibilities
 - d) Selecting the theme content
 - e) Identifying activities that would help in reaching learning and developmental goals
 - f) Organizing the learning experiences for a theme-based unit
 - g) Preparing the learning space for the theme
 - h) Implementation of thematic curriculum and assessment
- 2) The themes can be about
 - a) The child herself/himself:-
 - b) The child's family:-
 - c) The child's community:-
 - d) The child's environment:-

Some examples of themes are : 'Myself', 'My Family', 'Plants', 'Animals', 'Birds', 'Transportation', 'My Helpers', 'Water', 'Seasons', 'Sky', 'Day & Night' and 'Air'.

- 3) A web is a graphical representation of the possible content that can be covered under the theme. It is a planning tool that is used to visually represent key ideas and concepts linked to a theme and can be achieved through brainstorming about the content under a theme.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1)
 - a) Children's knowledge about this theme
 - b) Concepts and content age-appropriateness
 - c) Interest of children

- d) whether the content meets learning goals in the various domains of development
- e) How are the selected concepts related to each other?
- f) Time to be dedicated to the theme
- g) What do children want to know about the theme?

- 2) a) Strength
- b) Strength
 - c) Strength
 - d) Challenge
 - d) Strength
 - e) Challenge
 - f) Strength
 - g) Challenge



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