

## How Theme Study Integrates Curriculum and Makes Learning Meaningful

by Rise Richardson, Director

Parents, teachers and students want learning to be interesting and engaging. When we started the Village School in Royalston, MA, we agreed that we wanted to pursue depth over breadth. So instead of touching on many subjects separately and superficially, we looked for a topic each year that classrooms could explore deeply, a topic that could weave through all parts of the curriculum, integrating reading, writing, science Spanish, art, music and even math, with lots of opportunities for hands-on learning and enriching the learning experience.

We came up with Theme Study, a central theme that manifests differently in each classroom.

Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup>-graders work with a Theme Study over an eight-week period. This year, they will spend eight weeks at a time on: Earth and Rocks, Air and Wind, Water and Ice, and Fire and Heat. Their themes focus on their immediate surroundings, so their experience is very tangible and real for them. Their Theme Study is experiential, using books, objects, music, art, and nature-science to explore facets of the same theme. Each eight-week Theme Study culminates in a Theme Share, when parents come into the classroom and the children share their learning with singing, presenting their journals, art projects and theme books that they wrote and made.

For older children, the classes take on year-long Themes. We look at children developmentally and choose topics accordingly, so that our system of year-long Themes matches with children's developmental stages. Let's look more closely at an example of a 4th-6th grade Theme Study.

This year, the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade class is studying the American West, covering the time period from about 1800 to 1900. Though much history is learned, the focus is cultural: how were people living in those days, where were they living, what was their lifestyle, why did families choose to make the arduous journey to the west? And what was their life like once they moved? We also look at differing points of view, to see the story of westward expansion through the eyes of Native Americans, slaves, white settlers and immigrants.

This Theme carries over into language arts, examining original documents, letters, non-fiction accounts and wonderful fictional books and stories. We read some of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, to give a narrative thread, and provide a picture of the life of western settlers.

We look at why farmers in particular moved west from Massachusetts, and to discover one of the reasons - that the land here is hard to work compared with, say, Ohio, - an early homework assignment is to dig a 2 ft.-deep hole and report what happens. In a word, rocks! We read stories of the westward migration, beginning with Lewis and Clark, and continuing to the epic sagas of the Oregon Trail and the California Gold Rush. We learn about the grievous consequences of the settlers' western migration on the lives of Native Americans.

Among other topics, we cover homesteading, immigration, the Civil War (briefly!) and the building of the first transcontinental railroad. There is a strong geography element in the theme, and the children engage in various mapping projects as we track the United States' acquisition of new territory, and the accession of new states throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In art, the children look at landscape painting in this time period, and work on making their own landscape art. Every week, a copy of a classic painting is hung in the classroom, in large 3 ft. by

2 ft. format, for children to view and discuss. In at least two visits a year to art museums such as the M.F.A. in Boston, the children view the original paintings. In music, they learn many of the popular songs of the time period.

As with all classroom themes, time is given every week to hands-on work. In various sessions, the children will shell beans, sew, stake a claim in the field outside, or their favorite: participate in “Covered Wagon Day.” Here the classroom tables are given canvas covers to transform into wagons not much smaller than the actual wagons used on the Oregon Trail, providing an understanding of the theme in a deeper and interactive way to enrich learning.

The children are organized into families and have to decide which items to take with them, choosing – as did the settlers – between needed supplies and prized possessions. Working together, the ‘families’ role-play through a variety of problems, such as fording a river or climbing a steep mountain pass.

Because of the children’s genuine interest, they are choosing books to read from the classroom collection and reading with great curiosity and satisfaction. Different groups will research various topics and make reports back to the whole class.

The whole Theme Study culminates in a play, written by the children and then performed at the Royalston Town Hall, with a set they paint, costumes, singing and more. The children love writing the play, drawing on everything they learned in the year-long theme to work out a plot and enough characters for every student to have a speaking part.

The play begins as a major writing project, with all the children contributing lines from their own versions of each scene. Then it’s time to learn lines, and work hard to inhabit the role of each character, exactly what younger children do when they pretend to be pirates or firemen or explorers, so it’s fun too.

In other years, the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grades study Ancient Greece, or the Middle Ages, much in the same way. In the younger class, the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>-graders stay closer to home, studying Colonial America for one year and Native Americans the next.

As you can guess, Theme Study engages the child’s interest, so it’s often the children who are leading the study, by asking questions and pursuing the answers. Children bring the Theme home, and discuss it with their parents. Children often bring in artifacts, or family heirlooms, or family stories related to the Theme.

Theme Study is a very successful way to ‘integrate curriculum,’ an education buzzword these days, as we all seek ways to get learning to really “stick.” Village School children live, breathe and dream about their Theme Study topic. Our alumni report that this experience of studying a topic in-depth has served them well at the college level and beyond.

Children leave the Village School with a love of learning and all the skills for in-depth study and exploration of a topic of interest. They learn that math, science, music, art, history, social studies and English are not separate isolated subjects, but connected curriculum areas that unite in the groundwork learning to understand a specific topic deeply.