

# Studies: The Heart of *The Creative Curriculum® System* *for Preschool*



*Scenario 1: Ms. Smith announced to the class that they would begin activities related to trees. Approaching the topic as a theme, she wrote lesson plans for the next 2 weeks, making sure she had something related to trees in every interest area. Examples of the activities in her plans included*

- placing specified numbers of felt apples on felt trees
- adding plastic trees to the sand table
- learning the rhyme “Way Up High in the Apple Tree”
- playing “Squirrels and Trees” on the playground
- making tissue paper collages of trees with leaves
- making leaf-shaped sandwiches for a snack
- coloring “T is for tree” worksheets

*Scenario 2: The children in Ms. Taylor’s class gathered around a hollow part of a tree trunk on the playground and wondered what was inside. They returned to the tree every day and brought magnifying glasses to have a closer look at it. Building on the children’s interests, Ms. Taylor began a study of trees that would last more than a month. By talking with the children, she learned that they were most interested in what lived in the tree, so that was the starting point for the study. These are examples of the kinds of experiences that Ms. Taylor included in her weekly plans:*

- discussing what children already know about trees and what new things about trees they want to learn
- listing animals and insects that might live in the tree; checking off those the children observe
- feeling the texture of different trees and making rubbings of their bark
- taking digital pictures to gather clues about what might live in or near the tree (e.g., a partially eaten leaf, a feather, or a nest) and creating a book for the Library area
- reading *Who Lives in Trees* and discussing insects that are harmful to trees
- sorting and classifying tree parts that children collect
- measuring the circumference of trees with yarn and comparing the lengths of the pieces
- preparing snacks with edible parts of trees (fruits and tree nuts)



How are the children’s experiences in these two classrooms the same? How are they different?

Mrs. Smith and Ms. Taylor both approached teaching and learning through the topic of trees, which usually interest preschool and kindergarten children. To some degree, both teachers integrated learning across developmental and content areas. Both planned primarily hands-on experiences.

Notice, though, that their approaches were in many ways quite different. Ms. Smith was implementing a *thematic* approach to curriculum (scenario 1) while Ms. Taylor was using *studies* to integrate learning (scenario 2). The following chart shows some of the similarities and differences between these approaches.

	<b>Thematic Approach</b>	<b>Studies Approach</b>
<b>Definition</b>	The thematic approach is a method of integrating content learning by organizing information and skill instruction around a particular topic.	The study approach is a method of integrating content learning through children’s in-depth investigation of a meaningful topic. Children raise questions about the topic and find answers to their questions.
<b>Topics</b>	Topics are determined by the curriculum and the teacher. They may or may not be of interest to students.	Children’s interests and potential interests are a major reason for selecting a topic.
	Themes are often <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broad (e.g., transportation, animals)</li> <li>• narrow (e.g., shapes, colors, apples)</li> <li>• not necessarily related to children’s everyday experiences and cannot always be explored through firsthand experiences (e.g., rainforests, dinosaurs, planets)</li> <li>• fanciful (e.g., the circus, teddy bears)</li> <li>• abstract (e.g., conflict)</li> <li>• holiday-centered</li> </ul>	Good study topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can be explored through children’s firsthand experiences with resources that are readily available in and near the school</li> <li>• are age-appropriate and relevant to young children’s everyday experiences</li> <li>• can be explored over an extended period of time</li> <li>• interest families in becoming involved</li> <li>• are connected to what children are expected to learn in grades K–12</li> </ul>



	<b>Thematic Approach</b>	<b>Studies Approach</b>
<b>Focus</b>	Thematic activities are planned by the teacher to teach specific concepts. Skills are often practiced in isolation.	Studies focus on child inquiry, deep content knowledge, and fostering the disposition to make sense of experiences. The teacher helps children integrate concepts and process skills through firsthand explorations and extended discussions.
	The teacher bases activities on specific concepts and curricular objectives. Child inquiry and research may or may not be included.	The teacher finds out what children already know and then structures the study so they can build deeper understandings. Curricular objectives are integrated as the study progresses, and child investigation is always involved.
<b>Design</b>	Teachers plan a series of activities that are often connected in only a cursory way. Many of the activities are fun and entertaining, but they are not always very relevant to children’s lives and experiences. They involve limited academic skills but do not always challenge children to identify and solve problems.	Studies are a coherent, “spiraled” approach in which children build understandings on the basis of previous learning. Studies have three phases: beginning the study, investigations, and celebrating learning. Children are challenged to pursue their interests and engage deeply in learning.
	The teacher designs learning experiences in advance.	The teacher observes children as they conduct investigations and bases next steps on children’s interests, skills, and knowledge.
	Resources are provided by the teacher and sometimes by the students. Content is taught during small-group, large-group, and individual experiences, and during events.	Resources are provided by the teacher, children’s families, and visiting experts, or children gather them during site visits. Content is addressed during small-group, large-group, and individual experiences, and during events.
	Theme-related activities are conducted during times of the day determined by the teacher, or they might be integrated throughout the day.	The study is integrated throughout the day and in all interest areas. Learning experiences involve many content areas and skills.



	<b>Thematic Approach</b>	<b>Studies Approach</b>
<b>Role in the Curriculum</b>	For 1 or 2 weeks, almost all classroom activities and skill practice are linked to the theme.	Study topics are not the only focus during a given period of time. Skills practiced in the context of the study are also practiced in relation to other topics and in other contexts.
<b>Field Trips/Site Visits</b>	A field trip might or might not be included. It might occur at any time, but it is often a culminating event.	Site visits are taken early in the study to build working knowledge and common understandings. Sites are revisited throughout the study to learn more. Children visit sites in and around the school.
<b>Duration</b>	Themes are of fixed duration. Units usually last for a period of 1–2 weeks.	Studies are of variable duration, lasting 5–8 weeks or so, depending on the children’s level of interest and engagement.

## Benefits of Studies

The study approach

- focuses on science and social studies topics while promoting skills in language and literacy, math, technology, and the arts
- enables children to apply their acquired skills in meaningful, real-life contexts
- equips children to solve problems and find answers to their questions creatively
- engages and challenges *all* children
- encourages higher-level thinking, development of intellectual interests and positive approaches to learning
- encourages family involvement
- supports the development of social-emotional skills such as resolving conflict, sharing responsibilities, and working collaboratively



## Frequently Asked Questions About Studies

### Question:

“What study topics are featured in *The Creative Curriculum*<sup>®</sup> *System for Preschool*?”

### Answer:

- Balls
- Clothes
- Trees
- Buildings
- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

The first teaching guide, *Beginning the Year*, does not feature a study, but it does include a “mini-investigation” to help teachers understand this approach.

### Question:

“I’ve spent years planning activities and collecting materials for my themes. Do I have to throw them out and start over in order to implement studies?”

### Answer:

No. Some of your materials may be very appropriate for enhancing an interest area or read-aloud experiences. When adding materials to interest areas and planning learning experiences, ask yourself, “Does this material or experience help children gain a deeper understanding of the topic?”

Let’s look at some typical themes and see how they might relate to *The Creative Curriculum*<sup>®</sup> *Teaching Guides* featuring studies.

Common Themes	Relationship to Studies
All About Me	With <i>The Creative Curriculum</i> <sup>®</sup> <i>for Preschool Teaching Guide: Beginning the Year</i> , teachers guide children to learn about themselves, their families, and their school. That <i>Guide</i> places a strong emphasis on making friends and learning about feelings.
Animals	“Animals” is a very broad topic. The animals that are most important to children are those in their immediate environment. During a study of trees, investigating what lives in and around the trees in their neighborhoods helps children learn important concepts about animals and their habitats.
Construction	Resources for this theme most closely relate to in-depth investigations of buildings, which are addressed in <i>The Creative Curriculum</i> <sup>®</sup> <i>for Preschool Teaching Guide: Buildings</i> .
Transportation	“Transportation” is also a very broad topic. In <i>The Creative Curriculum</i> <sup>®</sup> <i>System for Preschool</i> , learning about various types of transportation is incorporated into several studies. For example, children learn about garbage trucks during the reduce, reuse, recycle study, and they learn about construction vehicles as they study buildings.



Common Themes	Relationship to Studies
Plants and Insects	During the trees study, children learn important concepts about trees, other plants, and the insects that live in trees. More importantly, they learn about relationships between plants and insects by investigating insects that are helpful or harmful to trees.
Nutrition	Healthy eating can be incorporated into most studies. In the <i>Balls Study</i> , for example, children investigate healthy foods that are shaped like a ball, e.g., cantaloupes and tomatoes. In the <i>Trees Study</i> , children learn about food that comes from trees. In the <i>Reduce, Reuse, Recycle Study</i> , children learn about various foods, what becomes waste, and how composting makes rich soil for growing food.
My Five Senses	Each and every study requires children to use all of their senses to find information, so sensory exploration is not limited. A special mini-investigation explained in <i>Beginning the Year</i> focuses on sounds around the school.

**Question:**

“But what about themes related to our community events? Can I still use them with *The Creative Curriculum® System for Preschool?*”

**Answer:**

*The Creative Curriculum® System for Preschool* is carefully crafted to meet state early learning standards. Following the *Teaching Guides* ensures that you are meeting your state requirements. Stepping away from the system for a week to focus on a local event is fine, and *System* resources such as *Intentional Teaching Cards™*, *Mighty Minutes™*, and *Book Discussion Cards™* can be incorporated into your exploration of a theme. However, veering too far away from the *System* means running the risk of not meeting your state guidelines.

Learning about a local event can be incorporated as children explore many of the study topics in *The Creative Curriculum® System for Preschool*. For example, in the *Teaching Guide: Clothes*, clothing for special events can (and should be) a part of investigations to answer such questions as “What are the features of clothes?” and “What special clothes do people wear?” During a study of buildings, children investigate and discuss the features and use of buildings, including those used during special events.

**Question:**

“My children were very involved during the balls study, and they weren’t ready for it to end. Is it all right to go further?”

**Answer:**

Absolutely! Each *Teaching Guide* includes blank investigation forms for you to use as you follow children’s interests and extend the study.

