

DECIDING ON A THEME— LOOKING AHEAD

When we decide to use a theme to structure the learning in our classrooms, we ask ourselves a number of questions that help us determine the value of a particular theme for our students.

- What is there about this theme that makes it relevant to the children in my classroom?
- What opportunities for making connections between children and their world does this theme offer? Between what children know, want to know, and need to know? Between and among children?
- What makes me think that children would enjoy this theme?
- How does this theme allow for student choice and a range of interests, strengths, and abilities?
- Why is this theme a good use of my time and the children's time? Are there things of value to be learned by doing this theme?
- Are there real questions to be answered and is there a real audience for the "answers"?
- Does this theme give my children the opportunity to use a variety of learning processes?
- What curriculum content and processes does this theme address?

And the last and most important question, regardless of the theme, is

- When working on this theme, will my children feel secure, respected, cared for, appreciated, and supported in their learning?

**These are
our questions.**

What are yours?

As teachers we have had to make decisions about the ways in which we organize the learning in our classrooms. As our primary purpose in using themes has been to enhance learning, we developed these questions to guide our teaching practices based on what we believe about learners. By using these questions we increase our chances of being involved in themes that give children the opportunities to construct new knowledge, shape their attitudes, and increase their repertoire of skills and processes.

GETTING STARTED: SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES

Although many of you may already be using themes successfully in your classrooms, teachers always welcome new ideas. Here we provide some starting structures that can help you

- see possibilities for themes that arise from the kinds of events that take place in your classroom every day
- involve children in the planning stages
- custom-design themes to fit with you and the children in your classroom

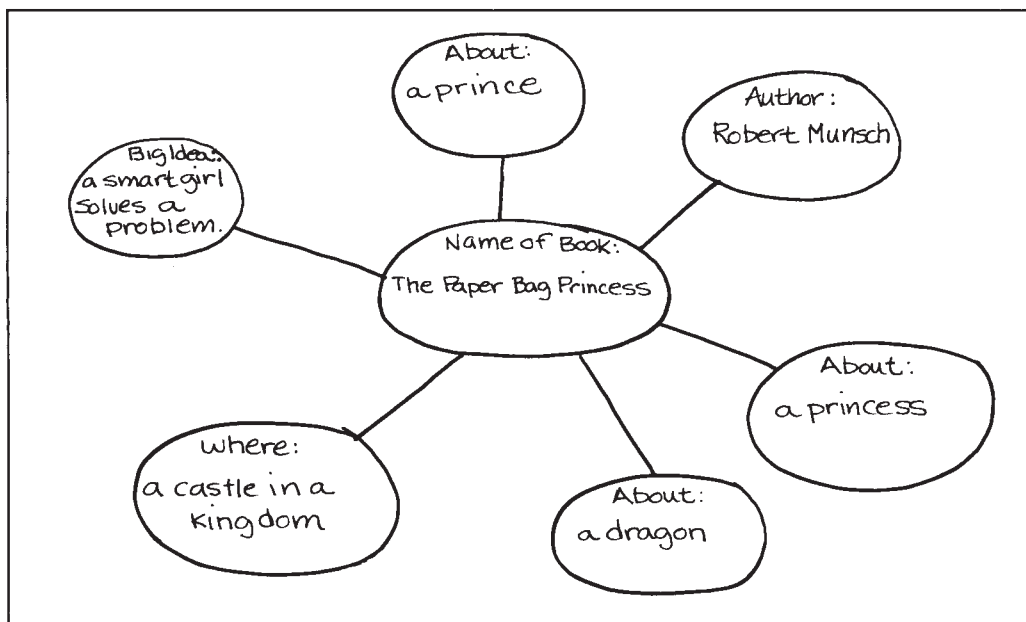
You may also want to refer to chapter 7, page 58, where we note a number of themes that have been used with great success.

Getting Started: USING BOOKS TO BEGIN A THEME

The following is an example of how a book can be used to launch a theme or a number of concurrent themes.

1. The class read the story *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch.
2. The teacher recorded the title of the book on a piece of chart paper and asked children the following questions:
 - Who is the author of this book?
 - Where does this story take place?
 - Who is the book about (main and supporting characters)?
 - What is this book about (big idea/theme)?
 - Is there anything else important about this book?

Preliminary web:
The Paper Bag Princess



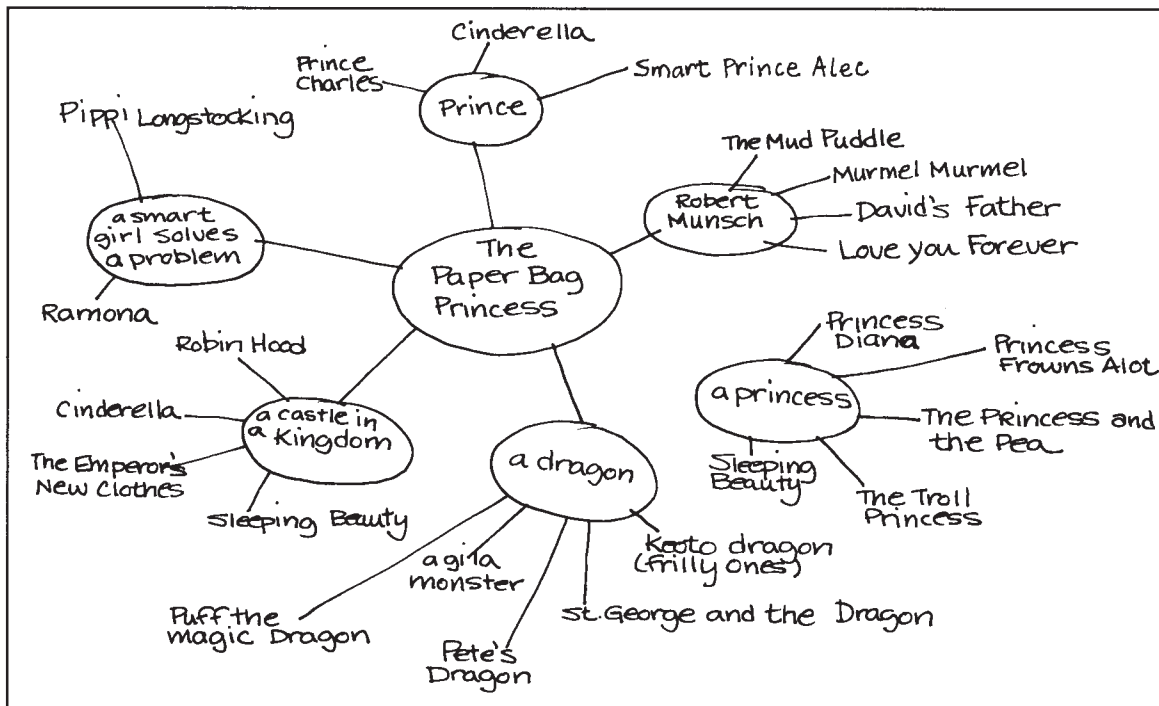
- The teacher built upon the web by asking the following questions:

Can you think of any other books/movies/television shows

- written by this author?
- about dragons?
- that take place in castles and kingdoms?
- about princesses?
- about princes?
- about girls that are strong and smart?

- After the development of the web, children were asked to make a "one-sticker decision." The teacher handed one sticker to each child and invited small groups to come up to the web and place their stickers on the area that they would most like to have the opportunity to explore. The teacher said, "If you would like to read more books by Robert Munsch then place your sticker here. If you would like to read and study more about dragons then place your sticker here," and so on.

Detailed web:
The Paper Bag Princess



- The part of the web that contained the most stickers became the next class theme. (An alternative to this would be to determine the three most popular items and then run three concurrent but complementary themes.)