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Mixed Age Groups
in Early Learning
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Mixed Age Groups in Early Learning and Care

Editorial

Throughout our lives we engage, interact and socialise with people of all ages, learning from and supporting those both older and younger than ourselves, and benefitting from their different experiences, understanding, knowledge level, abilities and skills. In most Western countries, including Ireland, however, many children spend much of their time outside the home with other children the same age. It is the norm in the primary and secondary school system, for example, for children to be segregated into classes based solely on age. In centre-based Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings this is also often the case, with children grouped into babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers, to be cared for and educated separately in different rooms. By not being given the opportunity to play with and socialise with others of different ages, children are being denied the positive relationships, enhanced learning experiences, and social and emotional development that would come from such engagement.

This issue of *ChildLinks* considers the benefits of mixed-age groupings, particularly in Early Learning and Care, where children engage with children at least 2 or 3 years older and younger, supporting, nurturing and learning from one another.

In the first article in this issue, Sandra J. Stone, Founder of the National Multiage Institute and Professor Emeritus at the Northern Arizona University in the US, considers the myriad benefits of mixed age groupings in maximising every child's overall well-being while preparing them now and for a future, mixed-age, diverse society. Following this, Barbara Gavagan, Early Years Inspector in the Department of Education, discusses effective pedagogy with mixed age groups in Early Learning and Care settings, drawing on both the content of the Early Years Education Inspection Quality Framework and the findings from inspections in settings across Ireland.

Tina Dunstan then gives an overview of her experiences as owner of Cherryblossoms Childcare Ltd, a service that espouses mixed age groupings, and highlights the benefits this approach has had for the children in her care. An article from Barnardos then looks specifically at the positive impacts of mixed age groups on children social and emotional development. Finally, Dr Miriam O'Regan, Regional Childminding Development Officer with Dublin City Childcare Committee, explores mixed age groupings in childminding settings in Ireland.

Sinead Kantor

Creating Multiage Groupings for the Well-Being of Children

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Historical Perspective

Multiage is not a new concept. Throughout history, children have naturally played with, and learned from, children of mixed ages (Katz et al., 1993). The Industrial Revolution from 1700s to mid-1800s impacted future schooling, however (Rippa, 1997; Robinson, 2015). The factory model of producing goods led to decision-makers using this model to *efficiently* educate children by segregating them by age and moving them through the grades (years) as one would move products along a conveyor belt (Day & Yarbrough, 1998; Dewey, 1938, 1966; Robinson, 2015). Educators were alarmed by this impersonal, mechanical management of children designed around the principles of manufacturing, treating children as though they were products rather than individuals (Dewey, 1938, 1966) and became deeply concerned about the *well-being* of children.

After World War II, educators implemented a different schooling approach that would heal children's emotional scars created by the war (Connell, 1987; Rogers, 1970). Thus, multiage education was invented, with a focus on the well-being of children, where children learned in a mixed-age, family grouping and were cared for, and respected, as individuals (Blackie, 1971; Eisner, 1974; Rogers, 1970; Stone, 2010).

A simple definition of multiage is a mixed-age group of children who stay with the same teacher for several years. The grouping optimises each child's learning when children of different ages and abilities have the opportunity to interact and learn from each other (Katz et al., 1993). Mixed-age groupings of young children usually vary from 1) two-year groupings such as two-three-year-olds, three-four-year-olds, four-five-year-olds, and five-six-year-olds to 2) three-year groupings such as two-three-four-year-olds, three-four-five-year-olds, four-five-six-year-olds, or five-six-seven-year-olds.

Multiage Pedagogy

The instruction in a mixed-age grouping shifts from a traditional school *pedagogy of teaching* to a multiage *pedagogy of learning*. Multiage, a child-centered approach, sees learning as originating from the child, where the child is the center of the learning process and is in harmony with the child's unique timetable of development (Alghamdi et al., 2018; Stone & Burriss, 2019). Multiage learning pedagogy has its foundations in constructivist and social learning theory (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Child development and developmentally appropriate practices uphold a nonlinear, holistic view of learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Elkind, 1989).

Piaget's constructivist approach considers the child as an active participant in the world and *with people*; the child

makes meaning by constructing knowledge through his or her interactions (Piaget, 1952). Vygotsky's social learning theory views knowledge as *socially* constructed as each child interacts with others; social learning is enhanced in mixed-age groupings (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Piaget, 1952; Stone & Burriss, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky (1978) believes a child's level of potential development can be enhanced by more capable peers, understanding that 'children learn from others who differ in ability' (Feldman & Gray, 1999, p. 507). Experts encourage novices to use more advanced approaches, naturally scaffolding learning as they socially engage with novices (Gray & Feldman, 2004; Stone, 1997; Stone & Stone, 2021). Keep in mind that experts are not always the oldest and novices are not always the youngest. The relationship depends on each child's understanding at the time of engagement.

Benefits for Young Children

While two-year age groupings are beneficial, three-year age groupings are recommended as there is greater cross-age learning with three ages than two ages (Stone, 2004; Stone & Burriss, 2019; Stone & Stone, 2021). Learning in mixed-age groupings does not disadvantage any child, but rather advantages and complements each child in the grouping across the whole child learning continuum. Katz et al. (1993) wisely ask, 'Are children losing something valuable by having limited opportunity to interact with older and younger children?' (p. X). The following factors indicate the valuable whole child benefits of mixed-age learning.

Social Development

Mixed-age groupings provide social models for children to observe and imitate (Bandura, 1977; Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Kallery & Loupidou, 2016; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Children are natural scaffolders and use a variety of strategies to engage one another such as modeling, inviting, assisting, and directing (Stone & Christie, 1996).

Enhanced social skills

Mixed-age groupings enhance social development for both older and younger children (Edwards et al., 2009; Katz et al., 1993; Paul, 2014). Older children are more sensitive to the intricacies of social interactions when interacting with younger children (Graziano et al., 1976; Stone, 1997). Older children, who may be more socially skilled, will naturally engage younger, less socially skilled children in conversation and experiences. Interestingly, the younger children will also try to use more advanced social skills because they want to engage in the advanced experiences of older children (Brownell, 1990; Gray, 2008).



Gehrke (2000) found that a mixed-age preschool grouping of three-, four-, and five-year-old children all gain and strengthen their own social skills as they interact with one another, providing positive social development for all ages in the grouping.

More cooperation

Multiage groupings create a more cooperative social context than same-age groupings (Stone & Burriss, 2019). Mixed-age children understand that differences are natural and normal; younger children see older children as helpers and older children see younger children as needing help (French, 1984; Katz et al., 1993). This natural awareness leads to less competition and more cooperation.

More prosocial behaviours

The presence of younger children encourages older children in the development of care-taking behaviours. Edwards et al. (2009) studied three early childhood mixed-age childcare centres (birth to five; three-to-five-year-olds; two-three-four-year-olds). The teachers found, 'in multiage settings, older children were more likely to intervene when they saw a child upset, providing comfort and caring within the groups' (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 61). For example, older children would engage babies, settle them down, and take turns playing with them. As one teacher noted, '... the older children will shake a little toy and give it to the babies ... the younger ones really seem to like it and the older ones, they get to be the experts' (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 59).

Multiage classrooms provide 'opportunities for children to learn how to care for each other and to respect differing abilities' (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 59). In addition, the younger children eventually become the older children who then mentor and care for the younger ones, thus the mixed-age approach builds the 'capacity for empathy and compassion' for all children (Gray, 2013, p. 201). More helping, sharing, and turn taking occur in multiage groupings.

Greater range of friendships

Katz et al. (1993) propose that mixed-age groupings provide children with greater opportunities to develop friendships among different ages that 'match, complement, or supplement their own needs and styles' (p. 2). Even as adults, age is not a factor in choosing friends and this is true for children (French, 1984). Katz et al. (1993) note, 'friendship appears to be a relationship that transcends age-related behavior' (p. 10). Stone and Burriss (2019) suggest, 'Multiage does not limit children's friendships, rather enhances friendship possibilities' (p. 188).

Enhanced leadership skills

In same-age groupings, most children find it difficult to develop leadership skills as they see themselves as the same, have less interaction with one another, and less opportunity for leadership (Stone & Burriss, 2019). However, in mixed-age groupings all children have the opportunity to become leaders by virtue of age. Interestingly, older children do not dominate decision-making, but become facilitators and organisers of younger children's participation by building consensus (Feldman & Gray, 1999; Stright & French, 1988). Younger children are understudies who observe and imitate older children, and eventually assume leadership roles with new younger children (Furman et al., 1979; Stone & Christie, 1996).

Emotional Development

Emotional growth/stability

Emotional growth and stability are enhanced by having the same teacher for several years within a supportive, mixed-age family where children are more able to regulate and respond to their emotions (Gray, 2013; Hu et al., 2017; Paul, 2014). Mixed-age children also enjoy the comfort of 'fitting in' emotionally with either older or younger children, reducing stress and supporting each child's own self-confidence and the natural unevenness of emotional development (Katz et al., 1993; Kim, 1990).

Acceptance, support, self-worth, and self-confidence

Because multiage forms a 'family grouping,' children are valued, encouraged, and supported as prized members within the family. Whether a child is the youngest, middle, or the oldest child, each one is respected as a unique human being, which instills a sense of personal self-worth and self-confidence.

Cognitive Development

Scaffolding learning

Multiage offers the rich opportunity for experts and novices through age differences to scaffold learning for each other (Vygotsky, 1978). As Stone and Burriss (2019) note, 'Expert children can give novices temporary support to help them accomplish tasks beyond their current independent capabilities, which is often more in line with where the children's range of possibilities for enhancement lies' (p. 175).



Cognitive conflict

Cognitive conflict simply means that children have a difference in perspective. How one child sees a situation differs from another child’s understanding and a conflict of thought, a disagreement, ensues, compelling children to explain themselves to one another (Katz et al., 1993; Piaget, 1976; Tudge & Caruso, 1988). This conflict stimulates cognitive growth as children assimilate and accommodate the new information presented by the differences in each child’s understanding (Brown & Palincsar, 1986; Dowling, 2003; Katz et al., 1993; Roopnarine & Johnson, 1984; Theilheimer, 1993). As Stone and Burriss (2019) suggest, ‘In a multiage classroom, these differences of understanding occur all the time, as part of the *natural course of learning*, and it is the cognitive conflict, the differences in viewpoints, that stimulate children to rethink and change or confirm their own understandings’ (p. 177). More cognitive conflict occurs in mixed-age than same-age groupings.

More communication

Mixed-age children are drawn to establishing social relationships with younger and older children, so much so that they adjust their language to engage both speakers and listeners (Allen & Feldman, 1976; Edwards et al., 2009; Furman et al., 1979). When children are same age, they make fewer language adjustments (Shatz & Gelman, 1973). Mixed-age children are thinking and problem-solving how to modify their language, so they can keep playing and build friendships (Lougee et al., 1977; Shatz & Gelman, 1973).

Younger children advance their own language and thinking skills, using more sophisticated language and incorporating ideas from the older children (Gray, 2013). Older children also progress in their communicative and thinking skills as they intellectually problem solve to engage the younger children. As Katz et al. (1993) suggest, ‘Mixed-age grouping allows richer verbal behavior and better language development’ (p. 36).





Greater engagement in emerging literacy

In preschool mixed-age play, children are developing abstract thought, which is a precursor to emerging literacy. Symbolic play is the tool children use (Piaget, 1976; Stone & Stone, 2021). For example, a child will use a block of wood to stand for a car. The block of wood is a *symbol* that *stands for* another object. Without the ability to symbolise, children would not be able to represent the world symbolically through drawings or writing. Stone and Stone (2021) found that mixed-age young children scaffold symbolic play for one another when engaged in sociodramatic play.

Five-six-and seven-year-olds also scaffold emerging literacy skills by using alphabet letters to label pretend birthday presents, 'read' books to the dolls, and transform storybooks into recipe books (Stone & Christie, 1996). As mixed-age young children play together, they engage and scaffold one another in symbolic transformations and emerging literacy (Stone & Stone, 2021).

Constructing mathematics

Social interaction is important for the development of logico-mathematic knowledge (Kamii, 2014; Piaget, 1973). For example, game playing capitalises on mixed-age children figuring out things mathematically, exchanging ideas, and also getting immediate feedback (Kamii, 1996; Stone & Burriss, 2019). Mixed-age dramatic play also finds children counting objects, using money to buy things, and identifying numbers on a phone, all within a social, meaningful context (Emfinger, 2009).

Greater engagement in thinking skills

As mixed-age children play games together, they learn to pay attention, think ahead, and remember, all of which are thinking skills (Gray, 2013). In sociodramatic play, they mentally organise stories. Mixed-age players also enhance each other's imaginative and creative play (Gray, 2008).

Katz et al. (2014) suggest mixed-age projects provide a 'wide range of intellectual processes' such as predicting, hypothesising, and theorising (p. 11). Katz et al. (2014) see projects as a good fit for mixed-age groupings because younger children are more likely to be included while older children enhance problem-solving and divergent thinking.

Physical Development

Multiage enhances children's physical development. Older children will adjust their outdoor play so the younger children can participate. Older children model gross motor skills, while the younger children extend their own physical capabilities as they engage with the older children.

In one mixed-age class of five-six-and seven-year-olds, a seven-year-old, on her own, taught all the younger children to jump rope (Stone & Burriss, 2019). In a mixed-age preschool, children developed gross motor muscles as they supported each other in digging holes outside (Curtis, 2017). Mixed-age children also model and scaffold for each other as they use their fine motor skills to paint, build, and create together.



Creating a Mixed-age Environment

Multiage provides inside and outside *learning spaces* designed to optimise cross-age learning (Katz et al., 1993).

Play

Play supports children's overall well-being, personal empowerment, and satisfaction with life (Carlsson-Paige, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gray, 2013; Stone, 2017, 2021; Wasserman, 1992). Stone and Christie (1996) found that children choose to play with mixed ages more often than same-age playmates.

Multiage play centers (Stone, 1993) include places for *functional play* such as running just to run, or blowing and chasing bubbles. *Constructive play* includes children building with blocks, play dough, and wood, or creating with various art materials. *Sociodramatic play* centres provide spaces for children to act out favorite stories, pretend to be astronauts, creatures in dinosaur land, or waiters in a restaurant. Children enjoy *games with rules* as they play outside and inside.



Interest centres

Interest centres afford mixed-age children multiple opportunities to explore their own curiosities, such as places to enjoy interesting books, listen to favorite stories, draw and write, and places to investigate science and social studies topics, and explore mathematics.

Projects and problems

Mixed-age children may also choose to engage in simple projects such as creating personal butterfly wings to fly around the classroom, or finding worms outside and building their own worm centre inside. Or, mixed-age preschoolers (ages three to five) who discover a huge puddle of water in the play area outside and solve the problem by filling it in with dirt (Stone & Burriss, 2019). Play, projects, and problem-solving give mixed-age children the opportunities to explore, to take risks, collaborate, experience ownership of the spaces indoors and outdoors, and enjoy the freedom to imagine, invent, and create together.

As Stone and Burriss (2019) suggest, ‘Multiage is changing the image of schooling so we see children as thinkers, creators, and constructors who work cooperatively with others and are joyful and excited about being in an environment where they are respected, trusted, encouraged, and autonomous’ (p. 226). Multiage schools are ‘stimulating, challenging, happy places for children to learn’ (Rogers, 1970, p. vi).

Strategies / Assessment

Multiage teachers use strategies to facilitate each child’s personal learning (Mack, 2008; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, for literacy development, the teacher uses the strategy of Shared Reading, where he or she daily reads a big book to children and focuses on a broad continuum of teaching points ranging from interpreting pictures, recognising print contains meaning, letter recognition, sight words, punctuation, and so forth (Stone, 2004). The teaching points are based on the stages of literacy development and the teacher’s authentic assessment of where individual children are building. Some children are understanding that print contains meaning while other children are memorising simple text, and still others are actually reading the text. The teaching points follow the research on how children gradually emerge into literacy (Cambourne, 1988; Clay, 1991; Stone, 2004).

The teacher engages children in the strategy *Modeled Writing* (Stone, 2004). Again, the teacher uses the stages of drawing/writing development and each child’s personal development to choose broad-based,

simple to complex, teaching points, which provide children with review as well as acceleration (Stone 2004). The teacher personally conferences with each child and adds samples that document growth to the child’s portfolio that may range from a scribble for a drawing, a circle for a sun, a letter-like grapheme to label a picture of a dog, to writing the word ‘dg’ (dog) or a sentence ‘I lk mi dg’ (I like my dog). The variances of development are natural and normal in a mixed-age grouping.

Similar process strategies are implemented in small groups or individually as the teacher scaffolds learning in math, science, and social studies experiences based on daily assessments. The teacher is always on the cutting edge of where each child is building knowledge and understanding. Children are not compared to other children or ranked or sorted by standards or benchmarks; each child’s learning development is documented in his or her learning portfolio.

The Ultimate Goal: Children’s Well-being

Multiage is a child-centered, mixed-age, developmental approach which advocates for the well-being of children. Robinson (2015) promotes designing schools where children can *flourish*: ‘Education is about living people, not inanimate things. If we think of students as products or data points, we misunderstand how education should be’ (p. 41). Similarly, Abeles (2016) encourages educators to *humanise* our schools, rather than dehumanise them through the ‘blind quantification of our entire education system’ (p. 97). Nancy Carlsson-Paige (2013) adds that education should *nurture* our children and build on the ‘magnificent capacities children bring with them when they come to school!’

Some same-age early education schools may espouse similar beliefs about educating young children; however, they may not offer the rich dimensions of cross-age learning that multiage environments do. Mixed-age, diverse groupings (i.e., ability, culture, language, gender) provide unique whole child benefits, maximising every child’s overall well-being while preparing children now and for a future, mixed-age, diverse society.

Again, as Katz et al. (1993) ask, ‘Are children losing something valuable by having limited opportunity to interact with older and younger children?’ (p. X).

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Effective Pedagogy with Mixed Age Groups of Children in Early Learning and Care Settings

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Department of Education

Introduction

This article discusses the topic of effective pedagogy with mixed age groups in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings. It draws upon the content of the Early Years Education Inspection Quality Framework and the findings of Department of Education Inspectors from inspections in almost 3,000 ELC settings nationally.





Snapshot from Practice

In this early learning and care (ELC) setting, a group of school-aged and pre-school aged children are playing together, investigating, questioning, and communicating their curiosity, discoveries and sense of achievement to their peers and adults in the room. They are using playdough to make 'snakes' and every child is fully immersed in the activity although in very different ways. The younger children are busy rolling out the playdough, concentration evident on their faces as they learn how to use their hands to squeeze and pinch and stretch the material to create the long thin strings that become the 'snakes'. The older children are equipped with rulers, measuring tapes, paper and pencils as their job is to measure and record the length of the 'snakes' as well as the creative names for each one that are being decided on by the group. It is a clear that the children are having fun, with lots of laughter and excitement evident. They are also learning new skills, developing new ideas and developing their ability to communicate, use mathematical language and, importantly, learning how to work together to achieve a goal. Each child has the opportunity to engage at a level and pace suitable to their age and stage of development. The benefits of this mixed aged group are clear – the younger children receive individualised coaching support from their slightly older and more skilled peers and the older children consolidate their own skills and develop their capacity for communication and empathy.

What is Mixed Age Group Learning?

There are several different terms in use in practice to talk about mixed age grouping of children in early education settings. These include 'natural group', 'family groupings' and 'multi-age' among others. Regardless of the term used, this approach involves the intentional placement of children of different ages together to support peer learning. It allows for children of various abilities to play together in an environment that will enhance and enrich the potential for learning and development (Gov. ie, 2020).

The Irish Context

In Ireland, mixed aged groupings of children in early years education settings are not a new phenomenon. Many childminders, home-based settings and ELC settings, particularly those in rural locations, have provided programmes to mixed age groups of children as a natural response to the profile of children enrolled. In more recent years, the establishment of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme of free pre-school has stimulated significant growth in participation by children in centre-based care and education (Evangelou, 1989). These settings are required to comply with regulated adult/child ratios that are differentiated according to age (Department of Health and Children, 1996) and this has influenced the trend towards single-age groupings in these settings. Having noted this, the introduction of a second year to the ECCE programme in 2018 and the widening of the age-range for eligibility (2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months), has resulted in increasing incidences of mixed age groups in many ELC settings.

Children may also experience mixed age grouping in the infant classes of primary schools, either due to the age that parents choose to enrol children, or more usually, in the context of smaller schools where more than one year group is taught in a single classroom.

The Theoretical Benefits of Mixed Age Grouping

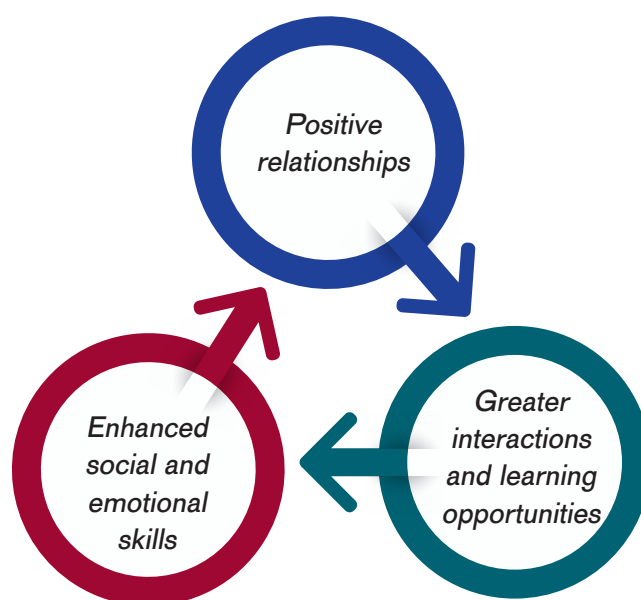


Figure 1: Benefits of mixed age grouping

Many educational theorists and researchers have highlighted the importance of social interactions between peers in supporting and promoting children's learning and development, and have examined the benefits of mixed age groupings (Gov.ie, 2020). The literature



suggests that a mixed age group pedagogical approach ‘can be quite successful and beneficial for children’ (Goodwin, 2018, p.5). Benefits identified include deeper positive relationships, enhanced social and emotional skills for both the younger and older children within the group, and also children being afforded the opportunity to play within their zones of proximal development (Gray, 2011). These benefits do not come about by chance, they are determined by ‘both the curriculum and teaching strategies employed’ by the early years educators (Katz, 1990, p.13). These include positive relationships and interactions, a carefully planned curriculum and environment, and opportunities for the children to learn and develop skills through play.

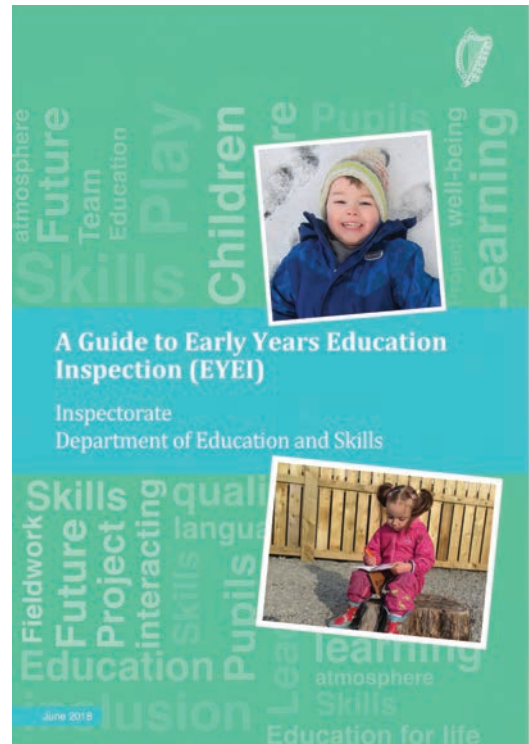
Challenges

Although ‘age related differences in children’s play can disappear in mixed age groupings’ (Gauvain, cited by Goodwin, 2014, p.9), early years educators implementing a curriculum for a mixed age group of children may, at times, find it challenging. These challenges often involve meeting the individual needs of all children while ensuring that ‘the complexity of play is not compromised for older children and also for the younger cohort it is not too intricate’ (Goodwin, 2014, p.9).

Support

There are a number of resources that can assist educators to build their capacity to provide effective mixed aged group pedagogy. These include Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and the Department of Education Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) Quality Framework. Behind each of these publications is a rich range of further resources that address how to develop effective high quality early years education provision and practice.

The Department of Education’s Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI), which is underpinned by the Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Years, and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, ‘evaluates the nature, range and appropriateness of experiences of children in state-funded early years settings’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2018a, p6). The inspection process supports ELC settings, including those with mixed age groups, to reflect on the quality of their educational programme and to plan for improvement. During inspection, the Department of Education inspectors offer advice to support best practice and the implementation of quality provision in all areas of curriculum: relationships, pedagogy, the environment, observation, assessment, and differentiation in planning for the next steps in learning.



A series of short webinars that focus on these topics can be viewed at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c71c0-insights/>

Curriculum

‘Curriculum refers to all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment, which contribute to children’s learning and development’ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009, p.54)

Highly effective early education provision and practice in ELC settings in Ireland is typically characterised by well-planned curriculum and pedagogy underpinned by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Using the content of Aistear as a core reference can support positive learning outcomes for all children. It supports all educators to create a rich pedagogical experience for all children in a mixed age group and to develop a shared understanding of the benefits of mixed age group learning by delivering an emergent, enquiry play-based curriculum that is flexible and adaptable to meet the interests, needs and dispositions of all children.

Further resources can be accessed at www.aistearsiolta.ie



The Key Elements of Effective Mixed Age Group Pedagogy

The EYEI Quality Framework, which informs the Department of Education Inspection in ELC settings, highlights key outcome statements that are essential for high quality early childhood education and care in all contexts. We will now explore some of these outcomes in relation to mixed age group provision.

Relationships

Outcome Statement 2: Relationships are respectful, responsive and reciprocal

To be successful in developing a rich pedagogical experience for children attending mixed age group settings, educators, parents and children need to work collaboratively. This consistency creates a framework for deepening relationships, supports the continuity of care, and provides stability for children (HEAD START, 2021). In many cases, it also allows for siblings of different ages to be together and to develop deeper and more secure relationships with one another.

Inspectors often find that in highly effective settings, positive relationships are evidenced by warmth and a sense of homeliness. A key-person approach is used to help support and develop secure relationships between the early years educator and a small group of children, and acts as a link between the setting and home. Inspectors will often observe that open, honest and respectful relationships between parents/families and the educators are essential in supporting the best interests of the child and in promoting the sharing and receiving of information (Gov.ie, 2020).

Promoting positive relationships between children of mixed ages also plays an important role in their development. Mixed age group settings are known to be highly beneficial for less confident children, for children for whom English is a second language, and where learning difficulties may exist (Evangelou, 1989).

It is positive to note that inspectors often observe early years educators supporting children to establish secure and supportive relationships and develop friendships with children of different ages, as they encourage them to play together in small groups and pairs and as they adapt activities to suit all children's interests, age and needs (Gov.ie, 2020).

Interactions and learning opportunities

Outcome Statement 6: High quality interactions with children are facilitated

All of us learn from each other and children are no different. In effective mixed age group settings, children

of similar and of mixed ages and abilities will have ample opportunities to engage in social and pretend play activities. They will also have opportunities to learn from their own achievements and to be challenged and inspired by the achievements of others (Gov.ie, 2020). As children interact with each other, they improve their pro-social behaviours such as helpfulness, sharing, and turn-taking, and they improve their co-operation and negotiation skills (McClellan & Kinsey, 1997). In mixed age groups, older children will often invite younger children into their play and naturally scaffold and extend play and learning for the younger children. As the older children take on leadership roles and become mentors, they provide peer and buddy support to younger and less experienced children (Katz, 1990). With careful encouragement and support from adults, the older child can develop empathy and concepts of sharing knowledge, interests and ideas, and their play can become more creative and less competitive. Gray (2011, p.512) also suggests that 'younger children not only learn from play with older children, but they also gain emotional support and care from them'. As the younger child mimics the older child's play, they are developing a higher level of complex play, involvement and expressive language (Goodwin, 2014), they are stretching their abilities to higher levels (Gray, 2011).

From their observation of effective interactions and learning opportunities for children in a mixed age group settings, inspectors note that, regardless of children's ages or how they are grouped together in a setting, play is central to the learning and development of all young children (Department of Education and Skills, 2018b). Inspectors also acknowledge that in high quality settings children are provided with opportunities to engage at a pace suitable to their own developmental capabilities. The educators encourage children to be active agents in their learning, which often results in children naturally gravitating to more expert peers who will support them emotionally and developmentally.

Play is central to children's learning and development.

Understanding, valuing and promoting the importance of peer learning in the ELC setting is essential for mixed age group learning to be successful. Inspectors often note that in highly effective mixed age group settings the educators' expectations of children are adapted depending on the age of the child. Older and more able children will be encouraged to do as much as possible for themselves and to help younger or less able children. Educators also adapt their style of questioning and conversation to the age and stage of development of the child/children they are communicating with.



It is also important that parents/guardians are aware of the opportunities provided by mixed age grouping. The provision of information and guidance to support parents' understanding of these intentional processes in the ELC setting is important, particularly where the child has siblings in the home and parents can replicate the encouragement for peer learning the child has experienced in the ELC setting (Gov.ie, 2020).

Observation, Assessment and Differentiation in Planning

Outcome Statement 4: Provision is informed by Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Outcome Statement 5: Information about the children's development informs next steps in learning

Outcome Statement 10: Provision for children's learning and development is closely aligned to their interests and developing capabilities

In delivering a broad-based curriculum to a mixed age group of children, an early years educator's understanding of the concept of differentiation and their knowledge of the stages and process of play are of paramount importance. They must, at all times, be conscious of the fact that children may go through these phases at different paces. Of equally high importance is the educator's ability to focus on children's individual interests and skills rather than expecting the entire group to move linearly through milestones and achievements. An integral aspect of the early years education process is the understanding that not all children will be ready for the same tasks or activities at the same time.

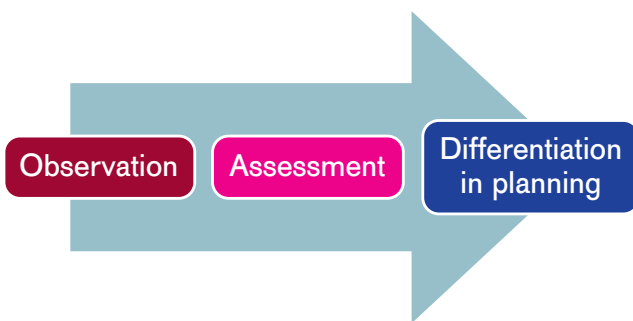


Figure 2: Observation, assessment and differentiation in planning

Inspectors have observed that in high quality settings educators in mixed age groups use pedagogical strategies such as regular observation, assessment and documenting of children's learning dispositions, skills, and interests to support and extend children's

learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2018b). It is also evident that educators know all of the children well and derive this understanding from the implementation of a key person system for observation, record keeping and on-going communication with parents. In Department of Education inspection reports, you might see affirming statements about observed effective practice such as:

- ◆ Individual learning plans are completed for all children.
- ◆ Short-term plans are adaptable to meet the interests and emergent interests of individual children.
- ◆ Observations of the children's individual emergent interests are used to inform short-term plans.
- ◆ Individual children's learning is recorded regularly and includes next steps in learning.
- ◆ Children's strengths and dispositions are clearly visible in observations and in planning documents.
- ◆ A variety of approaches are used to record and document children's interests, needs and dispositions, these include anecdotal notes, observation learning records, individual and group learning journals.

The Environment as the 'Third Teacher'

Outcome Statement 7: The environment and resources support children's wellbeing, learning and development

A key consideration in creating positive learning experiences suitable to the unique learning dispositions of individual children in mixed age group settings, is the preparation of the environment. When the environment is thoughtfully prepared it caters for the abilities and interests of all the children in the group, ensuring that younger children don't get overwhelmed and that older children are challenged and don't lose interest. Equipment and materials in highly effective mixed age group settings are carefully selected, freely available and open-ended to support children's interests and needs, and to challenge and extend their thinking and capabilities. When it works well, the carefully curated learning environment acts as a 'third teacher' to the children, enticing engagement, enriching their experiences and challenging achievement. Putting effort into creating an environment that will cater for the age range and capabilities of children in the mixed age group will provide opportunities for children of all ages and developmental levels to interact, take risks, experiment, explore, discover and connect with the natural environment and the world around them.



A thoughtfully prepared environment caters for the age range and capabilities of all children.

Inspectors observe that high quality environments are comfortable, inviting and well planned. They are safe and secure whilst offering stimulation and challenge. A well-planned environment can be highly effective in catering for a wide range of ages and abilities in a mixed age group and is designed to provide differentiated spaces that appeal to all.

In Summary

The Department of Education Inspectorate often observes the benefits of effective mixed age grouping programmes in ELC settings. The role of the educator in creating learning experiences to meet the needs of the whole group, their knowledge of young children's developmental and play stages, and their engagement in meaningful and reciprocal interactions with the children and their parents is of paramount importance. Other factors such as leadership skills, adult/child ratios, and the group size are all important

elements in creating positive learning outcomes for children.

In highly effective mixed age group settings, children are encouraged to grow, develop and learn at a pace suitable to their own individual capacity. As a result, younger children learn from, and are motivated by, older children. In turn, older children are empowered as they help and teach younger children.

Where high quality provision is observed, a strong coherence between observation, assessment and differentiation in planning is evident. Planning for children's learning builds on their interests, previous learning experiences and previous achievements.

And last, but by no means least, in high quality mixed age group settings, the indoor and outdoor environments are purposefully structured, resourced and organised to support children's developing curiosity, creativity, imagination, literacy and numeracy skills, and desire to for exploration.

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Mixed Age Group Settings in a Rural School Community

Supporting Families and Strengthening the Sense of Community For Children

Tina Dunstan, Owner, Cherryblossoms Childcare Ltd





Introduction

Cherryblossom Kilbrin is an Early Years and School Age Childcare Service based in a rural village in North Cork. The service was established when a local preschool provider, who had provided an outstanding little service, retired, leaving a huge void in the community in terms of catering for preschool children. The local national school rallied round and quickly developed their plan for what was to become our setting, Cherryblossoms Kilbrin. We are a single room service with our own entrance and a separate outdoor area in the local primary school, and our service caters for children from 2 years and 6 months to 13 years (preschool to primary school aged children). There are three staff in the service: Danielle, the Manager, and Helena and Miku, who are Early Years Assistants. Our service capacity is 22. We consider our service to be a family support setting as younger and older family members are catered for in the one room. Our service came about because of a community and family need, and the natural establishment of mixed age groups has been magical to watch.



What is a Mixed Age Group Setting?

Mixed age groupings occur when children at least one year apart are cared for and educated together in the one group. This type of grouping occurs naturally in some rural schools in Ireland where they have small numbers and a teacher teaches more than one class. Cherryblossom Kilbrin is a mixed age setting in every sense of the word. As well as mixed preschool age groups

(both Year 1 ECCE and Year 2 ECCE together), we also cater for families together from 3 o'clock onwards when preschool and school age children are mixed. Peter Gray (2011) puts it so eloquently and helps us find the value in mixed age groupings when he says, 'In mixed age play, children scaffold the behaviour of younger one, so that the latter play within their zones of proximal development and thereby stretch their abilities to higher levels' (p.518) We have the wonderful pleasure of watching this first-hand each day. Our setting has developed as a mixed group setting because of the location, and the rural school set-up, and we are an extension of the family and school community.

Benefits of Mixed Age Settings

Having mixed age groups has many benefits but also has its drawbacks. The key to an effective mixed age setting is a flexible environment and, especially for our children, an accessible outdoor environment. Within the Early Years session, our children have free access and movement between inside and outside, and this allows the children movement between play groups. On a very wet day, the frustration of the younger children knocking or intervening in the play of those who are more advanced in their play can lead to arguments. Whereas on a dry day, with the constant flow and movement of children between inside and outside, this is less of a concern.

A strong sense of community and extended family relationships plays a huge role in our setting. Cousins, brothers, sisters and neighbours play together, and the vibrant local community connection is central. Children are also given a heightened sense of their place in their community as the link that we have with the primary school far outreaches the simple 'transition to Big School' link. We get to experience every school activity and are fully immersed in all of the school's celebrations.

Watching children learning and being supported by older children is the highlight of mixed age group settings, especially where children have no siblings. Helena (Early Years Assistant) in her feedback noted that she felt that, 'Some of the preschoolers are more confident when the afterschoolers come in the evening. Initially, the children might be slow to mix... and then to see them open up, and this is mainly developed through mealtimes.' Adults place themselves at opportune locations to scaffold the children in their interactions, sometimes establishing a common link, or mentioning an interest that we know two or more children have to get the conversation off the ground. These social moments, along with the supportive adult, form an extremely important piece of the positive experience of mixed age settings.



Counterbalancing any Negative Aspects of Mixed Age Group Settings

Of course, every setting type has its negative aspects and mixed age group settings are no different. To ensure that we get the best from our setting, being aware of these is key. One of the 'tricky' aspects of a mixed ECCE group, highlighted by our Manager Danielle, is when 'children form a close bond or friendship with children who move onto primary (school) before them'. This does create a sense of loss for the children but as our setting is so deeply immersed in the school, the children still see each other at break times, and often children come back to our service for homework club one or two evenings a week.

Another issue highlighted by both Danielle and Miku (Early Years Assistant) is that, if not supported, children 'might have difficulty in reaching key milestones'. This might be in terms of their play, and the key to this is reflective practice, observations and providing the best supports for children. Vygotsky celebrates children learning from more knowledgeable others, and this includes their peers.

Parents' Opinion on Mixed Age Settings

When looking for feedback from parents for this article on mixed age group settings, it was clear that most had not even really considered our setting as being a mixed age setting. As the children are already mixed in the local school, they really hadn't even thought about 'mixed age' as a concept.

For one parent, the opportunity for siblings to attend the service together helped them to settle, while another parent noted that their younger child found remaining in the Preschool while their siblings made the transition from Breakfast Club to Primary school difficult. With support from staff and open communication we overcame this. Some parents commented on their children's self-esteem, and how they had 'grown so much'. On the whole, parents didn't have any concerns about mixed age groups, but our setting is small and in the afternoon the children are mostly from the same two or three families.

Mixed Age Group or Not?

I've been working in the Early Years and School Age sector for over 20 years, and I've had experience in a variety of settings. I love the mixed age approach and can see how it works so well in some settings, but I can

also see how it might not be suitable for other settings. In Cherryblossom Kilbrin, we have an emergent play-based curriculum and I believe that is why mixed aged groups in our setting works so well. We don't expect children to conform to our idea of play, as they are allowed the freedom to move throughout the time they are in the setting. This means that children can leave a group if they aren't comfortable or are feeling overwhelmed, and move elsewhere. It has taken us a few years to get to where we are and it is not always easy for staff moving into a setting like ours, but when you see those magic moments, honestly it's so worth it. The key to it all is staff being open to mixed groupings, and understanding the benefits for children, plus our school set-up really defines the type of setting we have.



Whether mixed or not, from our setting's experiences the key is in ensuring that social occasions allow for children to connect, that outdoor environments are accessible, that environments are flexible and adaptable for all age groups, and that children of all ages are challenged and have materials that help them reach their full potential. Children naturally play in mixed age groups, so nurturing those natural instincts is essential. So, I don't think the question is 'mixed or not?', rather that ALL children be supported in the setting. Age is but a number.

Thank you to Danielle, Helena, Miku and the parents for their input into this article.

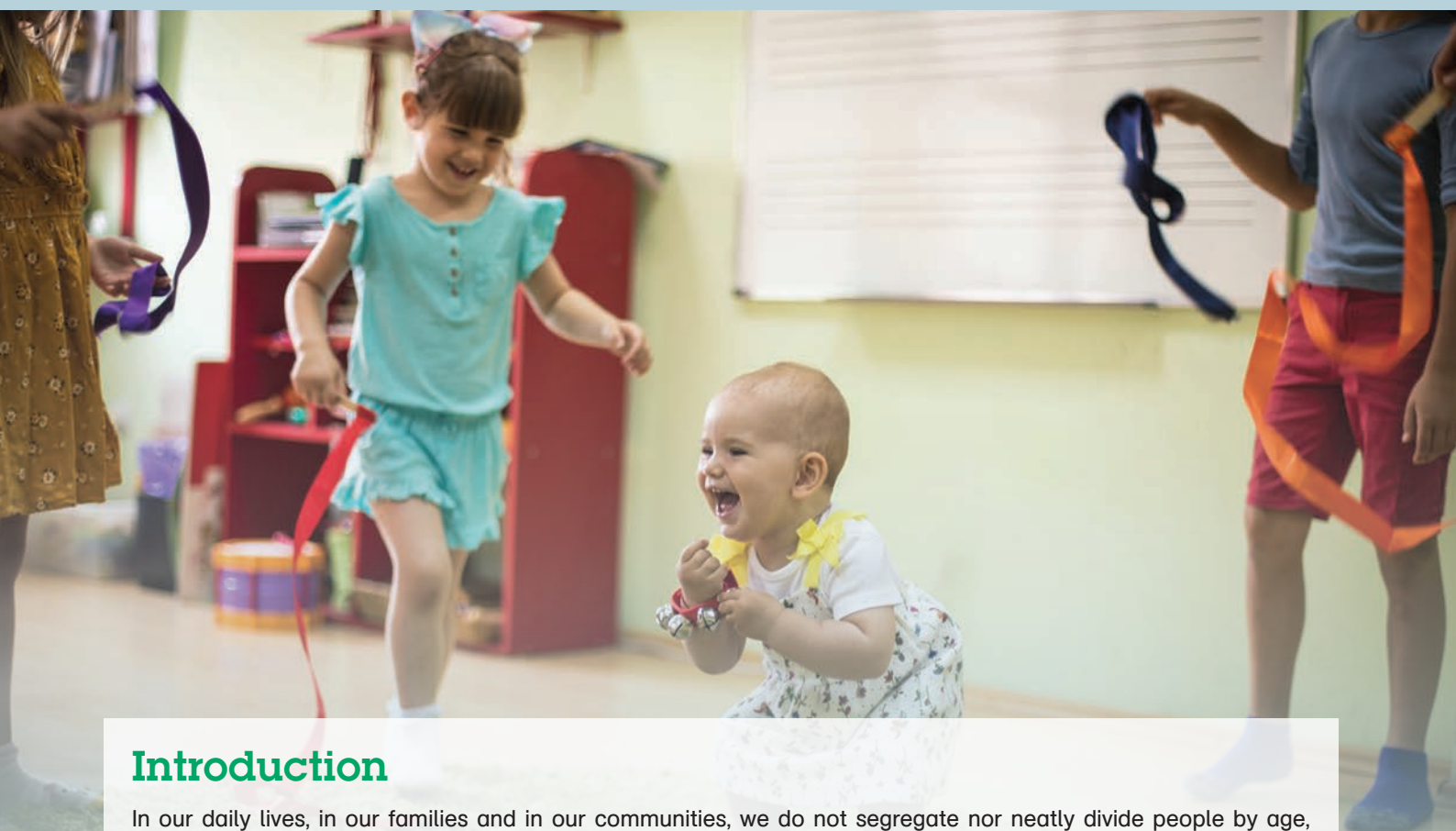
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Mixed Age Groups and Children's Social and Emotional Development

Jean Currid and Michele McDermott, Regional Development Workers and Aistear/Síolta Mentors, Barnardos



Introduction

In our daily lives, in our families and in our communities, we do not segregate nor neatly divide people by age, nor as adults do we only befriend people our own age. This is because we know and understand the benefits of engaging and socialising with people of all ages, enriching our lives through the experiences, interests, abilities and enthusiasms of those who are both younger and older than we are, and learning from and teaching one another.

Despite this general understanding of the benefits of being with people of all ages, many children in Ireland today spend a large portion of their lives outside of the home segregated by age in their schools, in their groups and activities, and in the different forms of out-of-home care, including Early Learning and Care (ELC). While many childminders provide mixed-age care (also known as family grouping or natural grouping), and there are a small number of ELC settings that intentionally offer this type of service, most centre-based ELC settings in Ireland have specific rooms and different carers for babies, wobblers, toddlers and pre-schoolers.

In this article, we look at what we know about mixed-age groups in ELC and consider the benefits of being in a mixed-age group for young children's social and emotional development.



Our Understanding of Mixed-age Groupings

The concept of mixed-age groupings in Early Learning and Care (ELC), and its benefits, have been well researched and documented. As early as 1907, Maria Montessori recognised that children learn in different ways and that a mixed age grouping is a critical element of this learning. She noted that younger children learn by observing older children and seeing what is possible, while older children learn from acting as role models. She saw also that older children deepen their understanding of what they themselves are being taught by becoming a teacher to others.

Sixty years later, Vygotsky, when developing his theory on Zone of Proximal Development (see more on this below), also emphasised the importance of mixed age groups, believing that children should have access to more knowledgeable companions and serve as an expert resource to others. In more recent years, Katz (1995) stated her belief that the intention of a mixed age group should be to increase the diverse nature of the group in order to capitalise on the differences in the experience, knowledge and abilities of the children. In 2011, Gray suggested that children have more to learn from playmates who differ from themselves in age and ability than from those who are at their same developmental level, citing a study that found that toddlers with older playmates in age-mixed day-care groups scored higher in language, general cognitive, and motor development than toddlers in otherwise similarly aged early years groups (Bailey, Burchinal & McWilliam, 1993).

In Ireland, the regulations and quality and curriculum frameworks that guide the ELC sector refer to mixed-age groupings. The Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) (Tusla, 2018) for the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (DCYA, 2016) advises that 'The service supports children in forming and sustaining positive relationships with siblings, peers and other children' (p.33) and suggests that settings plan time when infants, younger children and older siblings or friends can be together. Standard 5 of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2017), states that each child should be 'enabled to interact with her/his peers and with children of different ages in pairs, small groups and, to a lesser degree, in large groups' (Component 5.1, p.41), while Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, (NCCA, 2009), promotes that ELC settings encourage children to help each other during their activities, play and routines.

Continuity of Care and Attachment

We now understand that consistent relationships are critical in supporting children's development and learning. Studies show that the longer a caregiver stays with a child, the more secure the caregiver-child attachment relationship (McMullen, Yun, Mihai, & Kim, 2016), while frequent transitions to new caregivers can take a toll on children and families.

Approaches that allow for mixed age groupings in ELC settings offer an opportunity for increased continuity of care. In many ELC settings, children are moved 'up' to a different group with different educators as they age. Each time they move, the child's new educators must get to know them and the other children, learning to read each child's cues and gaining the trust of the children's families.

In a key person approach known as looping, also known as 'continuous learning' or 'continuity of care' and often found in conjunction with mixed-age groupings, the same educator stays with a group of children for multiple years. The practice of looping facilitates long-term relationships between caregivers and the child that will enable the child to feel secure, promote bonding and allow a secure attachment to develop. This secure attachment will benefit all areas of a child's development, including social-emotional development, cognitive development and language development (Bowlby, 1988). Looping provides children with additional time to build the trust and relationships on which much of their learning depends. Children develop stronger social bonds with the other children in the group, are better able to resolve conflicts and are more skilful in working as team members to solve problems (Hanson, 1995).

Offering mixed-age groupings in an early years setting further enables this system of looping. Children remain in the same group with the same caregivers over a longer period of time, creating a framework in which educators can deepen their relationships with children and their families, providing continuity and stability for all stakeholders. Providing mixed-age groups can, therefore:

- ◆ Increase the opportunity to build secure, attached relationships as well as support children's social and emotional development (Ruprecht et al., 2016).
- ◆ Provide ample time for caregivers to learn about the individual needs of the child and to develop positive working partnerships with families (McMullen, Yun & Kim, 2016).
- ◆ Reduce the number of transitions for infants, families, and caregivers.
- ◆ Allow siblings and peer groups to remain together over time in a familiar setting.



Learning and Development

Brain development - The Mirror-neuron System

In the first years of life, the brain goes through an incredible growth spurt, producing more than a million neural connections every second (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.) The development of these connections, which will go on to impact a person's future social and emotional health, depends on the experiences and interactions they have with others.

Children are continually observing everything around them and younger children are often motivated to copy what older children are doing. They observe and then imitate. When a child observes an action being performed, it activates some of the same neural pathways that would be active if they had actually performed the action themselves. This is called the mirror-neuron system and means that the child's brain is practising the action that they are seeing, even though their body may not actually be moving. Studies show that when children see an action, they are subsequently able to perform that action themselves more quickly than if they had not previously seen the action (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004).

Within a mixed age grouping, we can see the mirror-neuron system in action in the way that children learn from one another. Young children often imitate the behaviours and actions they see in the older cohort of children, aspiring to their levels of capability, and learn from how the older children respond to them in return. At the same time, the older children rise to the expectations of the younger children and the educator, becoming more responsible and embracing opportunities to lend and use their expertise.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

What a child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow.

(Vygotsky, 1987, cited in Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p.40)

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a key construct in Vygotsky's theory of learning and development, is the space between what a learner is capable of doing unsupported, and what they can do supported. Vygotsky's research (1978) led him to the conclusion that temporary support from a more knowledgeable other, i.e. someone with more knowledge or expertise, towards a novice in the development and attainment of new skills was the most beneficial way to support social development and learning. Children who could not achieve difficult tasks alone or with children the same age were able to attain successfully in the company of older children.

An older child who is a few developmental steps ahead of the younger child is in an opportune space to provide, consciously or unconsciously, scaffolding of activities so that a younger child plays in a more complex pattern and so attains new skills or builds on previous ones. They may take the opportunity to engage and sustain more complex play that will completely interest and fulfil them.

Emotional Regulation

Vygotsky (1978) also believed that there are a number of critical conditions necessary for the development of self-regulatory behaviours in children. One of these conditions is that, in order for a child to develop any higher mental function on the intra-subjective (individual) plane, they first need to experience it on the inter-subjective (shared) plane (Vygotsky, 1978). This means that children should have an opportunity to engage in other-regulation. Other-regulation is where a child acts as both a subject of another person's regulatory behaviours, as is likely the case in many of their interactions with adults, and as a regulator themselves, regulating another person's behaviours as might happen in their interaction with peers or younger children.

A mixed-age group provides an environment for the child to both model another person's regulatory behaviour and learn how to support others to develop theirs.

Lillian Katz (1998) found that, in some cases, older children who have difficulty in regulating their own behaviour improve when encouraged to help younger ones observe the rules of the group. When educators or caregivers ask such children to remind the younger ones about the rules, they seem to be better able to do so themselves. Katz did go on to say, however, that adults need to be mindful of how a child is co-regulating another child to ensure that it is carried out in a supportive manner.





She also noted that children from the older cohort who are socially less mature than their age-mates may be more accepted by the younger ones in the mixed-age group. When the ages are mixed, these older children have opportunities to practise and polish social skills with younger ones, learning to use their skills with the greater confidence required for competent interaction with their own age mates.

Educators can place children in a position to regulate the behaviours of others or guide older children when regulating the behaviours of younger peers.

Social Development

Unfortunately, many children in our society today have little opportunity for age-mixed play. More and more, free neighborhood play—which was usually age-mixed—has been replaced by adult-directed, age-segregated activities for children and by indoor solitary play. Before we move even further in this direction or give up on the idea of reversing this trend, we would do well to have a firm understanding of the evolutionary functions of age-mixed play and how those functions are still relevant to children’s development today.

(Gray, 2011, p.519)

As well as benefitting a child’s cognitive and emotional development, mixed age groupings can have a significant positive impact on a child’s social development – for both younger and older children. Pro-social skills such as empathy, leadership, collaboration, self-regulation, self-confidence and nurturing others can all be enhanced when children engage with other children of different ages. Dispositions such as patience, empathy, collaboration and negotiation are supported as younger and older play and explore together.

For example, in mixed age groups, older children can develop a sense of responsibility and empathy towards younger children, nurturing them and adapting their actions to support younger children to gain new skills. They engage in more help giving, explaining and sharing behaviours than they might in groups with children the same age where they may be in competition for the same materials and equipment. Young children who play regularly with older playmates learn to understand what is in another’s mind and to see things from a different point of view.

Leadership

In mixed age groups, older children who may not be confident in their leadership skills with peers can develop in confidence when given an opportunity to show, explain

and support younger children in their activities. Educators can scaffold and model leadership skills, supporting older children to model the same skills towards younger children who require help (Gray, 2011).

Mutual support

In ELC settings, educators can encourage children to turn to one another for help and support. This is not to displace the role of the adult, but to enhance the experiences of each child in their setting. Younger children will learn how to ask for help from others and that they can rely on other older children to support them. Older children will learn how to give and even offer help to when it is needed, offering comfort and providing explanation and direction on activities and tasks to younger children. They can also help to set up activities for younger children that they are able to engage in but are not yet able to set up for themselves. It is important, however, that educators ensure that older children are still able to avail of all the opportunities in the setting, and do not become surrogate caregivers to younger children. With support from adults, these older children can learn how to positively create boundaries for themselves when they need time to explore their own interests and activities.

Interaction and collaboration

In mixed age groupings, children can work in collaboration with one another rather than in competition with one another, which can happen when they are with children the same age. As they are in different developmental spheres, children of different ages do not usually compete for materials and equipment. They are also better able to engage in pro social skills such as turn taking, sharing and negotiation as part of their collaboration. Wu, Lin and Ni (2022) noted more positive interactions, and fewer negative or neutral interactions, between children in mixed age groupings of 3 to 6 year olds than in same age groupings. Rotherstein-Fisch & Howes (1988) found that toddler peer interaction skills were more developed in mixed age groups, with toddlers preferring to observe older children rather than children the same age, playing in a more complex way.

Empathy

Empathy, the capacity to understand what may be in the mind of others, see things from their point of view and acknowledge how they may be feeling, is a pro social skill that will benefit a person throughout their life. The development of empathy may not happen naturally in children, however. Educators in ELC settings can support this development by facilitating children to empathise with smaller children who have yet to attain skills that they have, supporting older children to be sensitive to younger children and their emotional well-being.



Children learn about emotions and feelings through their social interactions with others. Educators can also support children to better understand emotions through discussions about feelings and by modelling. For example, if an older child dismisses a younger child's sadness by saying 'he's a cry baby', the educator can lead a conversation about what is happening for the younger child and about the older child's reaction, encouraging the child to step into the shoes of the younger child and respect their level of ability. 'Do you remember when you were also not able to build blocks so high because you couldn't reach and what that felt like? How do you think Sam might feel?' This will provoke a more empathic response towards the younger child.

In this way, younger children are acting as teacher to the older child, helping them to learn how to build relationships with others, how to nurture and to share responsibilities of care. Each child learns from others in an individual way. By being given the opportunity to observe the differing experiences, knowledge and abilities of other children of different ages, and with sensitive, warm and responsive interactions from adults, children can look to one another for support, fun and enjoyment as well as learning.

Conclusion

Mixed age groupings have been used in primary schools in rural areas in Ireland for many years. They have also been effectively used in Early Learning and Care (ELC) within the Maria Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches. The implication for using mixed age groupings is that younger and older children can

gain from each other both socially and emotionally, which can only have a positive effect for all children. Mixed age groupings are a natural way to support children's development as they learn from those both older and younger. To support children at varying levels of learning, educators can model and scaffold skills such as self-regulation, leadership, empathy, sharing, negotiating, nurturing and supporting others. In turn, children will model that behaviour for others (Peter Gray, 2011). Being in a collaborative, family style grouping will also enhance children's interaction skills and provide opportunities for children to support and nurture other children and accept this support and nurturance from others.

To put such a system into practice, educators need to understand the complexity of the approach, and put great thought into how it will work in their setting, to ensure that it supports all of the children in the group. Consideration needs to be given to the number of children in the group, the appropriate ratio of younger to older children, and to the educators and the environment, as all will impact on the success of the approach. Educators need to ensure if introducing mixed age groups that they create an environment that offers a safe haven in which children of all ages are able to enjoy a wide range of opportunities. Children in the group must also be regarded as individuals with their own unique learning path/journey ages rather than as being a group in development. With all this in place, mixed age groupings will offer children an opportunity for children's social and emotional development to flourish and thrive.

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Childminders and Mixed Age Groups in Ireland

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Introduction

Childminders in Ireland care for children in a wide age range: approximately 10% of children aged 0-12 years (88,000) (CSO, 2017) are in the care of paid childminders and other professional home-based caregivers at least part time. Legally, a childminder is defined as a person who singlehandedly minds children in the childminder's own home (Child Care Act, 1991). Childminders are self-employed, agree their own terms conditions with parents, and are responsible for their own tax and PRSI arrangements. Under current regulations, childminders can only register with Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency, if they mind 4 or 5 unrelated preschool children or 7-12 school age children at any one time (Registration of School Age Services, 2018; Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016).



The latest estimated number of childminders is 15,000 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2021), although it could be as high as 33,000, depending on the estimated average number of children minded per childminder¹ (McGinnity et al., 2015). Currently, we still rely on estimates as only 77 childminders were registered with Tusla in January 2021. In addition, 690 childminders, caring for three or fewer children, were registered with Revenue in order to avail of the Childcare Tax Relief², which allows childminders to earn up to €15,000 per annum without paying income tax while paying for self-employed social insurance towards maternity leave and pension.

Despite its significant role in national childcare provision, little research has focussed on childminding in Ireland, until recent doctoral research explored childminders' cultural models of practice, pedagogy and professionalism in the Irish context (O'Regan et al., 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022) professional childminding (family childcare/day care. The research was conducted primarily within the theoretical framework of Ecocultural Theory (ECT) (Keogh & Weisner, 1993; Weisner, 2002), referencing concepts in Attachment Theory (Sroufe et al., 2010), in the context of historical and current policy in Ireland, Europe and the USA over the last 30 years. A mixed method approach was adopted using an online survey, World Café forum focus groups (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015) and the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICH). This article draws on all these sources of research to explore mixed age groupings in childminding settings in Ireland.

Ecocultural Research Methods

Since the culture of early care is not an abstract concept, but becomes visible in everyday activities (Rogoff, 2003), the EFICH asks the childminder to describe their daily routine: the lens of daily routine reveals the cultural models (Quinn & Holland, 1987; Weisner & Hay, 2015) underpinning childminders' practice (Tonyan, 2015). The EFICH research protocol has three main components: first, a semi-structured, conversational interview; second, childminder photographs illustrating their daily practice; and third, the completion of rating scales by the researcher with qualitative vignettes to explain each rating. In addition, a background survey gathered information about the family's economic circumstances, the childminder's reported levels of agency, their education level, and views on early childhood.

The original Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI) (Bernheimer & Weisner, 2007) focused on a family's daily routines as these develop within the resources and constraints of their ecology, drawing on the beliefs and values within the family's culture. Since a childminding niche contains multiple families and operates as a business, the EFI was adapted for use in childminding research in California (California Child Care Research Partnership, 2014) and further tailored for the Irish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) context. Subsequently, the data were coded using Dedoose[®], a web-based application for analysing mixed method research with text, photos, audio, videos, and spreadsheet data (Salmona et al., 2019), allowing for a qualitative analytic process of structured discovery, 'during which analytic strategies remained open to unexpected processes and patterns while focusing on project-specific topics' (Weisner, 2014, p. 167).

Study Participants

From the online survey in 2015, there were there were 325 valid responses from childminders (n=181) and parents (n=144), while 40 childminders attended the World Café focus groups in 2016 hosted by Childminding Ireland, the national membership organisation for professional childminders. Furthermore, 17 childminders gave EFICH interviews in 2018-2019: two of these were registered with Tusla and 15 were members of Childminding Ireland. All participants were female, and over 70% held at least QQI level 5 in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). In this article, pseudonyms are used to protect participants' privacy.

Mixed Age Childcare at Childminders

Some of the most striking findings in this research related to mixed age childcare and how central it is to childminding practice. A key finding to emerge was the prevalence of a cultural model childminders called Real-Life Learning. This is a relationship-driven learning environment, reminiscent of Hayes' concept of nurturing pedagogy (Hayes, 2007, 2019), which emphasises both 'the educative nature of care' (2007, p. 4) and 'an engaged, bidirectional level of interaction' (2019, p. 6) between adult and children. In relationship-driven learning, mixed age groupings from 0-12 years were found to play a significant role.

1 McGinnity et al., 2015 estimate the average as 2.6 children per childminders.

2 <https://www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/children/childcare-services/index.aspx>



Mixed age groups are central to childminding practice

Childminding services do not fit neatly into the age-stratified boxes of early years (ECEC) and school age childcare (SAC) for the most part. In the survey, the average number of minded children per childminder was 2.6, usually of mixed ages for varied hours, i.e., some full-time children, usually under the age of three years, and some part-time school age children up the age of 12 years. Similarly, of the 17 interviewees, 13 worked with a mixed age group of children, varying from babies and toddlers to school-goers of 11-12 years of age, many of whom were also siblings.

It could be said that many childminders provide neither ECEC nor SAC, as they typically work with a small group of children of mixed ages, from babies to teens, in mixed age childcare resembling a family group. Childminders considered this one of the main features and benefits of childminding, mentioned by several respondents and often seen in photos used to illustrate their practice:

They're holding hands coming up the hill, you know the way, they're all just, just having fun and G. is here as well, but he's only here part-time... He is 11 now, and L. was three at the time, and I just thought, 'broad range of ages, mixing together, it really is a family.' ... as in it's not their immediate family, but it is a family and that's what they have. – Marianne

In family childcare, these sibling-like relationships and interactions provided opportunities for learning and interactions between minded children and childminders' own children also. For example, Sonia's 11-year-old daughter loved playing with younger children, doing art, organising dress up, photo shoots, and role play. She became so attached to a particular three-year-old child, that one Sunday they arranged to go together to the cinema by train, not for payment as a minded child, but as a part of their family, as their little sister. Others mentioned how childminding created a big family for their lone child, or for their isolated children, who were far from extended family who lived abroad:

My children don't have really like, yeah, a sibling, they're just two. So, they feel when they have these children, 'I have a little sister. I have a little brother'. – Cynthia.

With rising numbers of one-child families using childcare in Ireland and elsewhere (Central Statistics Office, 2017; Office of National Statistics, 2018), the childminding home offers unique opportunities for socialising with a small, mixed age group of children.

Mixed age groups support socio-emotional learning

Mixed age learning was seen as a valuable tool in promoting and supporting the development of socio-emotional skills in both younger and older children. In particular, the development of empathy and a sense of responsibility towards the younger children was identified, for example, by taking care of them when out on a walk or in the playground, as illustrated in the following quote:

They're holding hands at the playground, they're looking after each other, they're pushing the other on the swing, they... you know, they just play, and it works really well... [laughs] – Rianne.

The small group size means the childminders can give each child more personal attention, and the mixed age cohort supports the child to develop emotional self-regulation as older and younger children can learn from one another (Administration for Children & Families, 2017; Ruprecht et al., 2016; Sroufe, 2005) emotional regulation, and learning (Center on the Developing Child, 2012). Katz et al (1990) also emphasise that mixed-age settings encourage empathy, cooperation and other social behaviours. The small, mixed age groups facilitate peer to peer scaffolding, stimulating the development of younger children, who also typically received more emotional support from older children than from those near their own age (Gray, 2011), promoting empathy and responsibility in older children.

Mixed age play helps to develop language and numeracy

In mixed age play, the more sophisticated behaviour of older children was perceived as providing role models for younger children. Specifically, older children were perceived to learn by teaching and were provided with opportunities for practising nurturance and leadership; at the same time, participants reported that these older children were often inspired by the imagination and creativity of their younger playmates. Younger children were represented in some cases as copying what older children were doing and wanting nothing more than to be involved in their play.

The possibilities for mixed age groups facilitating bi-directional learning were observed. In one home, the school age children were playing shop with two younger toddlers. Each was assigned the role of shop assistant or customer, with 'goods' exchanging hands and plenty of 'money' being counted, with all the vocabulary supplied by the older children. The toddlers had to ask and pay for goods in the shop 'properly'! When they tired of that, the older ones brought the younger children outside to



play on the scooters and trikes, helping them negotiate the skills of turn taking, while they practised nurturance at the same time, pushing the trikes, epitomising the dynamics of child-led, bidirectional learning.

According to Gray (2011), such bi-directionality seems to occur especially in cases where the difference in status between tutor and learner is not too great, so that the latter feels comfortable questioning and challenging the former. Thus, when older children explain concepts, such as turn-taking, to younger ones in mixed age play, they must turn their previously implicit, unstated knowledge into words which younger children can understand (and question), so that both “tutor” and “learner” are helping each other to learn.

Much of this practice is reminiscent of that in Reggio Emilia preschools, where small mixed-age groups are used to provide more family-like environments to harness these dynamics in the service of a child-led emergent curriculum (Katz, 1998). Drawing heavily on the theory of Vygotsky and the concept of scaffolding, Rogoff (1990) describes guided participation in cultural activity, noting how such environments ‘provide many benefits, including the opportunity to practise teaching and nurturance with younger children and the opportunity to imitate and practice role relations with older children’ (p. 184).

The challenges of mixed age groups in childminding settings

In interviews, childminders mentioned two significant challenges to mixed age childcare: the logistics of school drop-offs and collections and the dynamic of mixed age relationships. Almost all the mixed age childminders in the study followed a daily routine of drop-offs and pick-ups from local schools and preschools. For childminders in towns and cities, this could mean short, pleasant strolls around the corner twice a day - daily visits can support children’s transition to preschool or school (Ang et al., 2016). However, among rural childminders, the most frequently mentioned wish for change concerned the amount of time spent in the car doing collections. The most extreme example was a childminder who spent up to two hours a day driving children to schools or to home:

Do you know what, I absolutely love the school holidays! Absolutely love the holidays. Because ... I don't have to get them six times a day into the car seats, in and out, and I don't have to bring them onto the bumpy roads all the time. – Katriina





Moreover, while childminders work to create a happy atmosphere for all the children, with healthy interactions between all the children of different ages, this can involve monitoring the development of relationships. Most childminders in the study felt they managed the interactions well, with clear rules and boundaries helping to promote more sophisticated play with younger children and responsibility among the older children. However, several mentioned the issue of conflicting needs among the children in the care of the childminder. One experienced childminder found it difficult to get the balance right, partly, she felt, because the older children had not grown up with her, as she explained:

She's meeting me at ten [years of age]. But now she has settled a bit. But like I said, she's inclined to tell a lot of lies. So, you have to watch everything and double check everything. But that preteen phase, hormones are starting and all that kind of stuff. – Cathy

Others mentioned personality clashes between the childminder's own children and minded children when they are older, and the effect that could have on the family, to the point of considering whether to stop minding a child. However, for one childminder, such interpersonal conflicts among children were opportunities for her daughter to learn about relationships:

It's interesting, there's some children she's mad about. She loves the babies. I have one boy who she is absolutely allergic to. Doesn't get on with him at all. And he needles her, and I just tell her, 'You're never going to get on with everybody in life.' It's actually good for her. {laughs} – Mary

The benefits of mixed age groups in childminding settings

Mixed age groups were clearly considered as a defining characteristic of childminding in Ireland. Childminders were eager to describe relationship-driven learning in mixed age groups, with siblings together, in a rich home learning environment, with ample opportunities for outdoor play in the garden as the children wished. They highlighted the freedom of outings in the community, and the flexible spontaneity of everyday experiences the children could enjoy – cooking, gardening, organising their own play – without the restrictions imposed by a large group. They saw the value of being able to trust children of a certain age to play on the nearby green or walk home from school with a buddy (with parental permission) as a maturing experience of appropriate risk to develop the child's sense of responsibility. This is an approach that childminders clearly believed works very

well for children's development and learning, for which they articulately advocated in their interviews.



Conclusion

The potential for the home learning environment to provide natural scaffolding for rich role-play and social learning is evident, given the small number of children of mixed ages. In an increasingly age-stratified school environment, the mixed age group in itself is an affordance, opening fresh avenues of exploration and imagination (Fagan, 2009; Gray, 2011). The active engagement of the childminder can also enrich the joint learning between younger and older children, as each develops new skills: increasing and honing vocabulary for the younger child, while growing empathy and responsibility in the older one.

Not unlike cousins within an extended Irish family, who are connected through a family network within a community (Ní Laoire, 2011, 2014), the children develop close relationships with each other, with deep bonds of mutual affection between older and younger children, despite occasional personality clashes. Participants in this study revealed keen understanding and innovative practice in relation to managing the dynamic of such mixed age groups to maximise its opportunities for maturation and relational development for the individual children involved. This experiential knowledge ought to be integrated into our understanding of the knowledge base of these early years' practitioners (Campbell-Barr, 2018) and could be included in modules on mixed age childcare for childminders in the future.



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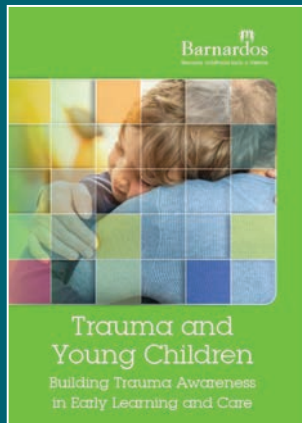
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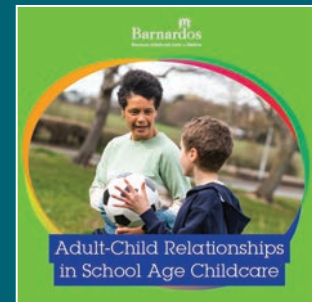
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