

Mixed-Age Grouping: What Does the Research Say, and How Can Parents Use This Information?

by Debbie Reese; May 1998

Taken from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

Parents can feel intimidated by the jargon used by teachers and school officials. Some terms may be new to those who have not spent much time in educational settings. As the school year draws to a close, some parents may find that in the coming school year, their child will be placed in a "mixed-age classroom." This article provides some basic information about mixed-age grouping and examines research on mixed-aged grouping. Finally, a list of questions is provided-- questions parents can pose to prospective mixed-age group teachers or the school's principal-- about how they will address parents' concerns.

Mixed-age grouping is a way of grouping children in which the children's age range is larger than a year--sometimes 2 years and sometimes more. It is intended to optimize the educative potential of the mixture itself. In a mixed-age classroom, children stay with the same teacher for several years. For example, in a classroom with children who are 5, 6, and 7 years old, the children who enter at the age of 5 remain with the teacher for 3 years.

In *The Benefits of Mixed Age Grouping* (1995), Katz provides a clear understanding of what "mixed-age grouping" means. She writes that "Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them." In most families children are born one at a time, and if the parents opt to have more than one child, the children are spaced out over a few years. In the home, the older children help the younger ones with certain tasks. In this helping relationship, the younger and older children work together to help the younger learn new skills.

Take, for example, tying shoes. Older children who have mastered this skill will often help younger siblings tie their shoes. The older child has the opportunity to develop her patience, as well as the verbal skills necessary to communicate the steps to the younger child, while the younger learns how to tie her shoes. Often, an older child may read a story to a younger child, occasionally pointing out letters of the alphabet as they read. The older child has the opportunity to develop and solidify reading abilities, while the younger has an opportunity to develop listening and early reading skills.

These sorts of opportunities occur naturally in a home environment. However, as more parents join the work force, and children enter child care settings in which they are grouped according to age, there are fewer opportunities for children to learn from older or younger children in a natural way. Mixed-age classrooms allow this sort of interaction between older and younger children to occur.

The research supporting mixed-age classrooms indicates that academic achievement is the same as, or better than, the academic achievement of children in same-grade classrooms. Mixed-age classrooms do not negatively affect student achievement, and students in these classrooms have significantly more positive attitudes toward school, themselves, and others (Stone, 1998; Veenman, 1996). The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) lists the following benefits of multiage classrooms:

- * Children are able to spend several years with the same teacher. This allows the teacher to develop a deeper understanding of a child's strengths and needs, and is therefore in a better position to support the child's learning.

- * Children have several years to develop, and are able to see themselves as progressive, successful learners.

* Children are viewed as unique individuals. The teacher focuses on teaching each child according to his or her own strengths, unlike in same-grade classrooms that often expect all children to be at the same place at the same time with regard to ability.

* Children are not labeled according to their ability. For example, children in same-grade classrooms may be labeled "below grade level" or "low." These children may stop trying, while those labeled as "above grade level" or "high" may not feel challenged.

* Children learn at their own rate, with no fear of retention. In same-grade classrooms, children are retained if they do not master content by the end of the year. In mixed-age classrooms, children have more time to master content, and this removes their fear of being retained in school.

* Children develop a sense of family with their classmates. They become a "family of learners" who support and care for each other.

* Older children have the opportunity to serve as mentors and to take leadership roles.

* Children are more likely to cooperate than compete. The spirit of cooperation and caring makes it possible for children to help each other as individuals, not see each other as competitors.

* Older children model more sophisticated approaches to problem solving, and younger children are able to accomplish tasks they could not do without the assistance of older children. This dynamic increases the older child's level of independence and competence.

* Children are invited to take charge of their learning, by making choices at centers and with project work. This sense of "ownership" and self-direction is the foundation for lifelong learning.

* Children have almost an extra month of teaching time, because the teacher does not have to spend the early weeks in the school year getting to know each child. Less review of prior instruction is needed before proceeding with new content.

However, some researchers suggest that it is important to examine the way in which mixed-age grouping is implemented in a particular school district. Mason and Burns (1996) have identified important differences in how mixed-age classrooms are implemented that relate to why the school district has chosen to implement a multiage program:

* The school district has chosen to implement the program based on research. The mixed-age program is carefully designed, and teachers who teach in these classrooms do so by choice. The teacher is well prepared to work with this situation and has the curricular materials and training necessary to effectively teach in this classroom.

Or,

* The mixed-age classroom is set up because of budgetary constraints. A principal is forced to combine different age children in a single classroom because the district cannot afford to hire additional teachers, or because of declining enrollment that often occurs in rural districts. In this situation the teacher has not chosen to be a mixed-age group teacher, and she may have negative attitudes as a result of not being prepared and not having the proper curricular materials to meet the needs of all the children in the class. As a result, the same benefits that occur in the first situation may not in fact be realized in the second.

Another factor that may affect the positive outcomes of mixed-age grouping, according to Mason and Burns, is that the principal, in an effort to reduce the burden on the teacher, will place children who are more cooperative, and more independent, in the mixed-age classroom. In some

cases, the principal will assign the more-able teacher to the mixed-age classroom, believing that person needs more experience and skills in order to manage the range of children's abilities.

What can parents do with this information?

Mixed-age grouping has great potential, but only if its implementation is carefully and knowledgeably planned (Gaustad, 1995). Parents who have the option of choosing their child's teacher and classroom for the coming year may want ask these questions when deciding whether to request a mixed-age classroom: (1) Was the classroom established based on an educational decision or a budgetary one? (2) Did the teacher choose to work in that classroom? (3) Does the teacher feels she has the curricular materials necessary to work with all the children in the class? (4) How does the teacher ensure that younger children are not overwhelmed by older or more competent children? (5) How has the curriculum been modified to take advantage of the heterogeneity of the classroom? Asking the teacher or principal these questions can help parents make the best decision for their child.

Sources

Gaustad, Joan. (1995). Implementing the multiage classroom. ERIC Digest. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.

Katz, Lilian. (1995). The benefits of mixed-age grouping. ERIC Digest. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Mason, DeWayne A., & Burns, Robert B. (1996). "Simply no worse and simply no better" may simply be wrong: A critique of Veenman's conclusion about multigrade classes. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 307-322.

Stone, Sandra. The multiage classroom: A guide for parents. ACEI Speaks.

Stone, Sandra. (1998). Defining the multiage classroom. *Focus on Elementary*, 10(3).

Veenman, Simon. (1996). Effects of multigrade and multi-age classes reconsidered. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 323-340.

Credits

Published monthly by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Children's Research Center, 51 Gerty Drive, Champaign, IL 61820-7469. This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. DERR93002007. Opinions expressed in this magazine do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Department of Education.