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5-1-2005

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Introduction

Formal education may have come full circle. Schools have evolved from multi-aged one-room school houses to single-age classrooms, and now some schools are returning to multi-aged classrooms. Educators are revisiting the concept and promise of mixed-age groupings to encourage individual learning and development in a diverse environment.

The prevalent K-12 school model places children in grade levels with approximately a 12 month age difference among them. The expectation is that all of the children in the room will be ready for the same learning experience on any given day. In fact, children who are the same age may vary by more than two years in their individual development. Child development specialists tell us that children progress sequentially through stages of development, with occasional regressions. However, children do not progress through stages uniformly. Some develop quickly, some develop slowly – according to the child's own unique nature. A six-year-old may have the cognitive skills of a seven-year-old but the social/emotional skills of a five-year-old. Therefore, chronological age is not an accurate indicator of a child's maturation or skill level.

About 150 years ago, formal educational institutions standardized the age of entry into school and established sequential grade levels and corresponding curricula (1). Today, children are spending much of their time in same-age groups, beginning in early childhood care and education programs and continuing in schools and even on sports teams. An age-stratified structure has replaced the natural mixed-age groups that were once available to children in their own large families and in their own neighborhoods.

While schools are evaluating the potential of multi-age grouping, directors of after-school and out-of-school time

(OST) programs are faced with the reality of mixed-age groups every day. These programs are populated with assorted ages of children, often in asymmetrical distribution. Small after-school programs are forced to mix different ages of children together. On the other hand, large after-school programs have a choice: to divide groups by age, similar to the classrooms that children just occupied for the previous six hours, or to create mixed-age groups. After-school and OST staff should consider age diversity as an opportunity that can be used to foster leadership and cooperation, as well as cognitive and social skill development. There are rich intellectual, social, and emotional benefits to be reaped from mixed-age groups.

Developmental Characteristics of Ages 6-8 and 9-11

Understanding the developmental characteristics of young children is helpful in facilitating the formation of mixed-age groups. Children generally enter school at age five (kindergarten) and leave second grade at age eight. Social-emotional characteristics developing during these years include forming inner control, progressing from self-centeredness to beginning to see other viewpoints, seeking security in groups, and needing friends. Although physical capabilities are increasing, muscle coordination and the ability to combine skills are still in the formative stages. Cognitive development benefits from the child's longer attention span (15-20 minutes) and increased problem solving skills.

In a child's middle elementary years (ages 9-11), social/emotional characteristics are increased patience and a greater ability to resolve conflict due to an appreciation of other viewpoints. Physically, strength, balance, and coordination are coming together to achieve mastery of complex skills. Cognitively, children are learning to plan ahead, pursue their interests through their own initiative, and talk through problem solving steps. They are learning without the need for hands-on instruction, since they are better able to understand abstract thought.

Benefits of Mixed-Age Groups

Grouping "by age" is an established practice in school systems, but it does not need to be the model for all groups of youth. In fact, mixing the age levels in a group may offer children important benefits that are untapped in traditional classrooms. Directors and staff of after-school and OST programs are in a unique position to explore the potential of inter-aged grouping.

There are promising rewards of mixing different ages of children, if appropriate physical, cognitive, and social parameters are observed. A mixed-age experience allows a child to form friendships with both older and younger children, something that occurs naturally in families and in neighborhoods. Many positive social interactions result when younger and older children spend time together, such as cooperation, nurturing, inclusion, and sharing. Re-mixing groups offers each child an opportunity to be both a younger member and an older member of a group, presenting the child with multiple perspectives on group interaction and involvement.

After-school programs are generally flexible enough to permit the grouping and regrouping of children. Mixing children of different developmental levels, assorted interests, variable skills, and multiple learning styles lays the groundwork for dynamic interaction. Children experience diversity as they are exposed to pronounced differences in ideas, talents, and knowledge, and this diversity can be a foundation for authentic inclusiveness (2).

In a mixed-age group, mutually reinforcing perceptions come together to produce cooperation. Young children look to older children to provide leadership, helpfulness and empathy. Older children perceive younger children as in need of guidance and help (3). A collaborative spirit replaces the competitive tendency frequently found among same-age mates. Cooperative actions and reactions bring out a sense of caring in older children, and they typically accept the responsibility of being a role model.

Younger children view older children as "teachers." They look to older children for what they can contribute. Older children view younger children as in need of knowledge and spontaneously respond to teach a skill or to facilitate a younger child's behavior (4). Older children also benefit because they increase their own understanding of skills and concepts through the very process of demonstrating it to others (5). Younger children who have been encouraged and nurtured by older youths are likely to emulate these behaviors and reciprocate toward others in the future.

Because children progress through developmental stages at different rates, children in a mixed-age group may possess similar skill levels, despite the differences in chrono-

logical age. This can reduce the pressure on an older child who is developmentally similar to a younger child. There is greater acceptance of differences in behavior and performance, which allows an older child to progress at his/her own pace with less stress. Younger children will allow an older child to remain socially or emotionally unsophisticated for a much longer time than the child's own age-mates (6).

In a single-age group of children there is a subtle expectation for everyone to have the same knowledge or skills. Children in single-age settings may experience undue pressure to meet certain norms. In a group with both age and developmental diversity, a broad range of knowledge and skills is anticipated and accepted. Children also identify and connect with companions who complement their own interests and abilities.

In a mixed-age group, children freely trade information. A child who has recently mastered a new skill can gain immediate reinforcement and recognition for this accomplishment by teaching it to another child. Furthermore, younger children may find themselves capable of participating in more complex activities when working in partnership with older children.

Strategies for Mixed-Age Groups

There are indeed challenges to creating an enriching and positive environment for the appropriate interaction of children of different ages. One of the biggest challenges is the amount of time involved in designing and preparing activities for a mixed-age group; however, the end results are well worth the effort.

One key to the success of mixed-aged groups is to use the *process approach* to topics and activities. The process approach emphasizes treating each child as a whole person with a unique developmental rate and style. Using the process approach, after-school staff provides a range of opportunities and open-ended activities or projects in which all children can participate at their own developmental level (7). The challenge is to establish a conducive learning environment where children can pursue various choices according to their interests. If the topic is dinosaurs, there are opportunities for children to write about dinosaurs, draw dinosaurs, build dinosaurs, read about dinosaurs, play with dinosaurs or create a habitat for dinosaurs. This flexibility allows children to become involved at their own interest and skill levels. Moreover, children benefit from seeing what others are doing and gain an understanding of the same topic from different viewpoints.

Creating activities around themes is an important strategy. Selecting a theme or big idea for the week or for the

month is a great way to organize programming, materials, supplies, and even field trips. Addressing a theme over time challenges children to explore a topic in depth. As children return to a topic, they approach it from different perspectives or in a more complex way. The advantage of a mixed-age group is that children of various ages should be able to approach a single topic with different levels of sophistication (8).

Thematic programming leads to another key strategy, the establishment of a rich learning environment. Engaging children in a theme is facilitated by creating a theme center filled with a variety of materials – books, art supplies, maps, audio/video tapes, theatrical props, building materials, and more. This can be a challenge for after-school programs that operate in the school cafeteria or gymnasium. Very little space may be available for creating a center or for storage. If it is difficult to establish a physical center, after-school staff should consider self-contained boxes or tubs of supplies, which have been specifically selected to support each theme. These can be brought out at the beginning of each session.

Regardless of programming design, staff can capitalize on opportunities for cross-age instruction. Whether children are playing a game or exploring a topic, such as dinosaurs, inter-aging offers the ideal environment for cooperative learning. After-school staff can help children learn cross-age teaching/learning techniques. Staff can assist older children in determining how much is too much help and when to let go, that is, to let another child try something on his/her own. Staff can also help younger children be the experts in some areas and determine when to act independently. Cross-age learning promotes collaboration and results in positive social interaction (7).

Establishing an Environment for Mixed-Age Groups

In planning activities and physical spaces, after-school staff may consider some of the following suggestions to meet the needs of a mixed-age group.

- Keep the groups of children small to provide for maximum participation by everyone and to minimize the potential for older children dominating the group.
- Prepare a visual set of instructions for any game, activity or project. Instructions should include step-by-step directions, illustrated whenever possible. This gives children autonomy from the staff, appeals to children of various skill levels, and allows for frequent review of the procedures, so that each group can progress at its own pace. Although time-consuming to prepare, if the instructions are laminated or covered with clear adhesive paper, they can be re-used from year to year.
- Plan a topic or theme in small units. Time management in after-school programs is challenging, especially toward the end of the day, when parents may arrive unexpectedly to pick up children. If each unit is small, children can complete one activity, and then proceed to another if time

permits. Create units of varying difficulty levels. Within a theme, there should be some units that build on previous skills to appeal to and challenge different skill levels.
- When playing physical games, consider grouping children by skill ability rather than by age. More physically developed children may not realize their strength, causing injuries to less able children and leading to frustration for the more able children.
- If it is necessary to include all children in a physical activity, choose games that emphasize basic skills and large muscle movements, such as running and jumping.
- Empower children to create new games. If children are given some basic equipment, they can make up new games or variations of traditional games. Provide a variety of materials that are non-structured or open-ended, such as balls of various sizes, athletic socks (rolled up in a ball or used as flags), bean bags, hoops, large baskets/boxes, and cones.

Planning an Environment for Open-ended Exploration

When planning the after-school environment, provide a wide variety of materials. This not only appeals to the mixed-age group but also allows a group of children to approach a theme from many different directions. Children may choose to write a story, make a model, act out a skit/play, paint a picture, compose/sing a song, or collect, sort, and classify items.

- Objects for classifying; two- and three-dimensional objects
- Rhythm and musical instruments, such as maracas, kazoos, harmonicas
- Maps, globes, atlases
- Modeling clay and modeling compound
- Fabric remnants, yarn, wallpaper scraps
- Popsicle sticks, paper cups, paper plates
- Paper and cardboard (card stock) in different sizes and colors
- Blank tapes and tape recorder
- Graph paper, index cards
- Dramatic play props, telephone, capes, uniforms (and a mirror)
- Old magazines to cut up
- Building systems, wooden blocks, interlocking plastic blocks
- Abacus, calendar, clock, timer/stop watch, calculator, ruler, measuring tape
- Magnets, prisms, magnifying glasses

Challenges and Risks of Mixed-Age Groups

Mixed-age groups are not problem-free. It is imperative to monitor mixed-aged groups for balance and fairness. Younger children may attempt to exploit older children, that is, they may pursue them with constant requests for help and attention. A younger child may become overly aware of her own limitations, physically or intellectually, resulting in a reluctance to try anything new (9). Rather than the older child spurring a

younger child on to greater challenges, the younger child may become content to let the older child do it for him.

On the other hand, older youth may assume that since younger children cannot do some things for themselves, the older ones must decide and do everything. Older children may become overbearing or bossy. Younger children might feel over-whelmed or intimidated by the older children (9). Adults need to be particularly vigilant for signs of bullying.

If the age range in a group is too great, older children may not be sufficiently challenged and will lose interest. Regrouping and dividing into smaller groups are helpful strategies in keep-ing everyone interested. Of course, there are times when older youth need a time and space to call their own.

Examples

Many activities and projects will appeal to a mixed-age group if appropriate variety is built in. Dramatic play is one example with rich possibilities. Dramatic play offers opportunities in planning, writing, creating a set (art), costuming, singing, and organizing (director). Each part of a play can employ the talents of both younger and older children. All ages can make up a storyline, characters, and dialogue; writing it down might be the responsibility of an older child. Staging and costuming can use the talents and imagination of a mixed-age group; an older child might contribute common sense, reasonable limita-tions and/or safety considerations to staging and costuming. Musically talented children can make up songs and play basic instruments or sing along to a recorded song. Co-directors, one older and one younger child, will help keep all children involved and focused on the success of the production.

Various learning activities can be multi-layered to appeal to all ages and developmental stages. Variety and levels of complexi-ty invite children to approach the activity at their own level of understanding or to team with an older child to achieve more complexity. A few suggestions follow:
- Making clocks and learning to tell time. Vary the activity by using Roman numerals, Hindu numbers, Japanese characters, or even making a sun dial.
- Rocks and minerals. Collect, sort and classify. Test for hardness. Paint with designs. Create sculptures by gluing together. Fashion a Japanese rock garden.
- Puppetry. Storytelling. Stage craft. Make stick, sock, paper bag, or finger puppets.

The realm of possibilities is limitless and children in mixed-age groups will continue to expand the possibilities if basic materi-als are provided and the environment invites all children to par-ticipate at their own level of interest and ability.

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