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## **Age Group, Location or Pedagogue: Factors Affecting Parental Choice of Kindergartens in Hungary**

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# **Age Group, Location or Pedagogue: Factors Affecting Parental Choice of Kindergartens in Hungary**

## **Abstract**

Hungary has experienced significant political, economic, demographic and social changes since the end of Soviet domination in the 1990s. The gradual move towards liberal-democracy has been accompanied by growing emphasis on individualism, choice and diversity. Universal kindergarten provision for 5-6 year olds is a long established feature of the Hungarian education system, but little is known about parental choice (Török, 2004). A case study (Yin, 2004) of factors influencing parental choice and satisfaction was undertaken in one Hungarian town. This was based on a survey of 251 parents of children attending both mixed-age and same-age groups across 12 kindergartens.

Parents suggested that the most important influences were geographical location and the individual pedagogue(s). Given that traditionally each pedagogue follows 'their' cohort from kindergarten entry to primary school, their influence appears heightened.

Although generally satisfied with their chosen arrangement, parents from same-age groups expressed significantly more confidence and satisfaction, particularly in relation to cognitive development and preparation for school.

Parents appear less convinced about the trend towards mixed-age groups and questions are raised about sufficiency of evidence of their benefits in a Hungarian context and the driving factors behind change.

Key words: Parents; choice; kindergarten; mixed-age; same-age.

## **Introduction**

Kindergarten attendance in Hungary is fully funded and currently compulsory from five years of age, lowered to three from September 2015 (Paszkosz, 2012). This has implications both for demand for places and the age at which choice of kindergarten is made. Parents are legally entitled to a choice, including that between homogeneous

(same-age) and heterogeneous (mixed-age) groups (Moss, 2013). Mixed-age groups mirror family life and allow siblings to remain together in out of home childcare. Same-age groups are valued by parents as good preparation for formal education. For a variety of reasons, in recent years the balance has shifted dramatically towards mixed-age groups (62% vs 38%) (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2013). Although, according to Török (2004) little is actually known about the parent-caregiver relationship or factors influencing choice in Hungary, wider evidence suggests parents of infants and toddlers are more likely to prioritize 'caregiver warmth' and family-based care, (Kim and Fram, 2009, p.79); whereas, for older children, parents favour more formal approaches as preparation for school. This article draws on a case study that featured a survey of two sets of parents in one Hungarian town. One set of parents had children in same-age kindergarten groups and one set had children in mixed-age groups. The study had two aims: firstly, to identify the key influencing factors for parents in choosing kindergartens; secondly, to identify how satisfied parents were with their chosen group type.

### ***ECEC in Hungary***

The first European kindergarten was established in Hungary in 1828. Through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the emphasis was on education whereas from the 1890's onwards the focus shifted to the development of the whole child. By 1993 kindergarten education for three to six year olds had been recognized as an official phase of the Hungarian education system with full time, government-funded eligibility from three years old, compulsory attendance at five and transition to primary school at six or seven depending on the pedagogue's and parents' assessment of school readiness. Currently, 98% of five year olds and 74% of three year olds attend kindergarten, broadly comparable to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development averages of 99% and 67% respectively (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013).

The Hungarian government's policy (Ministry of Human Resources, 2012) enables either parent to stay at home to look after their children for the first three years of life with state support at 70% of income for the first two years, and a flat rate payment for the third. Alternatively, a choice of government-funded childcare is theoretically available for under-threes in nurseries (bölcsöde) or family day care (családi napközi)

(Korintus, 2009). In reality the former are oversubscribed leaving a gap in state provision.

From the early 1990's and the end of Soviet domination, organizational and pedagogical changes began to take place in ECEC in Hungary reflecting the more liberal-democratic political ethos. Under Soviet influence all teaching had been organized in same-age groups and this 'sameness' was reinforced. The child's individualism was 'to be "tamed" and made able to serve the community's needs' (Millei, 2011, p.42) in order to become a socialist man. The new-found emphasis on individualism was accompanied by a sharp decrease in the birth rate due partly to the collapse of the Soviet style socialist economy and social welfare system that had previously guaranteed full employment, affordable mortgages with low interest rates, state-controlled food pricing for staples, subsidised recreation and holidays etc. As a result of demographic pressures, some kindergartens started to offer mixed-age groups where children from three to six years old (or, in some cases, seven) learnt and developed together.

In parallel, opening-up to western ideas meant that a variety of alternative pedagogical approaches could be explored that lent themselves to mixed-age grouping and included an increasing focus on the needs of the individual child. These ranged from Waldorf, Freinet and Montessori to the Step-by-Step or 'House of Joy Kindergarten Programme', amongst others (Kovácsné-Bakosi, 1999; Villányi, 2012). The professionalism and autonomy of pedagogues was respected and every nursery was granted the right to determine its own programme provided it adhered to the principles of the National Core Programme for Kindergarten Education (Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996). As a result there is increasing variety in kindergarten pedagogical programmes.

### ***The Childcare Market and Childcare Choices***

Ninety five per cent of kindergarten provision is maintained and funded by the state, therefore, the traditional concept of a 'market', based on supply and demand and regulated by price (Sosinsky, 2013) cannot be applied. Rather, the term reflects a range of provision from which parents can choose, with the state as guarantor of availability and reliability. Parents' right to choose kindergartens was enshrined in the 1993 Public Education Act and Török (2004) pointed out its significance in creating competition between providers; competition without clearly identifiable rules, parameters or criteria and often on the basis of the physical environment, the curriculum approach, the human resources and additional services offered.

The factors that are most important to parents when they make childcare choices have been studied extensively (Early and Burchinal, 2001; Rose and Elicker, 2008; Kim and Fram, 2009; Vincent, Braun and Ball, 2010). These studies broadly concur that parents are generally guided by economic, practical, social and moral concerns. Because public funding is provided for childcare in Hungary, economic concerns are alleviated.

Johansen, Leibowitz and Waite (1996) grouped influencing factors into two categories: adult oriented/external and intrinsic/developmental. The former included location, costs, opening hours and availability of places; the latter covered the type of pedagogical approach, early years curricula, training and qualifications of staff and educational materials. Kim and Fram (2009) also recognised these two categories and referred to them as 'practicality-focused' and 'learning and quality focused' (p.88), adding that parents working outside the home were more likely to give 'practicality-focused' reasons because geographical location and operational hours tended to be very important to them. In a similar study, Raikes, Torquati, Wang and Shjegstad (2012) reported that parents, who focussed on learning and quality, were more likely to have older children, higher income and higher maternal educational levels.

Other studies have confirmed that the quality of childcare was often the deciding factor for parents because it was perceived to effect growth, development and learning (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart 2004; Burchinal, Nelson, Carlson and Brooks-Gunn 2008). However, the core concept of 'quality' is itself problematic and some would argue, is a gross over-simplification that has been used to promote 'frameworks of normalisation' (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2007, p.115) through which hegemonic views of the desirable, objectifiable and measurable are legitimated. In contrast ECEC is complex and heavily underpinned by value-laden assumptions; for example, about the sorts of skills, beliefs, attitudes, personal characteristics and possibilities that are desirable in a given cultural context and, hence, to be nurtured; also whether young children are valued as persons in their own right - or only as 'human becomings' - a person/citizen/worker in the making (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgitta and Wintersberger 1994). This has particular resonance in the Hungarian context of the recent ideological shift at macro-level from socialism towards liberal-democracy and at micro-level from de-individuation to individualism.

### *Mixed-age and same-age groups*

A number of studies examined the benefits of mixed-age groups compared to same-age groups in the period up to the end of the 1990s; (Katz, Evangelou and Hartman 1993; Sundell, 1994; Veenman, 1995; de Lemos, 1999), however, recent literature is more limited (Lindström and Lindahl, 2011, Gray, 2011).

The dominant pattern of compulsory education in most developed countries separates children into same-age classes. Some have argued this reflects a factory model that '...uses an assembly line to subject homogeneous materials to identical treatments in order to yield uniform products' (Katz et al.1993:viii) and memorably pointed out that 'although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them' (p.7). In a similar vein, Robinson and Gerver (2010) refer to age banding as a batch-processing system unsuitable for modern education since it is based on the assumption that all children of the same age have the same needs and develop and learn at the same rate. In contrast Katz (1995) believes that the 'intention of mixed-age grouping in early childhood settings is to increase the heterogeneity of the group so as to capitalise on the differences in experience, knowledge and abilities of the children' (p.2) - the idea of a classroom as a family is thus to be encouraged.

Mixed-age grouping has been found to be surprisingly common across the world, largely for demographic/ economic viability reasons as much as pedagogical preference. For example, Lindström and Lindahl (2011) reported a rapid increase of mixed-age classes in Sweden during the 1980s and 1990s, while de Lemos (2001) found that multi-age grouping had been adopted by a number of lower primary schools in Australia. Some pedagogical approaches, notably Steiner Waldorf, Montessori and Piagetian, are more conducive to mixed-age organisation because they offer opportunities for peer tutoring (Isaacs, 2010; Nicol, 2010). In addition de Lemos (2001) found that practitioners' main motive for adopting mixed-age grouping with young children was to be able to practice in a way that was 'developmentally appropriate'.

Significant benefits of mixed-age grouping have been confirmed in social, emotional and cognitive development by a number of studies (Katz et al., 1993; Sundell, 1994; Gray, 2011).

However, not all studies have been positive. Mason and Burns (1997) found that mixed-age groups offered no advantage over same-age and in fact had a slightly negative impact. Mixed-age classes required more time for preparation and allowed less

time for instruction in small groups and for paying attention to individual needs, which resulted in greater stress and a negative impact on teacher motivation. Veenman (1995) had previously expressed concern that mixed-age classes created greater workload for teachers and that training was not adequate to prepare them to deal with these demands effectively. Even Katz et al. (1993), committed promoters of mixed-age groups, warned that, merely mixing children did not guarantee benefits. The optimum age range, the proportion of older to younger children, time allocation and the appropriateness of the curriculum were all crucial to success.

On the balance of evidence Lesnik and Umek (1996) assert that: 'It is sensible to form mixed-age groups (the age span between three and seven) in preschool institutions' (p.17).

## **Methodology**

A case study approach was considered most appropriate for investigation of the influence of mixed and same-age groups amongst other factors in parental choice of, and satisfaction with, kindergartens in Hungary. Adelman, Kemmis and Jenkins (1980) described case study as '...the study of an instance in action'. According to Yin (2009, p. 18):

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

The latter part of this quote demonstrates the particular relevance of case study in the changing Hungarian context.

This research project is a single exploratory case study, which also has a revelatory purpose (Yin, 2009).because it is concerned with the national issue of parents having to make childcare choices earlier with the reduction of compulsory kindergarten age to three

A largely structured written questionnaire was designed to elicit information quickly and efficiently whilst also enabling the voice of individual parents to be heard through space for additional comments. The survey comprised a largely structured written questionnaire including:



- (a) A tick list of 16 factors drawn from the literature as potentially influencing parental choice. These could be grouped into practical reasons (for example, geographical location and material resources), personal reasons (for example, recommendation or personal experience of the kindergarten) and pedagogical reasons (linked to learning and teaching) with some factors straddling more than one group. Respondents were asked to tick all that applied.
- (b) A ranking exercise to indicate each parent's three most important factors in order of priority.
- (c) A Likert-style rating scale of statements to gauge parental satisfaction with aspects of the care and education provided.
- (d) Encouragement for parents to add comments in their own words to explain/expand on their responses or to comment about any aspect of the research.

The research was carried out in one large town in a largely agricultural region of Hungary. Typically, older generations lived in the rural areas while younger ones had migrated into the city and away from extended families. Consequently they accessed childcare in the 34 kindergartens in, and on, the outskirts of the city. Twelve out of 34 fully funded kindergartens were identified for the research, each providing full-time education and care for between 40 to 180 children between the ages of 30 months and seven years, with an average group size of 25. The 34 kindergartens operated with 164 groups in total, out of which 48 were same-age and 116 were mixed-age groups. The participating kindergartens covered 35% of the relevant parent population. Kindergarten staff distributed questionnaires to 300 parents with children across both group types and 251 were returned, giving an overall response rate of 85%. Parental responses were roughly balanced between group types at 134 (53%) heterogeneous and 117 (47%) homogeneous.

Approval for the fieldwork (part of an MA thesis) was obtained through the Research Committee and was fully aligned with the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) in relation to non-maleficence, beneficence, participants' protection, voluntary informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity and the right to withdraw. For the Hungarian element of the study the *Ethics Code of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences* (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2010) was followed. In order to avoid deception, the introductory letter set out the researchers' position in having a primary interest in mixed and same-age groups and parents'

perceptions of their perceived advantages/disadvantages. The letter also explained to parents that their participation was entirely voluntary and that all information would remain confidential.

## **Findings**

Of the 251 questionnaire respondents 83.6% had one child attending the kindergarten at the time of the research while 18.4% had two. Having an older sibling already at the kindergarten did not seem to affect decision-making for the majority of these parents (18 out of 46). 136 (54%) of the 251 indicated they lived in the geographical catchment area of the kindergarten, whilst 112 (44%) parents travelled outside. This tendency was exaggerated to 90% versus 10% in the case of the kindergartens on the outskirts where distance/rurality may have restricted choice. Over half the parents (56%) did not visit any other kindergartens before making their choice, while 22% visited one other, 12% visited two others, and the remaining 10% visited three or more. Those who chose within catchment were less likely to visit other settings than those who chose to go outside (34% compared with 51%) which may indicate a felt need to have a good justification for not taking the easier option of the allocated local place.

### ***Factors Affecting Choice: Tick List Results***

The frequency with which each of the 16 potentially influencing factors was ticked by parents is shown in Fig 1.

[insert Fig 1. here]

Geographical location of the kindergarten was selected by the highest percentage of parents at 68% while 53% indicated that the garden/outdoor space had been influential in their choice of kindergarten. Pedagogical programme was third most frequently mentioned at 52%, with reputation and personal recommendation close behind at 51% and 49% of parents respectively. These findings are broadly consistent with previous research. However, a term such as 'reputation' begs the question of 'reputation for what?' and hence may have been inconsistently interpreted. Despite the introductory letter having emphasised the researchers' interest in heterogeneous versus homogeneous

groups, surprisingly only 17% of parents ticked mixed or same-age group as a factor in their decision making, although 24% indicated that they liked having the option.

### ***Factors Affecting Choice: Ranking Results***

Whilst the tick list gave a ‘landscape view’ of the multiplicity of factors influencing parental choice, the next question ‘zoomed in’ by requiring respondents to select and rank their three most influential factors. The number of times each parent ranked a factor in a top three place was totalled to give an overall ranking score.

The results largely aligned with the findings from the frequency analysis with geographical location by far the most important factor with a score of 344. This reflects the inescapable reality that dropping off and picking up children from kindergarten has to fit in with the wider routines of the family and work demands. Pedagogical programme (152), the reputation of the kindergarten (132) and personal recommendation (118) also, again, featured highly. However, there was one surprising finding: choice of a specific pedagogue was ranked overall second in importance as a decision making factor at 172.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Consistent with the broader picture from the tick list, and contrary to the researchers’ expectations, preference for a homogeneous or heterogeneous group did not feature in the top three rankings at all.

### ***Satisfaction with Chosen Arrangement: Likert-scale data***

To measure parents’ attitude towards, and satisfaction with, the type of groups their children were now attending, a three-point Likert-type scale was included. Table 2 gives the results for parents of children attending either mixed-age or same-age groups expressed as percentages to facilitate comparison.

[insert Table 2 here]

A general trend was apparent for parents of children who attended mixed-age groups to express less agreement (indicating less satisfaction) and more doubt and dissatisfaction than parents of children in same-age groups. For example, between 24% and 57% of parents from mixed-age groups responded ‘neither agree or disagree’ with the various statements, whereas the range for same-age groups was between 7% and 34%. This appeared to indicate less confidence or stronger doubt about the advantages of mixed-age grouping. The differences between agreement ratings of almost all statements were

statistically significant at the .05 level or higher using a Chi Square test. Parents with children attending same-age groups expressed more agreement with the statements overall and were particularly satisfied with how same-age groups ensured more attention from the pedagogues, supported their child's cognitive development and provided better preparation for school. The only non-significant difference related to supporting children's social development, which, the literature suggests would favour mixed-age groups. However, even in this aspect, the trend was in favour of same-age groups.

### ***Qualitative Comments***

At the end of the semi-structured questionnaire parents were able to expand on and explain any of their responses or to add additional personal comments. Seventy two out of 251 respondents took advantage of this opportunity, often quite extensively. Far more parents with children in mixed-age groups (47 out of 134 or 35%) chose to comment compared with 25 of 117 in same-age groups (21%). The researchers' stated interests in the advantages and disadvantages of homogeneous and heterogeneous groups were clearly reflected in parents' comments. Although potential themes were initially guided by the literature, comments were re-visited repeatedly by both researchers to identify categories and emergent themes that better fitted the data.

### ***Factors in Parental Choice***

Parental choice as a category could be sub-divided into comments related to the pedagogue, programme, group type and an additional category of 'no choice'. Although legally parents have the right to choose a kindergarten, the lived experience of a substantial minority (12 out of 72 or 17%) was somewhat different.

*"Where I live, this was the only kindergarten so I had no choice,"*

*"The kindergarten could only offer a place in a mixed-age group for my child, but I have no regrets."*

The choice of an individual pedagogue featured in 21 out of the 72 (29%) parental comments, making it the most mentioned factor overall.

*"Since we chose the pedagogue, the type of group was of no consequence to us."*

*"I had my doubts about the mixed group but we chose this kindergarten because of the pedagogue".*

Three of the pedagogue-related comments were from same-age group parents but the vast majority (18 out of 21) were from mixed-age groups, hence reinforcing the earlier suggestion that a pedagogue's importance may be perceived as heightened when children are subject to annual peer group disruption. The results were not clear regarding identification of specific attributes parents considered important in pedagogues but personality and attitude and values were frequently mentioned.

*“Everything depends on the pedagogue's attitude and personality – this is the most important thing.”*

*“For a group community to develop, the pedagogue has a major role to play. The pedagogue helps to formulate the values with her personality as an example. Approves of certain types of behaviour, strengthens positive characteristics in children and plays down bad behaviour.”*

Deliberate choice of group type was mentioned by nine of the 25 (38%) same-age group parents, but only four of the 47 (9%) mixed-age group.

*“There was no doubt in my mind about choosing a homogeneous group. I consider it more supportive of children's development.”*

*“I chose a heterogeneous group because in my view the youngest children learn the most from the older ones”.*

Pedagogical programme was mentioned by only four parents in total, while reputation of the kindergarten and personal recommendation also featured in a few comments. The latter might be interpreted as ‘proxies for quality’ since education and training of pedagogues was not differentiated between settings.

### ***Parents' views of Advantages and Disadvantages of Mixed-age and Same-age Groups***

Parents' comments on advantages and disadvantages in relation to their current group type were highlighted separately from those related to the opposite group type. Many parents were able to see advantages and disadvantages to both types of group. However, while half of the comments from same-age group parents were critical of the mixed-age group system, only one parent from a mixed-age group was negative about same-age grouping. In addition 26% of parents from mixed-age groups were self-critical about the disadvantages of their own group type compared to only 12% in same-age groups, reinforcing the apparent doubt and negativity of parents about the mixed-age system reflected in the Likert-scale findings.

As to the perceived advantages of mixed-age groups, these most frequently referred to the fact that the presence of older children could greatly enhance the development of younger ones.

*“Willingly or unwillingly, the little ones learn a lot from the older ones.”*

But this had a downside in that not all habits were good ones:

*“Younger ones do learn some ‘bad’ things from the older ones, too.”*

Mixed-age groups in particular were seen to promote social development, often for both parties.

*“My child ... is now the oldest and he proudly tells me at home that he’s helped the little ones (to get changed for example).”*

However, concern was sometimes expressed that younger children could hold the older ones back:

*“Heterogeneous groups do not prepare children for school adequately; with the little ones, the older ones do not progress but regress.”*

One advantage of mixed-age groups mentioned by several parents was in replicating family life and/ or accommodating siblings together:

*“Our children spent a beautiful year together in kindergarten this way.”*

However, one parent saw the opposite as an advantage since attending same-age groups prevented the younger child being able to “latch on” to the older one and allowed the older child “to play in peace”.

Parents from both group types often acknowledged the challenges for pedagogues in mixed age groups including the difficult and multi-layered nature of differentiation to meet children’s different needs:

*“...from the pedagogues’ point of view, it is much more difficult to differentiate with the age range of 3-7.”*

Same-aged groups attracted fewer comments and these were almost entirely favourable and ranged from personal experience to more age appropriate development opportunities and less distraction:

*“I much prefer homogeneous groups – it was a great success with my second child. Sending my first child to a heterogeneous group was definitely the wrong decision.”*

*“In a same age group, the pedagogue is more able to develop children’s knowledge and understanding to a given level – or she can notice those who lag behind or those who are talented compared to the others.”*

A recurring feature of parental comments from both group types was that advantages and disadvantages changed with age and that the initial benefits of mixed-age groups for younger children were often outweighed by disadvantages for older children.

## **Discussion**

The synthesis of findings from the different methods embedded within the survey revealed some significant, if unexpected, results.

Firstly, although the option of mixed-age or same-age group was appreciated judged by the tick list, the ranking exercise and the qualitative comments showed that group type was not an important factor in parental decision-making.

Secondly, although the tick list exercise was largely consistent with previous research related to the importance of ‘practicality focussed’ and ‘learning and quality-focussed’ factors (Johansen et al., p.766), in the ranking exercise the individual pedagogue was more important and ranked second only to geographical location in determining parental choice. It was also the most frequently mentioned factor in the comments. This unexpected finding may be attributable to the unique Hungarian context within which pedagogues follow each age cohort from entry at three through to progression to primary school at six (or occasionally seven), hence enhancing the importance of the individual pedagogue as a consistent presence and attachment figure for the whole of the child’s pre-school period. This may be considered particularly important in relation to mixed-age groups because of the annual turnover of approximately one third of the children and the disruptive effect this could have on peer group attachments.

In addition, the fact that the kindergarten’s local programme, together with reputation and recommendation, also featured in the top five influential factors in both the frequency analysis and ranking might also be linked to the individual pedagogue since, according to Török (2004), a kindergarten’s overall rating is mostly dependent on parents’ perceptions of the individual pedagogue who cared for their child and the programme becomes visible to parents through its delivery by a particular pedagogue.

Thirdly, although regardless of group type (consistent with the findings of Raikes et al., 2012), nearly all parents perceived the quality of the kindergarten overall as good, the generally lower satisfaction and greater uncertainty in heterogeneous groups captured by the rating scale was strongly supported by greater negativity expressed in parents' comments.

The balance of academic literature favouring mixed-age groups led to their wider adoption in Hungary in the late 1990s on pedagogical grounds (Körmöci, 2004). This coincided with the end of Soviet influence and the uniform socialist education system, the rejection of conformity and movement towards nurturing individualism. The removal of the 'iron curtain' in 1989 signified freedom not only in a geographical but also in an ideological sense. Western works of early years pedagogy and child psychology flooded the country prompting a new way of thinking and pedagogical changes in early education and care (Nagy Varga, Molnár, Pálfi and Szerepi, 2015).

The increasingly rapid adoption of mixed-age groups was affirmed by Bakonyi (1995) who suggested mixed-age groups promoted tolerance for individual differences within the children's community such that individualism could be nurtured, not 'tamed'. Zsolnai and Lesnyák acknowledge social and cognitive gains and the development of pro-social behaviour where interpersonal engagement, such as empathy, sharing, co-operation care and concern is for the benefit of others. Nyitrai, Bakonyi and Kovácsné Bárány (2009) agreed and asserted that early intervention, differentiation and an individualised approach to meeting children's needs were all more successful in mixed-age groups.

The trend towards mixed-age groups may, however, be attributed to more pragmatic factors including the dramatic fall in birth rate from 478,692 in 1980 to 391,950 in 1990 that followed the collapse of the former socialist economy and welfare system. The subsequent fall in kindergarten numbers (from 3522 to 2562 over a seven year period between 2001 and 2008, Ministry of Human Resources, 2013) meant mixed-age groups provided a solution that avoided closure – an effect that was accelerated by the global recession of 2008 and reduction of job opportunities. The evidence from this study suggests parents are not entirely convinced of the advantages of mixed-age grouping



and that many are more comfortable and confident with traditional same-age groups. However, their qualitative comments evidence a weaker justification than that of parents from the mixed-age groups. They negate what could be perceived as benefits of mixed-age groups instead of listing the positives of same-age groups. Parents from mixed-age groups do quite the opposite: they draw on what they believe are the benefits of mixed-age groups without expressing negative views of same-age groups. Yet, their conviction is not as strong about the group that they had chosen for their children. This could be because parents in this study are the last generation born in or at the end of the Soviet regime and inculcated with socialist ideology. They are bound by what they know and what they experienced themselves resulting in a dissonance between parents' views and current pedagogical thinking in Hungary. In other words, parents seem to be lagging behind the trend.

There is some evidence that different types of pedagogues chose to work in mixed or same-age groups (Anderson and Pavan, 1993); like parents, some had concerns about 'multi-agedness' (p.137) while others considered mixed-age groups pedagogically superior. So perhaps this gives us a clue as to a possible link between the importance of individual pedagogues and type of group. Could parents be picking up on the characteristics that differentiate those pedagogues who prefer mixed or same-age groups and how comfortable and confident they are within a particular pedagogical environment? Or is it possible that pedagogues who share certain characteristics and attitudes are simply better at the job?

### ***Characteristics of the pedagogue***

A personalised approach to children along with the appropriateness of the curriculum and openness towards the family, were identified by Török (2004) as essential attributes of a pedagogue in a Hungarian context. In practice, parents have been found to adopt a range of proxies for quality consistent with their personal values and priorities including: caregivers' education and training (Da Silva and Wise, 2006; Harris, 2008; Raikes et al.); a parent-caregiver relationship characterised by openness, honesty, effective communication and the appreciation of parental involvement (Fenech, Harrison and Sumsion, 2011).

Nyitrai et al. (2009, p.15), also writing in a Hungarian context, recognise that a sensitive pedagogue follows two approaches simultaneously: a 'personalised approach' where he/she aims to cater for children's individual needs and a 'community approach' that values the kindergarten community as made up of individual learners.

Elsewhere Kim and Fram (2009) report that caregivers' warmth and sensitive interaction with children was rated highly by parents as were "positive attitude", "sense of responsibility", "conscientiousness", "professional knowledge and competencies". This cluster of characteristics can be linked to the 'key person' concept commonly used in England where attachment based pedagogies are implemented by allocating a key person for each child and family who ensures consistent and sensitive interaction with them (Elfer, Goldshmid and Selleck, 2012). In the same vein, Woodhead and Oates (2007, p.19) write of a pedagogue's commitment to 'see the world from the child's point of view and seek(s) to meet the child's needs rather than just serving their own'. Parents' comments on the importance of their child thriving on the attention of the pedagogues echo Elfer, Goldshmid and Selleck's (2002, p.18) sentiments of the child 'being camped out in the key person's mind'. The idea of 'professional love' propounded by Page (2011) equates this insightful understanding and commitment to the pedagogue fostering attachment and 'loving' a child in a way that is non-threatening to the parent's love. Perhaps it is this capacity that parents identify when choosing an individual pedagogue, particularly in mixed-age groups that are more disruptive to peer group attachments.

Nyitrai et al. (2009) strongly argue that care and education in Hungarian kindergartens are intrinsically connected. This is reflected in the terminology used for the pedagogue, 'óvó néni', which translates as 'protective auntie', and the assistant 'dajka', the English equivalent of which is 'nanny'. One might expect this would predispose Hungarian parents towards mixed-age, family-style grouping. However, evidence suggests (Török, 2004) parents also believe firmly that educational experience in kindergarten determines progress at school and often have expectations that planned activities should mirror school structures and lessons, especially during a child's final year.

## **Conclusion**

Katz (1995) cautions that mixing the ages is not a magic button and it has to feel right for the parents and pedagogues alike. What is clear, from this case study of a single

town, is that this is not always the case. Parents' views of, and confidence in, mixed-age grouping is lagging behind the implementation trend. It is also apparent that a larger scale study of the impact of mixed-age versus same-age grouping on developmental outcomes for children in the Hungarian context may be necessary to produce sufficient empirical evidence to justify such a radical shift in policy.

The growing trend for mixed-age groups throughout Hungarian kindergartens appears to be based on a mix of pragmatic reasons and limited pedagogical evidence. It also symbolically represents a break from the uniformity of socialism. This trend dates back to the 1990s so the current generation of parents are more likely to have experienced kindergarten provision in same-age groups. This trend also raises a number of questions. Firstly, are the increasing number of mixed-age groups in response to or despite of what parents want for their children in out of home care? Secondly, do the changing pedagogical practices override parents' social ideologies?

The somewhat surprising finding that parents choose the pedagogue over the type of group accords with Hopkins' (2013) view that the teacher or pedagogue matters more than the pedagogical model they adopt. Similarly, the findings of Rowe's (2003) international evidence-based research suggest that what matters most to children is the quality of teachers and teaching; in particular, a personalised, child-centred approach where a child receives 'anchored attention' (Roberts, 2010, p.73). What parents see as 'quality' in relation to the pedagogues in Hungarian kindergartens is to be explored further. It is clear from this study that the 'characteristics of the pedagogue' as a factor is crucial in the decision-making process and requires further research. This is new territory for research in the field of early childhood in Hungary and a second phase to this current study could address the gap in empirical evidence.

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Table 1. Parents ranking of 16 factors according to importance in decision-making.

Table 2. Parental satisfaction with choice by group type

Figure 1. Chart showing percentage of parents that identified each of 16 statements as a factor in their choice of kindergarten in order of frequency.