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It's in the Mix. An Exploratory Study into the Experiences of Children, Parents and Staff in the Provision of a Mixed Age Group Model in a West Dublin Early Years' Setting.

Helena Goodwin
Technological University Dublin

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It's in the Mix.

**An exploratory study into the experiences of children, parents and staff in the provision of
a mixed age group model in a West Dublin early years' setting.**

A Thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfillment of the requirements for
award of Master in Child, Family and Community Studies.

By

Helena Goodwin

Supervisor : Phil Keogh

M.A. in Child, Family and Community Studies.

Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology.

October 2014

Word count: 14, 977.

Declaration of Ownership

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the **Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfillment of the award named above

Signed: _____

Helena Goodwin

Date: _____

Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them. Children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but also to find companions among their peers and others who match, complement, or supplement their interests in different ways.
Lillian G. Katz. (1990).

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Abstract

The main aim of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of children, parents and staff participating in a mixed-age model of early year's provision using a qualitative approach. The researcher will take an approach which will aim to interpret and clarify the participant's experiences.

Using semi-structured interviews, a focus group and an observation of practice the study will address questions such as *what were the perceptions of the children, staff and parents experiencing a mixed age group model. Has the mixed-age model proved to be advantageous and/or challenging to the community of the service? How could the provision be improved for those involved?*

Research has suggested that both older and younger children benefit from this model in a variety of different ways. However these benefits are not necessarily automatic. There appears to be a number of relevant factors such as, the optimum age range of the children concerned, the allocation of time to the mixed age group, the percentage of older to younger children and the strategies which the adults will put in place to maximise the developmental outcomes for all children within the mixed age group.

Thematic analysis was carried out to capture the relevant data in relation to the research question posed and in an effort by the researcher to establish the configuration of responses within the data collected.

This study has shed some light onto the workings of a mixed-age group setting. In analyzing the findings there appears to be huge benefits to the children attending this particular service. The philosophical beliefs underpinning the service appear to provide the children with unique learning opportunities and social experiences. This study does not attempt to suggest that all settings should operate in this manner but rather seeks to give some insight into an alternative method of early year's provision.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin by outlining the primary aim which underpins this study and consequently the objectives and research questions which will be investigated. The context for the research will be illustrated and the rationale for this investigation will be given. Following this a brief overview of the research will be specified.

1.2 Research Aims.

The aim of this research was to investigate the experiences of children, staff and parents in an early years setting which implements a multi-age model in its centre. The following outlines three main objects which underpin this research.

1. To explore the experiences of the children attending the service.
2. To investigate how the early years practitioners implemented the model.
3. To identify any challenges experienced in the execution of the paradigm.

Subsequently three main research questions were generated:

1. What were the perceptions of the children, staff and parents experiencing a mixed age group model?
2. Has the mixed-age model proved to be advantageous and/or challenging to the community of the service?
3. How could the provision be improved for those involved?

1.3 Context of the research

Although children are not born in litters (Katz 1995) the predominant model of early year's settings in Ireland leans towards children being cared for in them. Many young children now spend increasing amounts of time in large day care centres, which have replaced natural family or spontaneous community groups as the context for children developing relationships with other

children. These interactions with same aged peers deprive many children of the experiences and proficiencies that were once available to them in natural mixed-age groups (Katz 1995b).

1.4 Rationale of the research

The multi-age model, while not the norm in early years services in Ireland may be a beneficial alternative to age-segregated models. There is now a growing body of research (Katz, 1995a: McClellan, 1993) that supports and demonstrates the benefits of multi-age groupings in relation to both younger and older children. For this reason the present investigation was designed and conducted. It is hoped that this small piece of research will give a greater understanding into the benefits of mixed age groupings in an Early Years Service in the Dublin West area.

1.5 Methodology

This study will adopt a qualitative phenomenological approach due to the fact that the main aim of the study is to explore the experiences of those involved in the mixed-grouping model. The qualitative study utilised observations, interviews and a focus group to gather data from children, parents and early year's practitioners regarding their experiences in a mixed age group setting. This study took place in a fully inclusive early years setting in the west Dublin area.

1.6 Overview of the study

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter presents the aim of the research and key questions which underpin this study. It also lays out the context of the research and rationalises why the current research was undertaken.

Chapter 2: Literature Review.

This chapter presents the literature review and will begin with a brief discussion about mixed age groupings and its relevance within an early years setting. Following this introduction, a summary of literature related to the proposed area of research will be provided, with a focus on the following areas.

- What is mixed age grouping?
- Risks and issues in relation to mixed age groupings.
- A brief overview of Vygotskian concepts and their relationship to multi-age groupings.
- Implications of mixed age groupings for early childhood education

Chapter 3: Methodology.

This chapter outlines the research methods employed during the course of the research study, explaining the rationale behind the chosen research method. Finally it will detail the approach to both data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings.

Chapter four presents the findings and the major themes that materialized from the data collected.

Chapter 5: Discussion.

This chapter seeks to interpret the main themes which emerge in chapter four and will aim to synthesize and evaluate the findings. It will summarize and discuss the views and experiences of the participants while linking with existing research and findings.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations.

This chapter reflects upon the main findings based on the current research questions. Recommendations will also be submitted to maximise the facts which have emerged from the findings and discussion chapters.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter serves as an introduction to the body of research, outlining key aims and objectives of the study. It also provides a clear rationale for the undertaking of this study. Finally a clear outline of the study is given.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Literature review

The literature review is divided into sections and will address factors such as historical perspective, the current context, theoretical perspective, benefits and issues and the role of the adult in mixed age models of early year's provision.

2.1 Introduction

Mixed age grouping has had many names, heterogeneous grouping, multi-age grouping, erect grouping, family grouping and ungraded or non-graded classes. There is a distinct difference in the justification of non-graded groups, which is used to homogenize groups of children for the purposes of tuition by capability rather than age, and mixed-age groups, which is intended to optimise what can be discovered when children of both different and the same ages and capabilities have opportunities to interact with each other. Young children cared for within their own homes do not spend large amounts of time in groups of children their own age as family units are typically heterogeneous in age. Spending time in a family group gives individuals who belong to that group occasions to observe, evaluate and instigate a broad array of skills. In Ireland in early year's services, there is a practice to segregate children by age into

- Baby rooms.
- Wobbler rooms
- Toddler rooms.
- Pre-Montessori rooms
- Preschool rooms
- Afterschool rooms.

Given that instinctively formed peer groups are characteristically heterogeneous in structure this segregation in early year's services is questionable. This model appears to be based on the premise that chronological age is the single most consistent developmental index, with no consideration being given to social, emotional and cognitive levels.

2.2 Historical perspective

Very little research has been carried out in Ireland in relation to mixed age grouping in the early year's sector. According to research carried out elsewhere, it has been demonstrated that mixed age groupings can be quite successful and beneficial for children. Viewing the American system "graded education" seen as the grouping of children based on chronological age was introduced by Horace Mann in the early 1900's as a response to the flood of immigrants entering the United States. This system makes the assumption that children who are similar in chronological age are also relatively similar in an intellectual capacity. Children progress through this system with predetermined expectations, with all children expected to perform at the same rate and level. Goodland and Anderson (1987) introduced the idea of a non-graded system in 1959 arguing that age was a crude indicator of the learning experiences that children were ready for. In Ireland education has its roots in a one-roomed schoolhouse model, with older children often tutoring younger children. The classroom operated similarly to that of a family with close relationships developing. Since industrialization there have been many developments in ways of providing education and care, with the traditional one room school house no longer being feasible for the large quantity of children in education settings. There has been a major shift in the method we group children with age segregated groups being the predominant grouping for manageability. This gives rise to the speculation that children are missing out on by spending increasing amounts of time with same aged peers. Multi-classes are still today an important feature of the primary school system, the majority of which can be found in rural areas. According to the Department of Education (2000) 165,714 pupils in the Irish primary school system are taught in multi-grade classrooms. This finding is indicative of 39% of all primary school students with about 43% of mainstream teachers teaching in multi-grade classes. Although concern has been raised as to the effectiveness of this type of education little or no research has been carried out in the Irish context of multi-class teaching (1992: Green paper on education).

2.3 Current practice

A number of policy initiatives have been introduced since the 1990's to combat the failings in the provision of quality early childhood experiences for children in Ireland. Looking at the typology of early childhood systems, Ireland may be perceived as a liberal welfare state (French

2013). There is a high value placed on individual family's responsibility for their children. Traditionally, policy around early childhood has been weak, with several departments sharing the responsibility for these policies. The sector has experienced insubstantial regulation and has been broadly considered as a service for working mothers, rather than viewing children as being active in their own lives. Public investment in the sector has been very low, less than 0.5% of GDP and with low public investment came a mixed market model of services. As a result of this the provision of childcare services has been largely left in the domain of the private sector and are operated from a business point of view rather than from a whole child perspective. Most early year's settings in Ireland have developed an age segregated model, dividing children by chronological age into individual rooms such as baby rooms, wobbler rooms, toddler rooms, pre-Montessori rooms, preschool rooms and afterschool rooms. This model segregates children purely by age with little consideration being given to the whole child view.

Policy and legislation in the Irish context is concentrated on three main documents, Aistear The National Curriculum Framework, Siolta The National Quality Framework and article 5 which is concerned with the health, welfare and development of children.

Aistear the early childhood curriculum framework in Ireland, for children aged from birth to six, describes the process of learning and development across four interrelating and overlapping themes. These four themes focus on diverse aspects of pedagogy and investigate how children's learning can be provided for across these themes. For the purpose of this research the themes of well-being and identity and belonging will be considered. Well-being focuses on both the a child's development as an individual taking into account both children's sense of well being is directly related to their relationships and interactions with both their families and communities. They need to feel respected, loved, empowered, validated and included (N.C.C.A. 2009: pg16). Well-being, as a concept, is contextual and multi-dimensional. Camfield, Streuli and Woodhead (2010: pg 399) stresses that 'Well-being is clearly a broad, contested concept open to multiple interpretations and research approaches'. UNICEF, for example, has made a valuable contribution at international level to supporting the development of national sets of child well-being indicators by creating a 'global awareness of the need for monitoring how children fare' Ben-Arieh, Hevener-Kaufman, Bowers-Andrews, George, Joo-Lee, and Aber, J.L. (2001: p9).

The OECD (2009, p.183) identifies six dimensions of well-being to cover the major aspects of children's lives in Ireland, material well-being, housing and the environment, education, health, risk behaviors, and quality of school life.

2.4 Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspectives that inform this research includes Vygotsky's socio-cultural model of learning, Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Froebel's educational philosophy, Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory and Montessori's the secret miracle of childhood.

2.4.1 Vygotskian socio-cultural model of learning.

Vygotsky's theories offer an optimum platform to examine a multi-age programme and the naturally occurring interactions between children of different ages. The following three concepts of Vygotsky's theories will be explored in relation to mixed age groupings in early year's settings.

Zone of proximal development.

Probably the most relevant and important concept within Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defines the ZPD as "... the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". This theory views the more competent person, known as the expert, providing the less capable person, known as the novice, with support, to realize a task which otherwise the novice would not be able to achieve. Bodrova and Long (1996) argue that Vygotsky believed that a child can work in a higher ZPD through any sort of social interaction, with peers, with imaginary play mates or with children at different stages of development levels. While Berk, and Winsler (1995 p. 131) stated "Vygotsky emphasised the importance of mixed age groupings of children, which grant each child access to more knowledgeable companions and permit each child to serve as an expert resource for others." Demonstrating the opinion that multi-age child care grouping can be viewed as being more advantageous to children than same age groupings.

Scaffolding.

As children are being supported through the zone of proximal development, they are being occupied in what is known as scaffolding, which is the type of interactions which occur between the expert and the novice (Bruner 1973). Scaffolding is viewed as a temporary support, providing the expert with a framework in which hints, prompts and support can be provided to the novice, thereby enabling them to master a particular skill. Through collaboration the expert scaffolds the novice within the ZPD. As the novice hones his/her skills within the task the expert gradually withdraws the level of assistance being provided until the assistance is no longer needed as the novice has mastered all aspects of the task. According to Berk and Winsler (1995) very young children can scaffold less competent peers if their expert help is within the ZPD of the novice. However novices cannot learn skills that are outside the limits of their zone of proximal development “when a skill is outside of the ZPD, children generally ignore, fail to use, or incorrectly use that skill”.

Leading activities.

Vygotsky emphasised the importance of children’s social environment in the developmental process and that this provided the basis for the concept of developmental accomplishments as defined by Bodrova and Long (1996 p. 159), to underpin “the new cognitive and emotional formations that appear at different ages.” The concept of leading activity was used to specify the types of interactions between the child and the social environment that lead to developmental endeavours (Leont’ev . 1977/1978 as cited in Kozvlin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miler 2003). Leading activities are different for each developmental stage and are fundamental to the developmental accomplishments of children. Leading activities in relation to developmental accomplishments which are deemed to be central include emotional communication between birth to one year, whereby during an activity the adult engages the infant in both verbal and non-verbal communication exchanges. Manipulation of objects between one year to three years, whereby the toddler learns by the manipulation of objects with his/her environment. Finally play from two and a half years to six years, whereby children engage in play that augments their social and cognitive development. When considering multi-age groups and leading activities deliberation must be given into the opportunities to engage with all ages within the group. Vygotsky

maintained that learning was constructed through social interactions, Piaget on the other hand viewed learning as occurring through stages.

2.4.2 Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

Piaget's (1977) symbolic play is described as a phase in pretend or fantasy play that children experience between the ages of two and six. According to Piaget in symbolic play children give an action or object some implication other than its everyday meaning. This practice of making one thing stand for another is a significant pre-requisite of learning in a world where the ways in which we describe and make meaning of our experiences are fundamentally symbolic. A feature of symbolic play to be considered in early childhood is the development of dramatic and socio-dramatic play where children learn to create a plot, assign roles, reason out cause and effect, negotiate with others, accommodate another's perspective and practice dialogue. (Wood and Attfield 1996). Making appropriate provision for play in mixed age groupings may therefore present as a challenge in ensuring the complexity of play is not compromised for older children and also for the younger cohort it is not too intricate. Research has found however that age-related differences in children's play can disappear in mixed age groupings providing clear evidence of the importance social prevailing consequence that social context has on children's learning, play, and behaviour (Gauvain, 2001). It also suggests how social and environmental contexts can lead development forward for children (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Vygotsky, 1993). Piagetian theory is conceivably the classic stage theory of cognitive development with his theory of serration memorable. Piaget viewed these stages as being phases of consistent actions displaying distinctive styles of information processing (Mareschal and Shultz 1999).

2.4.3 Froebel's Educational Philosophy

Froebel's educational philosophy has had a considerable influence on early childhood care and education (ECCE) (Manning,2005: Nolan 2012: Towler 2009). Froebel's educational philosophy revolves around three main ideas and by combining these ideas he cultivated the concept of the "Kindergarten" (Manning 2005). Primarily each child was viewed as a unique individual. He highlighted the veracity of childhood as being a significant period in its own right. The concept of play and self-activity were also viewed as an integral part of children's education to be supported by the adult rather that dictated and directed. Secondly he focused on the connection between man, nature and God (Nolan 2012), emphasising that children learn about their

environment by engaging in outdoor activities. Finally Froebel considered the child to be part of a wider social context (Towler 2009). Froebel's work is underpinned by taking into consideration the importance of family, friends and the local community in children's development. Froebel's theories have resulted in Froebel classrooms being a mixed age group model.

2.4.4 Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological theory.

The socio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner focuses on the child's agency, highlighting the vibrant and multifaceted two directional interactions between both intrinsic and extrinsic factors which influence the development of the individual child. Intrinsic factors refer to the biological make-up of the child, including genetic factors and temperamental qualities (DeHart, Sroufe and Cooper, 2004). The child's immediate environmental, cultural, economical, social and political context are considered extrinsic factors (DeHart, Sroufe and Cooper, 2004). This perspective centrally places the child and demonstrates how each child both comprehends and is active within its surrounding macro and micro systems while concurrently being influenced by their surrounding systems.

During the 2000's Ireland experienced an interval of broad political, economic, demographic and social change (Central Statistic Office 2012). This became an influencing factor for smaller nuclear families and also provided a delay in individual's readiness to have children leading to fewer opportunities for children to have access to interactions with children of different age groups. Therefore the importance of the provision of providing children with multi-age experiences must be recognized (Katz & McClellan, 1997). The vital role a sense of community has in both the social and emotional development of children must be recognised. Lane (1947) observing the interactions of children found that they were often drawn towards children of different ages and also that their interactions altered as they played in mixed-age groups. He also documented aggression, rivalry and difficulties with compromising within same-age play while children who varied in age when playing demonstrated more co-operation and consideration for each other. Gerard (2005) further supports this view by stressing that children have always lived with siblings of different ages as well as learning from and playing alongside counterparts of all ages.

2.4.5 Montessori: The secret miracle of childhood.

Montessori advocates mixed age groupings in her theories of the developing holistic child. The mixed aged environment encourages children to learn to help and be helped by each other as there are constant interactions between children of varying ages and abilities. They gain enjoyment of their own achievements and are challenged by the achievement of others (Montessori 1967). Montessori emphasised the need for a span of at least three years in a mixed group system for the benefits for children to be optimised. This allows for children to validate their knowledge and skills and share them in many ways (Gahart –Mooney 2000). Nature and nurture work hand in hand when children have access to an environment which is built around a mixed age group. When groups contain different aged children there is an influence on the cultural development of the child through the relationships of the children amongst themselves (Montessori 1972).

2.5 Benefits of mixed age groupings for children

In a mixed age group setting, patience and tolerance are concepts older children learn, while becoming role models for the younger children. The younger children learn by observing the older children who are more skilled and more knowledgeable, making observation the single most important form of learning (Lancy, Bock and Gaskins 2010). Children practice skills through active participation with others. By teaching a younger child and older child reinforces previously learned concepts and aids in complete mastery of concepts (Katz, Evangelou and Hartman. 1990). By watching the older children, younger children develop skills around conflict resolution and also learn about important life skills such as courtesy and manners. As five and six year olds naturally become caretakers of their environment they care for the three and four year olds allowing for a level of engagement that holds a propensity towards co-operation rather than contention and competition (Lillard, 1996). Each child is afforded the opportunity to learn at their own pace and allows younger children to operate within their own zone of proximal development. Younger children are capable of becoming involved in far more complex learning experiences that they could instigate alone, once the older children set up an activity, they younger ones can participate even though they could not have initiated it (Chase and Doan 1994). According to Parten's classic theory of stages of development children of two to three

years old are incapable of collaborative play. This is disputed by Konner (1975) who argues that such an idea is manufactured by the modern age segregated early years settings or by findings developed in psychology labs. In an environment which supports age mixing older playmates erect scaffolds that can draw toddlers into collaborative play (Konner 1975). Howes and Farver (1987) observed two year olds and five year olds playing in pairs, both age-mixed and age-segregated. Findings of this study demonstrated that five year olds played at the same advanced level when paired with two year olds, drawing the toddlers into their play by providing them with the appropriate props and instructing them what to do. These younger children engaged in co-operative, social and pretend play with five year olds which was beyond their capabilities with their own peers. Young children benefit when they mix with older children who read, write and use numbers and often incorporate them in their social play. With older children being more literate and numerate they tend to scaffold their younger counterparts in acquiring skill in reading, arithmetic and writing through play scenarios (Christie and Stone 1999).

The developmental benefits of a mixed age group model go in both directions. Mixed age groupings allow older children the occasion to practice nurturing and leading, opportunities to reinforce their skills through teaching and provides them with inspiration for creative and imaginative activities (Gray 2011). Older children can be the mature ones in the interactions and therefore benefit by practicing their nurturance and leadership, demonstrating more kindness and compassion towards children who are at least three years younger than themselves Whiting (1983). Learning and teaching are bidirectional in that both parties learn within the exchange. In a mixed age group older children expand their own understanding of concepts through teaching. When older children explain concepts and ideas to younger children they must examine their ideas and translate them in a manner that they can children can comprehend (LeBlanc and Bearison 2004). Even four year olds spontaneously alter the way they speak to suit the age of the listener. They change their tone, the words they use and the length of their sentences (Katz 1995b). This facilitates the ebb and flow of conversation to expand the understanding of both ages, facilitating the opportunity of all ages to observe the characteristics of others by reading the cue's presented thereby sharpening their communication skills. Play in a mixed age group is more creative than competitive (Gray 2009). When children of the same age play a competitiveness may develop, whereas when the age difference is wider the focus transfers from winning to solely having fun. Older children also get the opportunity to engage in creative and

imaginative activities they may see younger children engaging in such as paints, clay and building blocks. Through this type of activity older children can become more creative thinkers and artists.

2.6 Risks and issues in relation to multi-age groupings:

Each method of grouping children within an early years setting has its risks. An important aspect to consider is to ensure that younger children are not overwhelmed by older children and that older children learn to manage interruptions when they are involved in a task.

Adopting a mixed age grouping model in early year's settings involves planning and wholehearted participation by all relevant stakeholders. The materials must be well suited to the underlying principals of mixed age groupings (Miller 1995: Oden & Ramsey, 1993) In order to support early year's practitioners to prepare a proper learning environment sufficient space must be allocated as children should have freedom of movement without feeling congested (Oden & Ramsey, 1993). While Greenman and Stonehouse (1997) advocate for mixed age groups they also propose the challenge involved in providing the range of materials and equipment necessary to promote optimum learning experiences, needed by a diverse age range if the age range extends beyond eighteen months. There may be a propensity to provide only materials for and experiences that are safe for the younger children, which will not meet the needs of the older children within the group, questioning whether older children are receiving optimum learning experiences where there may be a lack of perceived dangerous or more complicated materials. Therefore there are particular issues in relation to providing challenging but safe opportunities for all children to explore.

A further contentious issue amongst early year's practitioners is the safety of infants within a mixed age group setting. Practitioners who have no training or experience in this model may struggle to view how infants can be safe when placed in a group with older children. Bernhard, Pollard, Pierola, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Moran (1998) found that safety was not a controversial concern of early year's practitioners who had experience working in mixed age models compared to those working in age-segregated models.

2.7 Key role of the adult

While the interactions between mixed age groupings among young children can nurture a wide range of developmental benefits to all children, it is not necessarily valid to suggest that these benefits are guaranteed. There are many considerations which must be explored such as, the optimum age range of the children concerned, the allocation of time to the mixed age group, the percentage of older to younger children and the strategies which the adults will put in place to maximise the developmental outcomes for all children within the mixed age group. The benefits and issues of interactions in a mixed age grouping are dependent on what is actually occurring in the setting, the context of the service provision and how early years practitioners choose to organise their environment (Lloyd, 1999; Veenman, 1996; Winsler, 1993). By purely establishing a mixed age group, benefits will not be guaranteed, early years practitioners must set up learning experiences whereby children are active participants in their own learning, making decisions and taking responsibility for their part within the group (Theilheimer, 1993). Provided learning experiences must be modified to appeal in different ways to different children ensuring equal participation, equal access and equal learning outcomes. By creating an environment whereby all children in the group have the prospect to work with those whose abilities and disabilities are different from their own a democratic group will be formed, that will include children who are different, not just age, but with differing abilities (Theilheimer, 1993). Children come to early year's settings with a varied assortment of interests, abilities and prior learning experiences, which early years practitioners must take into consideration when designing an emergent curriculum (Shepard & Smith, 1986).

A key factor in engaging children in the learning process is supporting children in becoming self directed and ensuring the programme is child initiated. This is facilitated by the early year's practitioner by the appropriate organization of the group resources (Morrison, 2008). The resources need to be visible and accessible to all children in the mixed age group as when the practitioner is involved with one group the other group is engaged in independent activities Cooney, (2004). Resources need to reflect a wide range of interests and should be appropriate for both boys and girls of diverse ages.

If implemented correctly, the benefits of mixed-age groups will not just benefit children, but it will benefit both practitioners and parents. Byrnes, Shuster and Jones (1994) highlighted the significance of acquiring a true understanding by parents to ensure the successful support of

mixed age groups. An intrinsic factor in successfully implementing multi age groupings is parental support, using feedback from parents to improve settings.

2.8 Conclusion:

Research supports the benefits of mixed age groupings in early year's settings, with literature indicating that both older and younger children benefit in a variety of ways. However these benefits are not automatic. Children need to be supported by the adults within the setting to ensure optimum outcomes. Each method of grouping children within an early ears setting has its risks. An important aspect to consider is to ensure that younger children are not overwhelmed by older children. The potential benefits can be maximised by advocating that the children support each other in tasks undertaken. Older children can be encouraged to scaffold younger children in self help skills, in reading to them and in explaining things to them. Younger children will be less likely to reject an older immature child, thereby providing the less socially mature older child with a therapeutic environment. Thereby building an expectation of mutual respect and caring of and to each other (Lipsitz, 1995).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction:

A qualitative design was chosen for the purpose of this research, as the guiding aim of the research was to gain diverse accounts of a mixed age group from the views of staff, children and parents, within a setting. The researcher used a qualitative multiple – methods research design to carry out the exploration into the mixed age group provision as it was perceived that this approach would generate an excellent opportunity for a rich data collection. Staff interviews, parent interviews, a focus group with the attending children and an observation of mixed age groups in action formed the research methods to achieve a qualitative view of provision. According to Hesse-Biber (2010 p. 17) “Qualitative methodologies are a particularly sensitive means of capturing the lived experiences of groups and individuals, especially those left out of traditional knowledge-building research projects.” This example of qualitative research supports the chosen design for this study. This chapter will outline the research design, the reason for using this approach and the rationale behind the selection of each of the research tools and piloting the research instruments. Ethical considerations are particularly important when carrying out social research. Given the fact that children participated in this research process careful consideration was given to how the research was approached and carried out to ensure the best interests of the child were met. Finally the limitations of the research study were discussed.

3.2 Qualitative research:

Denscombe (2010: pg 132) identified quantitative research as “a basic belief in the need for data in the form of numbers” he recognized qualitative data as being “primarily concerned with the way in which people share the world”. Natural science conventionally selected a quantitative approach with an understanding of discovering hard evidence and fact (Walliman 2011). It consequently became evident to researchers that subjective emotions and feelings being difficult to quantify during research needed a new approach, a qualitative approach. As this study aimed to investigate the experiences of children staff and parents, a qualitative approach was deemed a suitable approach in order to ensure rich and profound information thereby capitalizing on the validity of the data. According to Haralambos and Holborn (2000 : pg. 803) “The qualitative

method can be described as richer, more vital, as having greater depth and as more likely to present a true picture of a way of life, of people's experiences, attitudes and beliefs." A qualitative approach identified important issues and experiences of the interviewees themselves which enhanced the data collected.

3.3 Research design:

Research design is described by Punch (2005: pg, 142) as "the overall plan for a piece of research". As a qualitative approach was decided upon, specific research methods were considered in relation to their suitability for the participants and the aims of the research project. After thorough deliberation it was decided the most suitable method to generate a rich amount of data was a multiple – methods research approach.

3.3.1 Multiple – methods approach.

While the term "mixed methods" research refers to combining both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, Hasse-Biber (2010) elucidates the multi-method approach as the mixing of methods by combining two or more qualitative methods within one research project. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the appropriate research tool to explore the experiences and opinions of both parents and staff. However given the age of the participating children it was felt that a focus group and an observation was the more suitable research tool. According to Silverman (2010) a multi methods approach is useful as a fuller picture can be gained, broadening the research technique does however require greater data analysis skills.

3.3.2. Semi – structured interviews.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out over a period of several weeks with two members of staff and two parents to collect the data. The interviews focused on their experiences of the mixed age group model being implemented within the setting. The interviews included several open ended questions aimed to allow for elaboration and expansion of certain topics (Appendix A). This also allowed the researcher to further explore the responses of the participants. Denscombe (2010) suggests that interviews are best suited to research which seeks to gain "insights into participant's opinions, attitudes, and experiences" (p.173). Denscombe

(2010) also explains that when conducting semi-structured interviews there is a requirement to maintain a balance between identified discussion topics and permitting the participants to expand on the relevant issues. The potentially biased nature of a participants answer and misinterpretation of information by the researcher due to weak communication skills such as the lack of verbally confirming facts are weaknesses to interviewing which must be considered. Four interviews were conducted in all. Two permanent staff members who had both spent time working in an age segregated service and had both been working in this service for more than six months, in order to gain a true picture of provision were interviewed. Two parents, were also interviewed, whose children have been attending the service for more than six months. These interviews were carried out in the service, at a time to suit participants.

3.3.3. Focus group.

A focus group interview with a group of six children between the ages of four to eight was loosely structured around a series of short questions (Appendix B). Gibson (2007) recommends that such focus groups be made up of between five and eight child participants to ensure a lively and manageable discussion. Krueger (1994: pg. 6) define a focus group as ‘a carefully planned discussion, designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment’. It required a considerable amount of skill and preparation which ensured successful data collection and positive experiences for the children. The focus group lasted fifteen minutes due to the age of the participants and the children’s key workers were present during the process. Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990) believe the main objective of a focus group is to collect qualitative data from a number of individuals, in this case the children, who had experienced a particular concrete situation, in this instance their experiences in a mixed age group day care centre. Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) suggest that a focus group encourages children to offer their own opinions as they listen to others experiences, while also recounting awakening memories which may be triggered by others.

3.3.4. Observations.

The third stage of the data collection entailed an unstructured observation. This involved carrying out an observation over a thirty minute period on the mixed age group model in action in the service. During this process the children’s key workers were present with a group of eight children ranging in age between two years and eight years. Observation has been described by

Marshall and Rossman (1989 pg. 79) as “the systematic description of events, behaviours and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study”. Observations also provide the researcher with clarity around the context of individual’s interactions (Patton 2002). Knowledge and perceptions gained while carrying out the observations were also heightened when interpreting the other data which was collected. Considering the ages of the children involved the researcher took on Gold’s (2005) stance of “observer as participant stance” whereby the children were aware of being observed by the researcher and the researcher was able to participate in the group if necessary, however the most crucial task was the data collection. The literature review and the documentary data were used to ascertain the important elements of the situation to be observed (Denscombe 2010). Detailed notes were written up immediately following the observation.

3.4 Piloting of the Research Instrument

A pilot study was conducted which enabled the researcher to resolve any relevant issues prior to interviews, focus group and observations and allowed for any modifications to be made. A pilot interview was conducted with a parent who was experienced in the mixed age model but who was not able to be a participant in the project. This was useful in determining how long the interview might last and the way in which the interview questions were worded (Bryman 2008).

3.5 Research Participants:

A purposive sampling approach (Roberts-Holmes, 2011) to selecting participants was applied in order to gain as much detailed information as possible. The researcher made contact with the owner (gatekeeper) of an early years setting in the West Dublin area which operated the mixed age grouping approach in their service, and gained permission to explore the mixed age provision applied in the service. Robert-Holmes (2011) claimed that responsibility for allowing access to participant’s falls to what is known as a gatekeeper, therefore their role is vital in the initial stage of the research process.

There were two staff participants, two parent participants, a focus group with the attending children and one observation of practice carried out. In order to gain comprehensive accounts of the individual experiences, the potential participants targeted for the research had been attending

the service regularly for a minimum of six months. This purposive sampling measure ensured a sufficient quantity of data provided by the participants, as they had acquired ample knowledge of the research topic. The researcher invited both males and females to take part in the research, however due to the absence of any male early years professionals working in the service, the participant sample was made up of only female staff, thus increasing the possibility of gender bias in the findings of the research. It was hoped to balance out this by encouraging fathers to participate in the parent interviews. However, unfortunately no fathers came forward when the request process was initiated. There was a good mix of both boys and girls within the setting of various ages to ensure a gender balance during the focus group and the observations.

3.6 Ethical considerations:

During the next meeting with the manager (gatekeeper) of the setting to further consult with them regarding the research project and also to gain consent to approach the staff, parents and children, the gatekeeper was asked if any extra support was required by participants when partaking in the study, i.e. English as a second language. This ensured that all participants completely understood all information especially as is contained in the consent form (Appendix C). Informed consent from all the research participants was acquired to ensure all ethical issues had been addressed (Burnett, 2009; Denscombe, 2010; Roberts-Holmes, 2011). The participants were given both adequate notice about the research project, and the consent form was distributed one week before the participation date, as this gave individuals time to decide whether they wished to engage in the process.

The code of ethics was essential to establish a set of principles to ensure professional conduct during the research project. The researcher followed the code of ethics, to ensure there was no falsification or misrepresentation of data collected to suit proposed theories. To avoid errors the researcher reflected on and reviewed the work through each stage of the process.

A focus group with some of the children attending the service was perceived to be an informative method to obtain an insight into the perceptions of the children within the setting. It was the obligation of the researcher to ensure the rights of the children taking part in the research project were protected. The children were consulted and informed of the process of both the focus group and the observation and after clarification on the use of the data were asked if they would like to

participate in the research project. According to Hill (1996) Children may at best be informed rather than asked to become research participants in certain kinds of observational research practices. Focus groups are a well-known qualitative approach to gathering data during a research project. When carrying out a focus group with young children there was consideration given to the developmental stages of the group. Focus groups with children capture information on their perspectives, their ideas and insights both from a personal and developmental aspect. This method of research can contravene any constrictions placed on the children with regard to limitations of a literacy/reading nature. Focus groups with children offer a plentiful, interactive and developmentally appropriate approach to research with children (Kennedy, Kools and Krueger 2001). However according to Greig and Taylor (1991; pg 132) “Children should receive clear explanations of the groups purpose and format with a limited number of themes planned for exploration.” To this end while conducting the focus group with the children it was explained to them on commencement that the researcher would be asking them questions about the space they use, how the adults help them, how they help each other, what do they like about the service and what they don’t like about it. Ethical issues with regard to children and research was considered and addressed appropriately.

3.7 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Once an adequate quantity of data had been collected, it was evaluated and coded. Burnett (2009) delineates the coding of qualitative data in three stages. Coding qualitative data is not a simple process, as it is time-consuming and laborious (Denscombe, 2010). Labeling can ease the process slightly, as it provides an accessible and efficient route to the most important data. A thematic approach was used when analysing the data in this research project. Interviews were transcribed in order to facilitate data analysis. The resulting transcripts from all data collection were reviewed several times in order to identify the principal emerging themes. The data were then coded to highlight sub-themes within the main themes. On completion of the data analysis consideration was given to the relevance of the findings in comparative deliberation to previously compiled literature in the field.

3.8 Strengths and Limitations of the methodology:

The very nature of qualitative research draws on the experiences of individuals, thereby there is a danger of a lack in evidence and solid facts. The collection of the data was time consuming as four interviews, a focus group and an observation were carried out. Transcribing, coding and analyzing the data was intense. The restriction placed on the research project of a small sample due to time constraints, while providing a valuable insight into the experiences and perspectives of the participants, was also somewhat limited. Sarantakos (2005) suggested that research using small samples do not necessarily prove anything which may contribute to social policy.

The outcomes were very positive with all participants enthusiastically and honestly describing their experiences of being cared for in a mixed age group day care while using a speaking object of their own choosing to regulate the discussion. .

Unfortunately while it was hoped to achieve a gender balance with the interview process this was not possible as no father came forward to participate. An element of gender balance was achieved during the focus group and observation with both boys and girls participating.

3.9 Conclusion:

In this chapter the research design and procedures for collecting and analyzing data have been discussed. In all twelve children participated in the focus group and observations and four adults including staff and parents. Ethical issues were given due consideration during the data collection process with information being provided in advance of consent being gained. The main themes and sub-themes emerging from the data have been analysed and are presented as the findings in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The following chapter outlines and presents the main themes that emerged from the qualitative data collected during interviews, focus group and observation. These themes are, and are presented and organized under six main headings to facilitate the data analysis. Thematic analyses were implemented in order to emphasize key responses to support systematic discussions. Direct quotes from the data collected will be included in italics to demonstrate the depth and significance of qualitative data. Further quotes will be included in the appendices.

4.2 Environment/Safety issues

All of the participants spoke about the importance of the environment in the success of a mixed age group model. Parental and staff concerns emerged around stimulating activities and space for all of the children as well as meeting the children's individual needs.

I was worried about the boys only having toys and stuff suitable for younger children, but there are lots of things for all ages and they have different areas set up. They also have lots of space to move and stuff and I think this helps too. Parent 1

The place is set up into different areas. They use small gates like and big pillows and furniture to divide the space between the ages when they need to. So like, the environment the kids play in is divided for particular uses. Parent 2.

We have more space for the children and better laid out environments: Staff 1

One of the things we learnt also in the in-house training we were given was like about providing for play opportunities and one of the things that really stuck with me was like making sure that the balance was right with the environment for like the other children to become really engaged but also to make sure the younger ones were not overwhelmed. Staff 2.

The staff demonstrated a working knowledge of the importance of carefully planned environments in creating optimum learning outcomes for the children in their care.

I prepare the environment to promote optimum learning outcomes for all the children. Staff 1.

but like now I plan my environment very carefully to meet the needs of all of the children within my group. Staff 2.

While discussing the environment, concerns around safety of the younger children also surfaced especially during the parental interviews.

Well she was only eight months old and I was worried that she would be safe 'cause like there was no traditional baby room for her and like with all the big guys running around I was afraid they would hurt her. Parent 1.

I was a little anxious 'cause I had never seen anything like that in operation. But then after the first day or two when I saw it in action I realized that like emmm I had no reason to be worried, because of the way they set up the area. Parent 2

However these fears were allayed for the parents by both, staff members reassurances and over time by the parents observing the mixed age model in action.

God no they had systems in place that if it got too busy with the older children there was a designated space within the large nest room that was a no go area for the big kids. Parent 1

Now in saying that I was very worried about Sophie being safe for a while, but as I saw the mixed age groups and how the staff worked it every day I did become much more at ease and my confidence and trust built up with everyone. Parent 1.

In the beginning I used to tell Josh to watch out for his brother in crèche, but like now I never say that any more 'cause I know that he is loved and minded by all the children as well as the staff. Parent 2

During the observation and focus group it was evident that the environment prepared for the children was conducive to meet the requirements involved in successfully achieving their aims. However during the observation it did emerge that to some extent the adults stood back, whether this was to allow the children to fully explore the materials or due to a lack of understanding of the importance of the adult support to produce more advantageous learning outcomes was unclear.

The children were working together to make a water wall. The area is set up with lots of loose parts and resources so there is a lot of equipment such as different sized containers, funnels and tubing in the environment for the children to us and stand back to allow the children explore. Observation.

Darren: Well sometimes I used to get annoyed because I wanted to play with the Lego and build cities 'cause I like cities and the small ones would come and knock it down. But then Tracy made a special Lego corner which was a small kids no go area so now I know they won't touch it and I can leave it and come back to it. Focus group.

4.3 Role of the adult

In all aspects of the findings the role of the adult was perceived to be central to outcomes and benefits for the children and cannot be undermined. A key factor is ensuring children become self directed and that their interests are catered for.

The staff are well on top of making sure both the bigger kids and smaller kids have stuff that interests them like for instance they use like the sensory boxes in different ways with the younger children and the older children. Parent 1.

Like the staff are brilliant with all the kids and really have their eye on the ball for what exactly was going on. The place is set up into different areas. Parent 2

Staff members interviewed expressed the opinion that just by establishing a mixed age group, benefits for the children are not necessarily automatic. The early year's practitioners viewed one aspect of their role to set up learning experiences whereby children are active participants in their own learning, making decisions and taking responsibility for their part within the group.

I see my role is to observe the children and to pick up on their emergent interests and to make suitable plans with my team members and with the children to develop a curriculum, like to create meaningful learning experiences for the children. Staff 1.

Well I feel by collaborating with the children in my group I feel that I help them to think through the steps of like solving problems lots of talking about what do they think will happen next like I use lots of different strategies which I think, I feel will support the children in developing a positive attitude towards problem solving through providing them with stuff that is relevant to them. Staff 2.

The children appear to view the role of the adult in a support capacity rather than in a directive one. This was apparent in both the focus group and the observation.

I like when Becky is here coz she is pretty and plays good games, when I am tired Helen makes me a cozy bed on the sofa. I like going to see the babies they are very funny and they are teaching them lots of songs Paul knows loads of songs. Once I was sad because my loom band broke Laura helped me make a new one that was even better, she helps us to clean up after dinner and if someone is tired she helps them eat their dinner. Focus Group.

When me and Ana and Thomas put on a show Miriam helped us to make the stage and the invitations and Ann helped us to practice that was really funny because she kept pretending she was a kid. Focus Group

Tracy came out with the hammer and nails and some safety goggles. She was holding a type of large pegboard and asked the children if it would be of any use to them for their

project. A discussion ensued and it was decided that the wooden peg board would be attached to the pallet with the nails. Observation.

4.4 Interactions/Relationships

All adults mentioned the importance of interaction during interviews. The children discussed interactions in the focus group and positive interactions were witnessed by the researcher during the observation. These interactions demonstrated pro-social behaviours which are central to the social development of children.

I felt a whole new chapter for them could open up and that if they mixed together during the day they would become closer like as brothers I mean: Parent 1

As I was leaving one of the staff said to my older lad “would you like to help your brother to pour his milk on his rice krispies?” When I looked back Darren was pouring milk onto Toby’s breakfast and Sophie was gurgling happily at everyone in general. I cried that first morning ‘cause it was so different to what I was used to: Parent 1

I really wanted him to have a good relationship with his brother so I thought that maybe in this crèche if they were to spend lots of time together during the day he might learn to get on better with his brother: Parent 2

The kids were making a water wall and Josh was right in there with both the older and younger children trying to work out how the best way to do it was: Parent 2

They learn how to interact and negotiate with each other and also another great benefit I see is being able to change their expectations of different aged friends and the way in which they play together which I feel is really a valuable life lesson. Staff 1

Like they support each other every day in different projects, emmm which I feel encourages positive interactions between the children, like they co-operate and plan together Staff 2.

Positive interactions were observed while the children collaborated to build a water wall. The older children were observed promoting positive interactions with the younger children by assigning them appropriate roles which could be carried out by the younger children.

Thomas instructs Kathryn to gather the tubing together and then he crouches down to Tanya’s level and says to her while pointing “will you get that big piece of gutter over there by Patricia’s door”. “I’ll help her Marcus ‘cause she’s only little” shouts Toby and takes Tanya by the hand and walks over to the guttering. Observation.

Marcus got the children to sort all of the containers by size “we need to put the biggest one on the top ‘cause this will hold the bigger amount of water to trickle down to the smaller ones underneath. Observation.

During the focus group Toby aged four demonstrated his understanding of supporting interactions by being aware of the fairness of taking turns while speaking.

Yeah. Toby asks “is it gona be like circle time where we take turns to talk?”

Researcher: That’s right it’s a bit like that but I will be using your answers in my homework.

Toby: “Well I’d better get the speaking object so.” He runs to a shelf and takes a silver paperweight off it and carries it to the group.

It became apparent during the course of the research project that the interactions between the children were core considerations of practice in this service. Both parents and staff appeared to view positive interactions between the children as a testament to the success of the mixed age grouping model.

4.5 Zone of Proximal Development.

Evidence of Vygotsky’s Zone of proximal development in action was preset in all forms of the data collection. The setting provided opportunities for children to adjust to and take into consideration differences while simultaneously the younger children have the opportunity to learn from more experienced peers.

The boys play together in the evenings and the weekends and both boys have a really good caring nature towards their little sister. Emmm I really feel that this has come from the crèche ‘cause I see my children interacting not only with their peers but also with children both younger and older than themselves. Parent 1

He’s really good at problem solving like last week when I arrived to collect them, the kids were making a water wall and Josh was right in there with both the older and younger children trying to work out how the best way to do it was.. I was delighted ‘cause like before he’d have been killing like everyone to get the best bits and grabbing everything so that there’s no way he could have made anything. Parent 2.

They learn how to interact and negotiate with each other and also another great benefit I see is being able to change their expectations of different aged friends and the way in which they play together which I feel is really a valuable life lesson. Staff 1.

Absolutely I see the children making great strides. The older children help the younger ones to work within their zone of proximal development as they're all at different stages of development and have greater knowledge of things. Staff 2.

Kathryn: Well I like to have space to play dolls and mammy's 'cause when I grow up I'm gona be a mammy. There's a nice kitchen too where we sometimes cook the dinner. But when I didn't know how to play restaurants Alexandra helped me and we had waiters and chefs and everything. I like that game. Focus Group.

During the observation it was apparent that the older children enabled and supported the younger children to participate in the building of the water wall providing them with the opportunity to play at a higher level than they could have with age peers. Younger children may lose track of rules with wandering attention. During the observation the older children reminded the younger ones what to do, giving direction as to the anticipated outcomes.

Okay Kathryn hold the tube steady while I attach it, remember we said this was the way the water could trickle down, if we pour it in the top funnel there" Kathryn, "K I have I Alexandra" Observation.

The involvement, cooperation, skill, ingenuity and imagination observed by the researcher while the children built the water wall was far beyond some of the children's age.

Findings from all groups appear to suggest children in mixed age groupings have better opportunities to develop the different skills necessary to adapt their behaviour to accommodate differing age groups, while concurrently learning to consult, cooperate and modify their expectations with children from different ages. There was a strong consensus amongst the adults interviewed that this was dependant on the age and development of the child. Younger children appeared to be more likely to cultivate more complex skills whilst working alongside older children and meanwhile older children gained important opportunities to learn tolerance, empathy and responsibility.

They are becoming outgoing confident boys who are not afraid to give a hand to anyone. I have seen Darren reading to the younger children when I collect him from crèche and recently Patricia (his key worker) told me he helped Hannah to write her name and that he is always helping the younger kids. This makes me feel so proud and I know he is becoming a good person. Parent 1

He's much better with his little brother like the other night he helped him to get into his pajamas he never even told us they just arrived down into the sitting room and jumped in and shouted Dah Dah. Parent 2

Another advantage I do see on a day to day basis is on the cognitive abilities of our children because like especially our younger children are exposed daily to stimulation coming from the older ones. And like for our older ones they are learning skills that I feel will benefit them later on by making them be more responsible, having more empathy and hopefully having more tolerance for difference like 'cause in our mixed age group setting every day there are different needs to be met an I do see the older ones accommodating the differences in the group. Staff 1.

The children with the support of like the adults in this setting they collaborate together on lots of different things. I emmm think that this type of care encourages all of our children to be more empathetic and aware of like the needs of others. Staff 2.

Vygotsky's theory maintains that children have the ability to obtain new levels of understanding when they are encouraged to work within their zone of proximal development. Operating within this zone implies that by providing support from a knowledgeable other, a child can master a deeper level of understanding thereby enabling the child to make the leap to the next stage. The findings suggest that while this more knowledgeable other may be a parent or early years educator older children may also fill this role.

4.6 Well Being

Children's well-being focuses on their development as individual people. The two main elements, psychological well being which includes feeling and thinking and physical well being, were apparent in the data collected.

Well I think that by mixing together in different age groups my children are happy, they are happier here than in the other crèche they were in and I think it is to do with having the freedom to mix together throughout the building Parent 1

My older son especially has become a happy confident little boy and they both love coming here every day. I usually leave them sitting at the dining room table every day trying to decide what to have for breakfast and I love that it makes it feel like a family. Parent 2

The children appear to be valued, empowered, validated and included. Their opinions and ideas are respected.

They are becoming outgoing confident boys who are not afraid to give a hand to anyone. Parent 1

All three of my children are confident, healthy and happy. Parent 1

I feel that the children in my care are becoming confident self directed learners and this in itself supports their sense of well being like their place in space. Staff 1.

Like the learning outcomes and goals and aims are all considered when we are observing the children and are all a point of like reference when looking at the learning experiences we devise for the kids. It's very important to us that the children 's well being is met which like I can see on a day to day basis as the children are confident and happy they are encouraged to put their ideas and suggestions across like they are being validated daily. Staff 2

During the construction of the water wall it was perceptible that the children demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness. As the activity did not appear to be adult directed and was outside with children of mixed ages it lead to less restraint and control and more challenging exercising of muscles and minds.

4.7 Identity and Belonging

Children need to develop a sense of who they are their place in space as it is. The research suggests that there is a sense of community in this service with children, staff and parents being acutely aware of this community.

My children know stuff about all the other children in the crèche like what they like and stuff and I know that the other kids know what mine like and don't like and I feel that this makes my children feel as if they do belong here. Parent 1

They know about their local community and often go around to the local charity shop to see their Gran who volunteers there. My Mam says when the group of children arrive in they all call "Hi Joshes Gran and good stuff today". Parent 2

We have a family wall here that gives all of our children a sense of who they are, where they come from and also that they have their place here in this service and that they are important here. Staff 1

I feel that as the children sit around a dining room table together having meals there is a kind of sense of community being supported here. They feel as if they belong. Staff 2

During the focus group the children also demonstrated that feeling of family and community when they expressed their pleasure in being able to mix with not only their own brothers and

sisters but also other children's siblings. All of the children appear to know each other and each other's families well, regardless of their age.

Dorothy brings me and Jack and Tim and Gavin to school that is a helping job, we get to take turns pressing the button at the traffic lights and she brings Sarah my baby in the buggy sometimes or other peoples sisters or brothers and she puts all the bags in the end so that is a good way to be helping people. Focus Group

When I come in from school I like to play with the babies so I can do that here, they let me see my baby Leah and I can stay and read to her all the time if I like to. Focus Group.

This sense of community and kinship is also demonstrated during the observation when Marcus encourages both Josh and Darren to help with a communal project.

Marcus is looking at Josh and Darren who are sitting on the ground playing with a lengths of tubing neither boy seems interested in joining in with the main activity, they are pushing pebbles through the tubing. Marcus walks over and gets down on his hunkers he says "something really good is going to happen, want to help" both boys look in the direction of the other children Darren says "I'm doing this, can I fill the water though" Marcus replies "yep I need you to do that, but not next, we still need stuff" Darren gets up and follows Marcus to the main area. Observation

In order for children to feel that sense of belonging they need to have a secure relationship and connection within a group. This enables them to be psychologically strong. sure of themselves and be confident in their capabilities to overcome challenges and difficulties.

My guys came home recently and told us that they met some new children that day that were thinking of "moving into the crèche with them". To me this shows that they see the crèche as an extension of their home where like they feel as if they belong there. Parent 1

To me I feel like it's a home from home for my boys. I feel so much more relaxed and at ease. I feel that both of my boys are liked by the staff and other children which is great for me. Parent 2

And like for our older ones they are learning skills that I feel will benefit them later on by making them be more responsible, having more empathy and hopefully having more tolerance for difference like 'cause in our mixed age group setting every day there are different needs to be met an I do see the older ones accommodating the differences in the group. Staff 1

We work a key worker system here and I am responsible for developing the play based curriculum in my group which I do really enjoy 'cause it's like all based around the children' interests and supporting them within these interests. I feel that by supporting their interests they feel like they belong, if you know what I mean? Staff 2

The children in this service demonstrate a positive sense of who they are and they exhibit feelings of having an important contribution to make towards the services community.

I helped to make the rules about crèche and I help to wheel the babies in their buggies when I come home from school. If a new person is sad I play with them or if someone comes to see the crèche I show them around. Focus Group

Alana is my best friend in crèche I help her to do hard jigsaws and to do art, I help my brother Paul to play all the games with us when we are playing. Focus Group.

The two girls help Josh to load the cartons into the buggy and he makes several more trips in to the shed returning each time with more cartons. Observation.

4.8 Conclusion

This draws a conclusion to the main findings of this study. The next chapter will discuss the primary themes that emerged from the study and discuss them in relation to the research questions while drawing on current literature.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the discussion, and interpretation of the main findings that have emerged from the research process. It scrutinizes the similarities as well as the differences between the findings of this research study and literature previously explored within the literature review. A thematic approach was used as according to Braun and Clark (2006: pg 9) “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set.” The themes are explored within the context of the existing literature available on mixed age groupings.

The main aim of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of the children, staff and parents participating in a mixed age group model? To answer this question data was sought that reflected the experiences of staff, parents and children who are all ultimately involved in an early years service implementing this provision. According to Edwards, Blaise and Hammer (2009) the importance of the collection of data in the assumption that the intricacies of pedagogical practice can best be explored when research, concentrates on how practice is experienced by key stakeholders.

5.2 Environment/Safety Issues;

As the study progressed interesting insights emerged into the interlinking of concerns of safety and environments. As previous studies such as Winsler, Caverly, Willson-Quayle, Carlton, Howell and Long (2002) have highlighted, mixed age groupings in an early childhood center appear to have consequences which differ for the older children and the younger children, this study has demonstrated similar findings. However when seminal issues such as those surrounding environment, safety and resources are managed effectively concerns surrounding safety diminishes with benefits becoming substantial. Safety was a controversial issue and a concern for the parents interviewed, however the data yielded by this study albeit limited, suggests that in this quality multi-age group setting strategies of co-operation were put in place to ensure infants safety. These results may lend support to previous literature explored which

suggests that co-operation and acceptance of others is encouraged by mixed age groupings (Eikind 1987; Katz 1995). Findings highlighted parents concerns surrounding the safety of their infants, while at the same time demonstrating that practitioners experienced in the provision of the mixed age model did not have similar concerns. This finding supports previous literature presented by Bernhard, Pollard, Pierola, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Moran (1998) which testifies to the experiences of practitioners in mixed-age models compared to those working in age-segregated models. This mixed-age group setting demonstrates an understanding of minimizing the risk to infants and toddlers by providing certain zones which are infant only zones.

The data collected suggests that stakeholders are aware of the importance of the provision of adequate space, suitable materials and the preparation of a proper learning environment to promote optimum learning experiences for a diverse age range. This view is corroborated by Greenman and Stonehouse (1997) and Oden and Ramsey (1993).

The importance of environmental organisation must never be underestimated and plays an integral role in the provision of learning experiences for young children (Gutiérrez & Slavin, 1992; Mason & Stimson, 1996). This view was propounded by all participants who demonstrated their understanding of environmental importance.

Current literature appears to validate the findings contained in this study that it is possible for age-related differences within children's play to disappear giving perceptive importance to the social context of children's learning (Gauvian, 2001). A means to this is by providing appropriate environmental contexts which can lead development forward for children (Berk and Winsler, 1995).

5.3 Interactions

The data gathered in this research project suggests the value placed on children's interactions in this mixed age group setting. This data reflects the findings of Evangelou (1989) and McClellan and Kinsey (1996) both of whom suggested that children are provided with more opportunities to connect in pro-social ways when mixing with children of varying ages. During the process it became evident that older children had many opportunities to provide help to both siblings and younger children as mixed age groupings by its very nature led to young toddlers needing assistance with both self-help skills and support in joining in group activities providing natural

interactions between children. Preschoolers and toddlers appeared to alter their tone of voice or use gestures to facilitate the needs of younger children. The comprehension of this necessity may have arisen from numerous interactions with children of different ages. It was also apparent from the data collected that the adults viewed part of their role as being to support the children in all interactions. The importance of children's interactions within different age cohorts is invaluable to the development and enhancement of distinctive skills. The findings suggest the early years service in this study are meeting a societal obligation of providing for the changing needs of children to have opportunities to engage and experience mixed age interactions, which due to changing family life in Ireland they may not otherwise experience. This finding is supported by Coleman (1987) and Katz and McClellan (1997) who highlight the obligation for early years settings to meet the changing needs of children and their families due to societal changes such as smaller nuclear families and less opportunity for children to experience mixed-age play. Findings of this study fosters debate on Parten's classic theory of stages of development whereby it is suggested that children of two and three years old are incapable of collaborative play. The available evidence in the findings in this study observed two year olds interacting successfully with five and six year olds engaging in co-operative and social play which supports the views of Howes and Farver (1987) who reported similar findings. During the research process it was noted that all of the children within the service were active contributors to positive interactions. Data generated during the observation and focus group, was indicative of the children's ability to take responsibility for one another, demonstrating knowledge and respect for the rules of the service and also awareness of each other's needs. Relevant literature emphasizes that interactions are essential for learning and the significance of friendships, interactions and relationships for development should never be undermined (Hartup, Laursen, and Stewart 1988: Haworth, Mephram, Woodhead, Simmons, Schimanski, and McGarva 2004: Townsend, M.A.R. 1992). Data produced gave an insight into children's experiences and possible learning opportunities when interacting with children of different ages in the early years setting. The very nature of the children's interactions in this mixed-age service appear to be empowering for each child as there are opportunities for the younger children to learn from the older, while at the same time the older children with their more extensive knowledge and life skills get the opportunity to lead the group.

5.4 Role of the adult

Research suggests that important facets in ensuring maximum developmental benefits for children attending a mixed age group setting are dependent on the active role of the adult in what is actually happening in practice, the context of the service provision and ultimately how early years practitioners choose to organize their environment (Veenman, 1996: Winsler, 1993). The data yielded by this study provides strong evidence to support this view with the early year's practitioners, the parents and the children expressing intrinsic knowledge on the role of the adult within the setting.

The available data seems to suggest that a key feature of the role of the adult is to implement the philosophical beliefs of the hierarchy who have determined the type of provision being offered while prioritizing the needs of children.

The role of the adult is central to providing the resources and the environment necessary to enable the children to be less reliant on the adult. This appears to be partly due to the fact that the younger children in the mixed age group service had access to the wide and diverse range of skills of the older children and were able to draw from these. This finding is consistent with previous literature which suggests younger children within mixed-age groups were visibly less reliant on the adult (Carter, 2005: McClellan, and Kinsley 1999). In mixed-age play it is viewed that the more complex conduct of the older children present as an example of behaviour for younger children, who also tend to obtain greater emotional support from older children (Gray 2011). However some of the findings that emerged from the observation suggested that while the learning experience was valuable for the children if there had been more support from the adults the outcomes may have been more advantageous mirroring the suggestion that by merely establishing a mixed-age group benefits will not automatically be guaranteed (Theilheimer 1993)

5.5 Theoretical Background

Many of the findings in the study have solid theoretical underpinnings, for example according to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, the younger children in the scenario laid out in the observation of making a water wall could not have thought of the intricacies of building the water wall with the largest container on the top to hold the large volume of water in order for the

water to trickle down to the smaller containers underneath as the younger children lack the concept of serratation. Under Marcus and Alexandra's guidance they quickly grasped the idea and sorted out the containers according to size with the biggest one at the top.

The data demonstrated the children practicing their skills by actively participating with others. While building the water wall the older children provided the younger children with the necessary support to work with them in achieving the task thus demonstrating Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. On the basis of the data collected it would appear fair to suggest this concept of children learning from each other as being a key finding. It is generally agreed that interactions between children of different age groups contribute to the overall development of higher skills. In this research project findings suggest that younger children, with the help of more experienced older children, grow in confidence to participate in more challenging group activities. This is important as it diminishes the need for adult intervention and direction as the children initiated, lead and directed their own learning. This view is supported by the theoretical premise of Manning (2005) who advocated the concept of play and self-activity as an integral part of children's education to be supported by the adult rather than dictated and directed.

Findings demonstrated the bi-directional influences of the relationships between the family and the center which impacts on a child's well being. This finding is supported by Underdown (2007, p. 6) 'Feeling unconditionally accepted, liked and loved is central to emotional health and, when a child feels emotionally healthy, he or she is more receptive to learning.' Bronfenbrenner's systems theory underpins how relationships both directly and indirectly influence a child's well-being. The child, at the centre of his micro-system, forms attachments with his immediate family and primary care-giver. These attachments will affect the child's resilience and ability to become intrinsically motivated.

5.6 Well being/ identity and belonging.

A key advantage identified in this study was the possibility of interactions between siblings. Due to the very nature of sibling relations being generally positive and nurturing they often enhanced the feeling of community and belonging within the service. Findings lend support to the views of several other studies which emphasize the significance of sibling relationships throughout the

early years and suggest that these relationships promote positive learning outcomes and also have a constructive influence on the emotional, cognitive and social development of children (Howe and Ross, 1990; Milevsky, 2011 and Smith 1993). Findings also lend support to the claim that when siblings attend a mixed age group setting it is a natural method of including the whole family in the early year's setting, leading to families having a vested interest in the service thus leading to more meaningful parental involvement.

Data collected propounds the view that older children had opportunities to engage with the younger children which led to nurturing and patient reactions and encourage them to become more tolerant to differences. It is suggested that these skills lead to the older children identifying the differing abilities and needs of others around them and also gives them the capacity to adapt their conduct accordingly. This view is further validated in the available literature namely Gray (2010: pg 500) who suggests mixed-age play provides older children with opportunities to learn as the practice “nurturance and leadership”.

Data collected during the focus group provided an insight into the children’s perceptions of their well being which is an integral part of both acknowledging and understanding how the children in this particular service actually feel about their time spent in the service. Gaining these opinions and particular insights values their experiences of being active citizens within the community of the service.

Findings presented in this study suggest that all relevant stakeholders value and believe that meaningful relationships between staff, children and parents are an intrinsic and defensible factor of the very fabric of the setting and that the emotional well-being of the child is influenced by these relationships. This is consistent with the image of the well-being of children outlined in Aistear (2009) with children being resilient and resourceful and active participants in their own learning.

Identity and belonging is about community. The findings in this study demonstrated a sense of togetherness from children, their parents and the staff. The research participants demonstrated signs of awareness that they truly belonged to the group in the manner in which they used language and demonstrated concern for each other. This finding is supported by Van Oers 2003 and Hannikain (2001) who argue that people demonstrate signs of appreciation that they belong together by the way they behave towards one another. These signs were particularly evident during the observation when the children participated in the experience of building a water wall

demonstrating pro-social and adaptive behaviours contributing to the group sense of community. Findings from the focus group demonstrated evidence laid out by Rogoff (1990) whereby the acceptance of unspoken rules demonstrates a sense of community. This was clearly evident in the manner in which the children used the speaking object to take turns to offer their ideas and opinions.

Research has indeed demonstrated that children learn better co-operatively and that this learning is improved when children feel a sense of belonging and safety within their environment (McClellan and Kinsey, 1999; Van Oers & Hannikainen, 2001). It would appear from the research carried out in this project that such an environment had indeed been created for the children attending this mixed-age group service.

5.7 Conclusion

This study has shed some light onto the workings of a mixed-age group setting. In analysing the findings there appears to be huge benefits to the children attending this particular service. The philosophical beliefs underpinning the service appear to provide the children with unique learning opportunities and social experiences. This study does not attempt to suggest that all settings should operate in this manner but rather seeks to give some insight into an alternative method of early year's provision.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECCOMENDATIONS

6.1 Overview.

This brief review represents a range of themes and ideas connected with mixed age groupings in an early year's service. It is dependent on seminal articles and research carried out in other countries due to the paucity of studies based on the Irish experience.

The research project has given a certain understanding of the demands, complexities, opportunities and successes of a mixed age grouping model, based on the experiences of staff, parents and children in one early years service which actively promotes the mixed age grouping model of early year's provision.

It is agreed that mixed age interactions encouraged among young children does offer a variety of developmental benefits to all. However it is not being suggested that merely mixing children of different ages together in a heterogeneous group will guarantee that benefits will be realised. Considerations necessary include, optimum age range, the percentage of older to younger children and the strategies that will be used to maximize the learning outcomes for all children. This mixed age group model appears to be adept at providing for a broad curriculum based on the children's interests. Conversely a key factor emerging is the importance of the adult's engagement in the provision of environment planning and preparation in order to maintain optimum learning outcomes for the children.

There also appears to be a certain responsibility on the part of policy makers to fully appreciate the true dynamic of this type of provision, which may necessitate further supports being made available to service providers.

Results from this study suggest that mixed age grouping can be a factor in the unique facilitation of the enrichment of children's experiences and development in an early years setting, nonetheless there is no doubt that there is a need for further research on multi age groupings in early years services in the Irish context.

6.2 Key Findings.

Being in a mixed-age group setting provided opportunities for the younger children to interact with, observe, imitate and engage with older more experienced children. They were welcomed into the play of older children which research has shown can be linked to developing strong cognitive development. They were supported in participating when they chose to and showed no signs of being overwhelmed by the older children.

The older children demonstrated a vast range of skills and expertise. They did not appear to be bothered by the attention of the younger children and drew them into their play scenario during the observation, scaffolding their learning. However it would be speculative to draw the conclusion that the older children found it rewarding to offer this support. The older children appeared to use different approaches dependant on the age of the child they were interacting with, appearing to use a nurturing approach for younger children while simultaneously using a more direct approach with same age peers demonstrating pro-social skills.

A significant finding was the fundamental role of the adult in facilitating every aspect of a mixed age group setting. Indeed it transpired that without the extensive knowledge and skills of the early year's practitioners in this service the success of the model would have been in jeopardy.

A key unexpected finding was the fact that when sibling relationships are encouraged in a mixed-age group setting the benefits to positive learning outcomes and their effect on affirmative influence on the social, emotional and cognitive skills of the children cannot be overlooked.

6.3 Limitations.

This study was designed to explore the perspectives and experiences of the service users of a mixed age model of provision of early childhood education and care in a service in the West Dublin area. The small scale localised nature of this study meant the data generated were not universal across any other setting, but were rather a reflection of the perceptions of the participants of this study. Consequently the encounters within this study cannot be seen to be

demonstrative of the occurrences within any other, either mixed age group or same age group settings.

6.4 Recommendations for further research.

This explorative study has produced some insight into the workings of a mixed age group model of provision. However it is important to note that it has not been a comparative study. A recommendation for further research would be to carry out a comparative study giving consideration to both same-age and mixed-age group settings.

Further research, on a larger scale and across a number of mixed-age group settings would be recommended to illuminate aspects of benefits, risks and issues in relation to mixed-age groupings that may have been overlooked in this single service.

Future directions for research might also attempt to include the voices of other key stakeholders in early childhood education. These may include specialists in the field of early childhood education and care such as owners and managers of both private and not-for-profit services and policy makers.

6.5 Concluding statement.

This study has explored perceptions of children, parents and staff in a mixed-age group setting. Reflecting on the insights gained in this study, points relating to practice have been revealed namely the unique learning opportunities provided to the children attending this service and the challenges encountered in the provision of this type of service.

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APPENDICES

- Appendix A:** Semi-structured interview questions.
- Appendix B:** Focus group questions
- Appendix C:** Information sheet for parents of participating children.
- Appendix D:** Information sheet for children.
- Appendix E:** Parent consent form for participating children.
- Appendix F:** Children's consent form.
- Appendix G:** Consent form for parents participating in the research.
- Appendix H:** Consent form for staff participating in the research.
- Appendix I:** Sample interview transcript parent
- Appendix J:** Sample interview transcript staff
- Appendix K:** Observation.

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview questions.

Parent Questions:

1. How many children do you have in the early year's facility?
2. Before you started in this service had you ever heard of mixed age groupings before?
3. Why did you choose this day care facility over others?
4. What concerns, if any did you have before your children started?
5. And now do you feel after six months do you feel her safety is risk?
6. Do you see any benefits with having your children in this mixed age group model?
7. Would you recommend this crèche to other parents?
8. Would you tell me how your children's wellbeing is being met?
9. Do you think your children have a sense of belonging here?
10. I was wondering is parental involvement encouraged at all?
11. Do you think of anything that could improve things in this service?

Staff Questions:

1. Would you like to tell me a little bit about how you found yourself working in this service?
2. So when did you start in this service?
3. Do you fully understand the ethos of this service?
4. So then this type of model the mixed age group model do you think it's beneficial for the children?
5. After experiencing this type of provision would you prefer to go back to your old way of having a defined room with a same age group of children?
6. Do you feel you get to work as an autonomous person working here and implementing this model of provision?
7. Do you find that this model helps in adhering to regulation five the health, welfare and development of the children as well as the principals of Aistear and Siolta?
8. What challenges do you feel Pauline are involved in this multiage model of provision?
9. Do you see any logistical challenges in implementing this model?
10. What would you change in this practice?
11. Could you tell me about your role in this service?

Appendix B: Focus group questions

1. Okay so thanks guys for taking part in this group. I have explained to you all and to your parents what is going to happen and how I am going to use what you say to me is that okay with everyone.
2. Okay so we're going to have a chat about the space you have here, how the adults help you here, how you help each other, what sort of things you like about this place and what sort of things you don't like. Is that okay with everyone?
3. Okay so if we're ready to start, how do you all feel about how the space is shared out between you?
4. Great stuff guys so can you tell me how the adults in this place help you?
5. So any thoughts on how you help each other here?
6. What kind of things do you like here?
7. What kind of things do you not like?

Appendix C: Information sheet for parents of participating children.

Research Topic: An investigation into the benefits and issues of mixed age groupings in an early years setting.

Researcher: Helena Goodwin.

Childs Name: _____

My name is Helena Goodwin and I am a student in *Dublin Institute of Technology* in Mountjoy Square currently studying an M.A. in Child, Family and Community. As part of my course I am undertaking a research project. I am hoping to find out what children like and dislike about the mixed age group model of the early years setting.

To do this I would like to observe the children interacting with each other and/or discuss with them their likes and dislikes during a group interview. This will take place during normal hours your child attends the service and will only take up about one hour of your child's time over a period of two weeks.

Please Note;

- No photographs of children will be used.
- I will be recording the interview to help me remember what the children say.
- All children's names will be change when transcribing the data to ensure the maintenance o a strict level of confidentiality.
- I will be supervised by the management team at all times and will adhere o both preschool regulations and the settings policies and procedures.
- The final project will be read by my dissertation supervisor and marking supervisor and may be stored in the D.I.T. library for other students to look at.
-

Parents Name: _____ **Date:** _____

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix D: Information sheet for children.

Hi: My name is Helena and I go to school to learn all about how children learn. Over the next two weeks I would like to watch you when you play with your friends to see what you like and don't like about playing in different groups. I am also very interested in what you think and what you have to say about this too. When I am doing this I will need to have a notebook to write things down and an ipad to record what you say.



I will use an ipad to record what you say. Is that okay?



I will use a notebook to write down what you say and do. Is that okay?

Sometimes when we talk, I would need to use my ipad.

Is that okay with you?



Can I do that?

Is it okay to show my teachers and friends what we talk about?

Can we talk about your work?

Are you sure about that?



Adapted from Harcourt and Conroy (2011, pp 41 – 46).

Appendix E: Parent consent form for participating children.

Research Topic: An investigation into the benefits and issues of mixed age groupings in an early years setting.

Researcher: Helena Goodwin.

Childs Name: _____

Please tick if you agree with the statement:

1. I have read the information sheet provided to me for the above research project.
2. Any queries I may have had have been answered to my satisfaction.
3. I am giving my permission for my child to take part in the study.
4. I can withdraw my child at any time.
5. It has been explained to me that the anonymity of my child will be protected.
6. My child will be asked if he/she is happy to take part in the study.
7. A copy of my child's consent for can be made available to me.
8. Feedback on the findings of this project will be provided to my child.
9. The data collected may be presented and/or published in academic journals and/or at conferences.

Signed: _____ **Date:** _____

Print Name: _____

Appendix F: Children's consent form.

Research Topic: An investigation into the benefits and issues of mixed age groupings in an early years setting.

Researcher: Helena Goodwin.

Childs Name: _____

Step 1: Verbal explanation to the child and asking for the child's verbal consent:

Hi: My name is Helena and I go to school to learn all about how children learn. Over the next two weeks I would like to watch you when you play with your friends to see what you like and don't like about playing in different groups. I am also very interested in what you think and what you have to say about this too.

I am going to start watching how you are playing with your friends. Is that okay with you? If at any time you want me to stop it will be okay for you to say STOP.

Witness Affirmation: The above verbal explanation was given to the child, and the child verbally agreed to the above request.

Signature of witness: _____

Step 2: Verbal explanation to the child and asking for the child's verbal consent to take part in a group interview:

Now we're going to talk about what you think and what you have to say about what you like and don't like about playing in different groups. Is that okay with you? If at any time you want me to stop it will be okay for you to say STOP.

Witness Affirmation: The above verbal explanation was given to the child, and the child verbally agreed to the above request.

Signature of witness: _____

Appendix G: Consent form for parents participating in the research.

Department of Social Sciences,
Dublin Institute of Technology,
Mountjoy Square,
Dublin 1.

April 2014

Dear Participant,

I am currently studying a M.A. in child Family and Community in the Dublin Institute of Technology (D.I.T.). As a prerequisite to obtaining this course, I am required to carry out a research project. I am hoping to find out what children like and dislike about the mixed age group model of the early years setting.

To conduct this study I am hoping to interview two parents of children who attend the setting. You are under no obligation to take part in this study; however should you decide to take part in this research you have the right to withdraw this consent at any stage.

Confidentiality and anonymity is a priority in this study and all information you give will only be used in this piece of research. No personal details or specific details which could identify any participant or their setting are asked for in this questionnaire. If you would like to receive information on the results of this research or have any other queries with regard to it please contact me, my contact details are below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information and if you would like to participate in this research please sign the attached consent form to undertake an interview and I will be in touch to arrange a convenient time to suit you.

Thanking You,

Sincerely,

Helena Goodwin



Interview consent form.

I, _____, understand that I am being asked to take part in a piece of research through an interview process. I have been made aware by the researcher, Helena Goodwin that this research forms part of an M.A. in Child Family and Community. I understand that this research is focused on the area of mixed age groups in an early years setting. I also understand that the interview data collected will be confidential and will be stored securely and that I may withdraw from the research if I so wish.

Signed _____

Appendix H: Consent form for staff participating in the research.

Department of Social Sciences,
Dublin Institute of Technology,
Mountjoy Square,
Dublin 1.

April 2014

Dear Participant,

I am currently studying a M.A. in child Family and Community in the Dublin Institute of Technology (D.I.T.). As a prerequisite to obtaining this course, I am required to carry out a research project. I am hoping to find out what children like and dislike about the mixed age group model of the early years setting.

To conduct this study I am hoping to interview two members of staff in your setting. You are under no obligation to take part in this study; however should you decide to take part in this research you have the right to withdraw this consent at any stage.

Confidentiality and anonymity is a priority in this study and all information you give will only be used in this piece of research. No personal details or specific details which could identify any participant or their setting are asked for in this questionnaire. If you would like to receive information on the results of this research or have any other queries with regard to it please contact me, my contact details are below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information and if you would like to participate in this research please sign the attached consent form to undertake an interview and I will be in touch to arrange a convenient time to suit you.

Thanking You,

Sincerely,

Helena Goodwin



Interview consent form.

I, _____, understand that I am being asked to take part in a piece of research through an interview process. I have been made aware by the researcher, Helena Goodwin that this research forms part of an M.A. in Child Family and Community. I understand that this research is focused on the area of mixed age groups in an early years setting. I also understand that the interview data collected will be confidential and will be stored securely and that I may withdraw from the research if I so wish.

Signed _____

Appendix I: Sample interview transcript parent

Interview 1: [REDACTED]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[Redacted text block 1]

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[Redacted text block 3]

[Redacted text block 4]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

Appendix J: Sample interview transcript staff

Interview 3: [REDACTED]

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Appendix K: Observation.

Observation 1: The obstacle course.

A group of ten children aged between 17 months and 8 years, both boys and girls, building an obstacle course from loose parts..

Marcus aged 8.

Alexandra aged 8.

Darren aged 6.

Anna aged 5.

Josh aged 4.

Toby aged 4.

Kathryn aged 3 years and six months.

Tanya aged 2 years and three months.

The children were working together to make a water wall. The area is set up with lots of loose parts and resources so there is a lot of equipment such as different sized containers, funnels and tubing in the environment for the children to use. The staff have told me they call this call this “an invitation to play” and that the resources provided have been carefully selected based on some of the participating children’s documented emergent interests and stand back to allow the children explore.

Marcus gathers all the children around him. “Okay so we’re going to try and make a water wall, what do you think Alexandra?” “Good idea” says Alexandra. Marcus starts giving the instructions to the individual children. “Darren will you collect all the connectors, Anna you can gather the bottles together” Anna runs off and starts to collect the bottles. “Right Josh you get all the funnels together ‘cause they’re the most important bit” says Alexandra. Thomas instructs Kathryn to gather the tubing together and then he crouches down to Tanyas level and says to her while pointing “will you get that big piece of gutter over there by Patrica’s door”. Tanya runs over and tries to pick up the gutter, “I’ll help her” shouts Toby taking the opposite end of the guttering, Tanya is struggling to get her end off the ground , Toby says “wait I will pull it for if I can put it up higher” Toby lifts the gutter off the ground and balances it on his shoulder he starts to walk forward slowly whilst looking back and instructing Tanya “ just push Tan, I can carry it,

but you are doing a great job with me, you're getting big like Sam". It takes them 5 minutes to get the guttering back to the main area.

Meanwhile Anna has collected all the bottles and put them in a pile "Do we need the small ones as well as the big ones?" Marcus says "Yeah sure we'll get them all. " "What'll we make it on Alexandra?" asked Marcus. "Well how about the big pallet Richie brought last week, I saw one once made on one of those. You get the pallet and I'll ask Tracy for the hammer and nails."

Marcus is looking at Josh and Darren who are sitting on the ground playing with a length of tubing neither boy seems interested in joining in with the main activity, they are pushing pebbles through the tubing. Marcus walks over and gets down on his hunkers he says "something really good is going to happen, want to help" both boys look in the direction of the other children Darren says " I'm doing this, can I fill the water though" Marcus replies " yep I need you to do that, but not next, we still need stuff" Darren gets up and follows Marcus to the main area, he begins helping Anna with the bottles he calls to Josh " will you go to the shed and get the milk cartons they will hold loads of water" Josh walks to the shed and goes inside he returns with several milk cartons which he has under his arm and they are starting to fall, Josh starts to pick them up and calls to the main group of children "help there is too many".

Thomas and Alexandra are walking towards the shed Alexandra says "wait I will get the buggy" she runs back and whispers to Tanya who is standing with a buggy watching the older children. Tanya puts out her hand and takes Alexandra's hand. Alexandra walks towards the shed holding Tanya's hand and pulling the buggy behind her. The two girls help Josh to load the cartons into the buggy and he makes several more trips in to the shed returning each time with more cartons. The buggy is dragged backwards by Alexandra and Tanya when Marcus sees the group coming he says "well done okay we are ready now guys, come on Josh we are doing it now".

Tracy came out with the hammer and nails and some safety goggles. She was holding a type of large pegboard and asked the children if it would be of any use to them for their project. A discussion ensued and it was decided that the wooden peg board would be attached to the pallet with the nails. The children all took turns nailing the peg board to the pallet and this process lasted about five minutes.

Marcus gets the children to separate the containers by size “put the biggest one on the top to hold the biggest amount of water coz we need it to trickle down to the smaller ones underneath.”

Alexandra and Josh begin to pile the containers and cartons while Thomas and Marcus hand them to them, the system is not working and the pile topples. Nobody says anything Thomas and Darren walk away and the other children begin to rebuild. The two older boys return with the lid of the sandpit and some off cuts of wood. Darren has now got the wall 3 cartons high and is very protective of his work “don’t touch it, I made it stand, leave it.” The older boys do not answer and begin to construct a separate wall. They place 2 heavy logs on the ground and start adding containers and bottles, Alexandra and Anna start to follow them and place funnels in the bottles suddenly there are lots of busy hands working in silence, Josh has abandoned his own project and along with Toby starts moving logs towards the large construction. “Okay Kathryn hold the tube steady while I attach it, remember we said this was the way the water could trickle down, if we pour it in the top funnel there” Kathryn, “K I have I Alexandra” For over ten minutes the children work in silence the construction was built and taken down several times as the construction got higher Thomas asked “will someone start getting the water”. Alexandra and Marcus went to the hose and turned on the tap they called for children to bring spare buckets and containers to be filled. The children worked in a production line fashion filling containers and transporting them back to the construction area.

Anna was first to attempt pouring the water from the container over the water wall, from a standing position she slowly poured the water into a an open bottle as it filled it fell over much to the delight of Tanya who was standing beside it and got splashed, she squealed “again again”. The children took turns attempting to get a momentum going with the wall and eventually it was fine-tuned so that the water was poured into a funnel attached to a tube. Thomas announced “keep it going” as the children frantically tried to keep adding water whilst catching it at the other end and also refilling from the tap. The system became more complex as tubing was fed through cartons and around logs all of the children played their part in keeping the activity going. For the next half hour the children worked together filling and ferrying buckets from the tap to the water wall they stood in line with their full buckets awaiting their turn to try it out.