

Mixed-Age Group Teaching in Second Language Learning: An Observational Study of a Montessori Classroom in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study aimed to highlight the effects of teaching young students of 3 to 6 years in mix aged groups, especially in language learning. The mixed method study employed purposive sampling, where observations of a class with 40 students, and semi-structured interviews of 2 Montessori Directresses were the chosen mode of investigation. The setting of the classrooms and the nature of the interactions and exchanges among the mix aged students creates an almost familial environment, where the older students take on the roles of mentors and help younger students learn and correct their errors. The participants asserted that there was seldom any conflict or clash of interests in the Montessori classroom, as the energies of all students were engaged positively. The observations also showed that peer interactions and collaborative work in the group lessons and at the times of free student play, were contributing factors in second language acquisitions and learning the patterns of the new language inductively.

Keywords: Montessori method, second language learning, mixed aged groups

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Introduction

The choice of the appropriate method in teaching is considered among professional teachers to be an essential factor, especially for second language learning. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, there is yet, no proper system of education or method for teaching practiced in most of the schools. The situation is even worst in the case of early childhood education; where primary education has a recognised status, early childhood education, and holistic practices related to it is practically non-existent (Khan, 2018) . Though urban areas have some schools under the masthead of playgroup, they tend to be what the name implies. The elite have access to quality education, whereas the poor suffer (ASER, 2016). Other than supervised play, learning is limited to the rote memorization of the alphabet, numbers and a handful of other random concepts (SPARC, 2017).

Most of the teaching in our country is lecture oriented and the instruction is teacher based. The students are not active participants in the learning process. The worst sufferers are the little children in the pre-primary level. Though a handful of private schools in the large cities practice a certain method for teaching, it serves to cater to a selected few and the majority are left to suffice with an unplanned, random and haphazard system of teaching. In a country where the literacy ratio is alarmingly low, there is no systematic methodology adopted to foster learning in the early years. The system does not have a programme for the preschool years, which are so vital for the overall development of the child. Until recently it was not even officially considered part of the education process.

Parents sometimes look at the pre-primary level as preparation for kindergarten. In Pakistan the term Montessori is misunderstood as a year of learning before going on to Kindergarten. The method is not even known to people who use it. In Montessori schools, the entire three-year span is kindergarten. From the moment a child enters a child's place, it is concerned with the ongoing development of the "whole child;" intellectual, physical, emotional and social.

According to Reese (1998) mixed-age grouping involves combining children typically from two years old to six or seven, with the intention to optimize the educative potential of the participants. In a mixed-age classroom, children stay with the same teacher for several years. There is no rigid grouping on the basis of age, as the Montessori approach demands, and thus both social and intellectual development is catered to. Learning within this diverse group stimulates greater interest and

encourages cooperation. This study aims to highlight the importance of the Montessori Method with emphasis on the mix age grouping philosophy, and its manifold advantages with emphasis on second language learning.

The Montessori Method

The Montessori approach offers a broad vision of education as an aid to life. It does not cover the traditional three “R’s”, i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic. The classroom is composed of several learning areas: Practical life exercises, language, mathematics, sensorial and culture. Culture includes history, geography, zoology, botany, religion, art and music. All activities are designed to progress from simple to complex, from the concrete to abstract. All the exercises in the Montessori environment are not product, but process focused. They are designed with what is typically called the inbuilt control of error, which provides self-correction. Therefore, a child can work on each task at his own pace, moving on from one stage to another and find pride in his achievement whilst perfecting himself in the concept. The class is not segmented into age, lesson plans, but rather allows children to choose work according to their liking, and to observe their classmates without interrupting them.

Language Development in the Montessori Method

According to Montessori (1983), language is one of the characteristics which distinguish man from the animals. It is a gift of nature bestowed on him alone. It is an expression of his intelligence...Written language can be acquired much more easily by children of four years than by those of six years of age--the time at which compulsory education starts. While children of six years of age need at least two years to learn how to write, and do so with much difficulty and against nature, children of four years learn this 'second language' within a few months.

Language is the method of communication between people through speech and the written word. Montessori brings the child from speech to printing and then to reading and comprehending the words, which he has written. The reason why the method propelled to fame was the spontaneous writing, which four-year-old children demonstrated in Dr. Montessori's first Children's House. The activities of Practical Life and the Sensorial materials prepared the children in that early classroom so as to naturally develop the writing of words and phrases as four-year olds.

Mixed-Age Groups in the Montessori Method and Early Childhood Education

The study explored the premise that second language learning is facilitated in a mixed age group learning environment as in the Montessori system of education. McClellan (1997) asserted, “Mixed-age or multi-age grouping refers to grouping children so that the age-span of the class is greater than one year. The purpose is to maximize the potential benefits of interaction and cooperation among children who vary in experience, maturity, and ability.”

According to Katz (1995), “It is a term and a concept which highlights a particular aspect of an alternative approach to the education of children: the mixing of diverse ages in classrooms, consciously, intentionally, and purposely. Its popularity and power as a teaching and learning strategy is evident as many states move to consider its adoption, particularly for teaching and learning in the early elementary school years.”

The essential element for success in any multi age ECE classroom is a prepared environment. This means that there must be a trained teacher who understands the principles of language development, a room with didactic material easily accessible to the child, the freedom to choose and work with that material under supervision of a trained teacher and opportunity to explore and grow (McClellan, 1997) Montessori approach firmly upholds all these principles.

Although multigrade teaching practices are observed across Pakistan, yet very little work has been done in the context of Early Childhood Education. The research that is available has been conducted largely in a contrived setting that limits play to particular areas or activities. Moreover, the research that is available either focuses on activities provided in contrived settings and focus on a developmentally appropriate framework, instead of a socio cultural one.

Benefits of Mix Age Settings in Montessori Classes

Research provides evidence that younger children are inclined to interact with older children, (Beach, 2013). There is also evidence that positive benefits accrue, and foster development as a result of collaboration, interaction and friendships between the two age groups (Fagan, 2009). Vygotsky and Piaget also elaborated how interactions proved to beneficial for cognitive development (Woolfolk, 2004). This

interaction is particularly even more fruitful when it involves the more experienced peers collaborating with the less experienced and introducing them into the ways of culture (Bruner, 1985; Drewery & Bird, 2004; Rogoff, 1990 as cited in Pepler, Corter, & Abramovitch, 1982). The younger children are exposed to material, which caters to a level more mature than their own. Thus, in a mixed age group environment in a Montessori set up the child would not be restricted to learn. Moreover, the young children adopt a more mature attitude while interacting with the more mature ones.

Young children learn from observing and imitation, which involves learning (Fagan, 2009). Furthermore, toddlers employ imitation as a means of drawing close to each other and to communicate (Meltzoff, 1993). Therefore, in a multi age setting, children learn social, as well as language skills from each other through meaning interaction provided through a prepared environment. In a Montessori environment, each year holds a special significance for the student. The younger child learns through observation of the older child. In addition, the older student has the opportunity to become a leader and reinforce their knowledge as they help their younger friends.

Research suggests that the effect of mixed-age grouping on cognition is likely to derive from the cognitive conflict arising from children's interaction with peers of different levels of cognitive maturity. Lillard (2016) emphasizes how grasping, movement, encouragement of self-locomotion, the variety of exercises of practical life and sensorial collectively enhance a child's cognitive and language skills.

According to Katz (1995) children as young as four years old learn the pragmatics of language and speak according to the needs and demands of the listener. Their sentence construction, tone, choice of words varies to suit the listener. Studies of cognitive development suggest that cognitive conflict arises when interacting children are at different levels of understanding, regardless of their ages. If two children are working on a task that one understands well, and another does not, the latter is likely to learn from the former if he or she understands the task very well, and if they argue. Only if one understands something very well can explanations be varied during argument.

The study strives to prove the assumption of enhanced second language learning in the light of previous research, the interviews of the two directresses and the classroom observation. The study however was unable to highlight the maximum potential of this method as the observation was for a limited period. If a more extended period were

considered, the full benefits of the system could have been effectively highlighted.

The present study was conducted to

- i. investigate the benefits of mixed age group teaching (3-6 years) within the Montessori method for Early childhood education in Pakistan
- ii. explore how Montessori method influences Second Language teaching in 3-6 years old children within early childhood education in Pakistan

Research Questions

- i. What are the advantages of mixed age group teaching (3-6 years) within the Montessori Method for Early Childhood Education in Pakistan?
- ii. How does the Montessori Method influence Second Language teaching in 3-6 years old children within early childhood education in Pakistan?

Methodology

For the present qualitative study, a Montessori school was chosen for observation as a case. The school was a typical Montessori setup for children ranging from 2 to 6 years old. It was designed with all the didactic material, keeping in mind the requirements of a Montessori school environment. Material was displayed on low shelves, which were of the children's height, for easy access. Unlike traditional structured classes, the school had several interconnected spaces and huge halls, to allow free interaction.

Semi structured interviews and Classroom observation were used as tools for information generation about mix aged teaching under Montessori method and its influence on second language learning. This was aimed to further strengthen the assertion that children can work in cooperation and benefit in a mixed age group environment. The focus was on the class routine, the mingling of the children of different age groups and the learning tasks, especially in the language area. The two directresses were also interviewed to gain insight into how a mix age group environment functions and how beneficial it can be.

Sampling and Participants

For the observations, a reputable private sector school from Lahore was selected, which employed the Montessori philosophy of education. The student sample consisted of 40 students in a mixed age grouping. The principal and the parents of the school children were sought for permission, with the researcher assuring them that no direct contact or interference would alarm or affect the children in any way. Permission was also sought for the use of a video-recording device within the classroom for the observations.

The participants for the semi-structured interviews were 2 directresses from the same school. They were informed of the purpose of the research beforehand and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in all stages of the research.

Classroom Observation

Once the school agreed upon a suitable time and gave permission to sit in the class and observe how the children behaved, the observation was planned for two sessions of one hour each spread over two months. Half an hour of each day's session was recorded on the video.

The observer did not unnecessarily engage in conversations with the children. An observation protocol was developed where the following aspects of the classroom were investigated, and their occurrence and recurrence noted: the child's movements, random or controlled; peer interactions and choices of activity; Concentration and what materials aid in concentration; interest in care of the environment; the social behaviour and peer teaching; examples of cooperation/competition; leadership and following among the children. In addition, the researcher made field notes of the important incidents in the classroom

Semi Structured Interviews

The semi structured interview questions aimed to investigate the directress' perspective of peer interactions and learning in mix aged groups in the Montessori Classrooms. The questions addressed aspects of teaching learning holistically. The interviews were conducted in both the native language and English, for ease of understanding and expression. The interview protocol is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1
Interview Protocol

Q. No.	Question Statement
i.	How long have you taught in the Montessori system? What trainings have you had?
ii.	Have you ever worked in any other early year school or system?
iii.	Do you prefer the Montessori method to other methods? Why?
iv.	What is your opinion of teaching young children in mixed age groupings?
v.	What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with mixed age groups?
vi.	In your experience, in which areas and at what times do children mingle the most and work in cooperation?
vii.	When does conflict arise when teaching mixed age groups?
viii.	What are the reasons?
ix.	What benefits or repercussions do children receive as a result of learning in a mixed age classroom? How would you increase the benefits?
x.	Do older children help and mentor the younger ones in such classrooms? When and how?
xi.	Do younger children feel confident or intimidated by their elders? When and how?
xii.	How is language learning facilitated in a mixed age classroom? If yes, how? If not, why? Do you have anything to add about this topic?

Thematic Analysis of Data

Two main themes emerged from the analysis of the semi structured interview and observation protocols, namely general benefits of multi age teaching, and also influence of peer interaction in mix age grouping, and specific benefits of mix age group teaching, particularly in the area of language development, which are discussed as under.

General Benefits of Mixed Age Teaching

Upon analysis, the two teachers yielded somewhat similar but unique perspectives on the role of mixed age teaching environments on student learning. Participant 1 (P1) had an experience of 14 years in teaching,

while P2 had been teaching for the past 22 years at the time of the interview. Only P1 had worked in another teaching system, whilst P2 had always been associated with the Montessori way of teaching. Both participants believed teaching a mixed age group of young learners was a very interesting, and according to P2, a very beneficial experience as, “the younger ones learn from the older ones. Hence it is easy to evaluate the extent of development as sometimes a younger child may have a high mental level and thus more potential for learning and development”.

While addressing the affiliation with the Montessori method of teaching, both participants found it to be superior to traditional early education programs; P2 expostulated that she had become interested in the method because of personal reasons. She shared her earlier lack of experience in this field and her frustration with her daughters schooling, as she felt that she was “only playing with no specific learning as such. She was then asked by her daughters Principal to find out more about the Montessori method and to study more about it. Once she had, she became an advocate and a strong proponent of the method and the philosophy behind it.

P2 was also of the opinion that one of the major advantages of mixed age group teaching is that it is possible to work with “large groups at one time.” The other main advantage according to her is the ability to be able to judge who needs more personal attention and needs to be attended individually. Thus, it is possible to cater to individual needs whereas, “the rest work independently through mere initiation.”

To investigate whether language learning is facilitated in a mixed age group learning environment, video recordings of observations of a Montessori classroom were studied and analysed. The school selected for this purpose was a Montessori school in Lahore. Unfortunately, though this method is practiced in Karachi, where the Pakistan Montessori Association conducts training sessions in affiliation with Association Montessori Internationale, in Lahore there are not many such schools.

The recordings and observations revealed that the children mingled very amiably in the class. There never seemed to be any conflict over choice of material and activity. The children were seen busy with whatever task they chose to occupy themselves and did not engage in any squabbles. In fact, there were no disruptions, which are seen, in normal classes, as the children stay naturally occupied. Similarly, while playing in the garden they display the same companionship and are busy on the swings or slides. No untoward pushing, or aggression was witnessed.

During lunch break as well the children were seen to settle down in groups and enjoy snacks in a relaxed and comfortable manner. No child was seen bullying another to snatch his snack or tease him. The atmosphere was seen to be light as children happily chat and snack.

Benefits of Mixed Age Teaching in Language Learning

While P1 agreed to this to some extent, she also held the view that the little ones have to suffer at times as “they don’t get a chance to express themselves.”, as their voices and choices are overshadowed by the older and more assertive students. A directress hence needs to be vigilant and should be informed of the personal styles and behaviour patterns of each student in the group. P2 contradicted this opinion and said that any child who is unable to handle an exercise on his own may feel inhibited, as the others may be able to master it with just a little help from the directress.

Regarding the areas where the children mingle and work most cooperatively, it was P1’s experience that students collaborated best “during group lessons, singing, painting and on the blackboard when they are drawing.” P2 felt that it is during simple scientific experiments and play dough sessions that the children mingle more and “enjoy each other’s experiences and work”. Both participants were also confident that older students always guided and helped the younger ones. P1 said that it is very seldom that older students intimidate or bully younger ones; P2 was emphatic that this did not ever happen.

When asked to share their views on the areas of conflict amongst the children, P1 felt that there are none; She held the opinion that as the children are busy doing their own work and making independent choices, conflicts do not develop at all. P2 on the other hand shared that the only area of conflict she has experienced is “outdoors play in the garden where they have to wait for their turn”.

One of the questions related to whether the young children felt confident and comfortable to ask the elders for help and guidance; both participants felt that was the case and the younger students did not feel any hesitation or shyness in asking for help. They said that the learning environment is always conducive and promotes interaction between the different age groups or otherwise. When asked about language learning specifically P1 felt that as the mix ages worked together, the opportunity to learn more facilitates this process. Moreover, the child learns at his/her own pace and according to his/her interest; she said that language “learning (was) not restricted”. P2 was of the view that peer interactions facilitated in language acquisition “through material and group work language learning does get a boost”. Both participants agreed that peer interactions and mix aged group contributed the most to the development of reading in young children.

While commenting further on the topic P2 shared that as the children come from different homes and varying backgrounds it posed some difficulty for her to teach and also to “answer the questions satisfactorily”. However, she felt that it was easy to “acclimatise the child” at this early age as they were more responsive, and disobedience was not a problem at this age as the child could be moulded to behave in a certain manner.

The classroom observations and video recording data also show how language learning and development process was fostered amongst children in a mix age environment. The observation video was made in for approximately 35 minutes each, spread over two months. The intimal intention of the researcher was to record all language exercises, however, in a Montessori school, children do not follow a rigid timetable; they work according to their own interest and choice and are given presentations during the course of the day. Hence, it was not possible to record only language instruction or exercises.

The main categories and significant areas of language learning in mixed age groups were discovered to be group lessons and interactions during play and lunch break.

In the group lesson the older children did their formal written work with the directresses, while the younger children were free to observe them. Later mix aged children say the names of the months in a year; The teacher then asks the children to name the continents and oceans in the world. In such instances of group work younger students or those who do not know, easily pick up newer information from the older students. These activities were followed by learning the names of the provinces of Pakistan and the different seasons in a year. The teacher uses a mix of both the native and second language and learning is inductive in nature. They similarly learns phonics with the use of a phonics board and visual cues from the teacher.

During the group lesson, there was another example of the teacher interacting with a large group of children and revising general knowledge facts, phonics, ethics and also action words. She was speaking it while interacting with the others. Although the atmosphere in this class was bilingual, the child did get to hear instructions in English. Thus, learning to speak simple commands and repeat them. Small everyday requests were also said in English. When there was story time they listened to a story in the second language and answered simple questions about that story. Here they got to practice their second language as well. Thus, the environment promoted and fostered the development of speaking skills.

Observation showed, that during a group activity of action words, the teacher held up cards showing some action being performed and the children were asked to name them, for e.g. he is running, he is kicking a ball etc. here too language learning patterns and the inherent grammatical structures were acquired from the older and more knowledgeable students. It was seldom that the directresses had to teach individual students these aspects of language. Language acquisition and recognition were mastered quickly and was reinforced through peer observation, imitation and correction. There were examples of children working with materials of their own choice without being corrected or snubbed. They are seen working at their own pace without any pressure. If they were

involved with some activity, they completed the full cycle and then went to do the other work, even for snack time.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted how teaching young students of 3 to 6 years in mix aged groups is conducive to their learning, especially in language learning. The study employed observations and the semi-structured interviews of Montessori Directresses as the chosen mode of investigation. The results provided insight into how the peer teaching and learning aspects of the Montessori education, facilitate and encourage learners in an immersive and purposefully prepared environment. The setting of the classrooms and the nature of the interactions and exchanges among the mix aged students creates an almost familial environment, where the older students take on the roles of mentors and help younger students learn and correct their errors. The participants insisted that there was seldom any conflict or clash of interests in the Montessori classroom, as the energies of all students were engaged positively. The observations also showed that peer interactions and collaborative work in the group lessons and at the times of free student play, were contributing factors in second language acquisitions and learning the patterns of the new language inductively.

This is interesting as the researcher has identified that in the traditional early years education, students are seldom provided opportunities to learn from one another; rather language learning is achieved through rote memorizations and learning of lists for vocabulary development. In the current study, it was discovered that the peer interactions in the mix aged classrooms provided incidents and opportunities for naturalistic and challenging language use. In such settings the young students made use of self-corrections, imitations, peer corrections, peer teaching and collaborative work to perform language tasks.

Although mixed age grouping has its manifold advantages, there are certain considerations which would ensure that the abovementioned benefits would be achieved. Before grouping, aspects of classroom management and instruction, such as the age range, proportion of the younger students to the older ones, instructional strategies for mix group teaching and time assigned to such teaching, should be given due attention.

Based on the above results, the following steps may be taken to further the cause of Montessori education and mix aged classrooms in Pakistan. The government and pertinent authorities may promote an understanding of effective mix aged classroom practices and the Montessori system. This may be done through the development of training institutes for teachers who can teach such groups. Trainings may also be offered for administrators who could learn how multi-age schools are supervised and managed, and draw out implications for use in local settings.

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