

Age ain't nothing but a number: Rethinking groupings in ECE

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Age groupings in early learning settings influence children's interactions and experiences. Recent shifts have seen same-age groupings become more common. In this article we investigate the relationship between early learning theories, pedagogical approaches, and grouping practices. While literature is dominated by research into mixed-age settings, overall it revealed that there are benefits to both types of groupings. The key factors appear to be aligning the grouping structure with the setting's philosophy, cultural values and community context. We were left wondering what information was informing the grouping decisions in Aotearoa New Zealand early learning settings and have posed some questions for reflection.

Introduction

As early learning centres in Aotearoa New Zealand have grown in size and number, approaches to grouping tamariki have evolved. In the past, many centres were run by community groups, catering for 25–35 tamariki in mixed-age groups. Grouping tamariki in early learning settings according to age, in multiple same-age rooms, has now become the “norm.” Rouse (2015) and Justice et al. (2019) note this may be primarily for organisational purposes rather than for the benefit of tamariki. We have been wondering why the groupings of tamariki have changed and what the benefits and challenges might be for each of these options.

For clarity, in this article we use the terms *same-age grouping* and *mixed-age grouping*. *Same-age grouping* refers to grouping tamariki into separate rooms based on narrow age ranges, such as dedicated rooms for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. *Mixed-age grouping* refers to placing tamariki of broader age ranges within the same room, such as under-twos and over-twos together, or infants through to preschoolers in one shared

space. These definitions reflect the distinctions used in the literature and guide the interpretation of our discussion.

There are varied schools of thought regarding how tamariki should be grouped by age in early childhood education (ECE) settings, with rationales ranging from developmental, pedagogical, and practical considerations. In a seminal article about the benefits of mixed-age early childhood education (ECE) settings, Lillian Katz (1995) wrote “although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them” (p. 2). According to Rutherford and Whittington (2013) benefits for tamariki in mixed-age ECE settings include enhanced learning opportunities, more individualised learning for tamariki, continuity of relationships and a positive classroom environment which enhances the professionalism of teachers. Benefits of same-age groupings relate to ease of teaching, the ability to target support to a particular age group, and assurance for whānau regarding safety for young tamariki and school readiness for older tamariki. This article explores literature to identify research-informed rationales that can support decision-making around age-grouping in early learning settings.

Theoretical frameworks

To develop an understanding of the rationale behind grouping decisions in ECE settings we explore key theoretical frameworks and the perspectives that inform decision-making. While it could seem that Piaget’s cognitive development theory supports an age-segregation approach to groupings in ECE, the categories in this theory are considered too broad for strict age division (Brandt & Menning, 2024). While Piaget cautioned against a rigid interpretation of the stages in his theory, teachers tend to base their reasons for an age-segregation approach on the idea of consecutive developmental stages without considering the wide age-range these stages encompass, and the limitations of the theory. The concept of cognitive conflict, an aspect of Piaget’s theory, could support mixed-age groupings through children at different developmental levels working together (Wang, 2023). Piaget also noted the impact of the environment on development, suggesting that tamariki can take on both a teaching and learning role in the development of schemas, assimilation and accommodation (Dai, 2025).

Sociocultural theory underpinning *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) emphasises the role of cultural context, social interactions, and activities in learning (Justice et al., 2019; Wang, 2023). Teachers often draw on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, especially aspects such as scaffolding and the zone of proximal development.

Literature suggests that tamariki of a similar age working collaboratively are likely to be within each other's zone of proximal development (Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022). Other literature notes that sociocultural theorists "argue that interaction with older, more competent children provides an optimal context for cognitive and behavioural development in younger children" (Moller et al., 2008, cited in Rouse, 2015, p. 748).

With reference to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model Aguiar and Aguiar (2022) investigated the kaiako perceptions of groupings through a bioecological lens. They found that the characteristics of the kaiako, their perceptions of diversity, and changes in groups had an impact on how challenging kaiako found their role. The researchers emphasised the need to address microsystemic factors such as group size, ratio, and social composition to prevent kaiako developing negative perceptions of their working conditions, which can adversely influence pedagogy.

Kaupapa Māori theory and Pasifika approaches are grounded in ways that see the responsibility of care for tamariki as a group responsibility. The tuakana-teina relationship is an example of the importance put on the less able or younger tamaiti, the teina, learning from or being cared for by the more able or older tamaiti, the tuakana (Glasgow & Rameka, 2017). Learning through observation of and listening to those with greater knowledge is a common feature of Pacific Island cultures. These approaches seem to support settings with a range of ages or skills.

Although neoliberalism is not a developmental or learning theory, its influence on education policy and practice has shaped age-grouping decisions by prioritising efficiency, standardisation, and school readiness. Neoliberal ideas began to influence education in the later decades of the 20th century. These ideas promote being efficient and preparing tamariki for their educational future (Brandt & Menning, 2024). Neoliberalism is often associated with a simplified version of developmental theories, age-grouping tamariki so that resources and pedagogy can be targeted to the perceived standardised requirements of a particular age-group.

The interplay of these diverse theoretical perspectives illustrates that age-grouping decisions in ECE are far from simple; they require balancing developmental, cultural, pedagogical, and practical considerations. The following section examines how these complexities translate into tangible benefits and challenges for both same-age and mixed-age groupings.

Same-age grouping: Benefits and challenges

Ākonga

Same-age settings in ECE can offer rich opportunities for tamariki to engage in collaborative play and learning. Surrounded by peers with similar social and emotional capabilities, tamariki have opportunities to experience interactions that feel equal and reciprocal, creating a strong foundation for social engagement (Babaei, 2022; Elwick & White, 2022). These environments often spark healthy competition, encouraging tamariki to challenge themselves and build resilience to cope with diverse expectations and challenges (Babaei, 2022). Piagetian theory suggests that encountering differing viewpoints among similarly skilled peers prompts tamariki to rethink their ideas, supporting deeper cognitive and moral development (Wu et al., 2022).

The challenges of grouping tamariki strictly by age assumes uniformity in development, overlooking wide variation in learning styles, emotional maturity, and cultural backgrounds (Teszenyi & Hevey, 2015). Tamariki who develop at a different pace may be positioned as less competent or knowledgeable. Brandt and Menning (2024) describe this as “institutionalised othering”, a dynamic that can erode the sense of belonging for tamariki and contradict the inclusive, relational principles of *Te Whāriki*. The structure itself reflects a broader educational understanding, shaped by standardisation and efficiency. These values, rooted in neoliberal thinking, risk sidelining the holistic, child-led approaches that honour individual learning journeys (Brandt & Menning, 2024).

Whānau perspectives

Many whānau see benefits in same-age groupings, such as improved cognitive development, school readiness and focused learning. For example, Teszenyi and Hevey (2015) found that whānau were more confident that teachers in same-age groupings could better support age-appropriate learning for tamariki. Alignment between developmental expectations and teaching practice contributes to whānau confidence and satisfaction. The familiarity of the same-age model resonates with some whānau, reflecting their own educational experiences and societal norms, which can make the structure feel predictable and reassuring.

Whānau often face challenges during the multiple transitions that occur in same-age settings, where tamariki move from infant to toddler rooms and later into preschool rooms, sometimes with unfamiliar kaiako and peer groups. These changes can be a significant source of stress for both tamariki and their whānau (Rutherford & Whittington, 2013). Multiple transitions can disrupt continuity, making it difficult to build deep,

trusting relationships between whānau and kaiako. When strong relationships are not maintained, the richness of culturally responsive, mana-enhancing engagement may be limited (Ritchie & Rau, 2006).

Kaiako perspectives

Much of the support for same-age groupings in ECE appears to stem from economic and organisational considerations rather than pedagogical evidence. Beach (2013) notes that same-age groupings simplify administrative processes and are more cost-effective when educating large numbers of tamariki. In business-operated centres, this structure offers flexibility to enrol more tamariki while potentially requiring fewer staff, thereby maximising profit. These efficiencies may appeal to centre managers, but they raise important questions about how economic priorities shape pedagogical decisions.

Some kaiako perceive same-age groupings as beneficial preparation for formal schooling. Elwick and White (2022) found that many kaiako believe same-age groupings help tamariki adjust to structured learning environments and age-based expectations. This perception may reflect broader societal narratives about linear development and academic progression. However, it risks reinforcing a narrow view of learning that prioritises conformity over diversity.

While same-age settings can support kaiako in planning and delivering age-specific content, they may reduce opportunities to respond to the diverse ways tamariki learn and develop (Brandt & Menning, 2024). Specialising in a single age group can deepen understanding of typical milestones, but it may reduce opportunities for kaiako to experience the rich variation found in mixed-age environments. Over time, this can lead to a more rigid curriculum where kaiako struggle to accommodate the diverse needs that exist within a single age cohort (Tercek, 1997).

Environment

From an environmental standpoint, same-age groupings are often viewed as practical and efficient. Justice et al. (2019) and Magnusson and Bäckman (2022) highlight that many teachers find it easier to manage teaching environments when tamariki share similar developmental needs. Planning for a specific age range allows kaiako to tailor resources, experiences, and routines to align with the group's capabilities, creating a responsive learning environment (Beach, 2013). While this offers consistency, it may reduce opportunities for responsive relationships and practice. Environments designed around uniform developmental expectations may struggle to respond to the diversity that naturally exists within any age group. A curriculum built for the “average” tamaiti

may leave some tamariki under-challenged and others overwhelmed, limiting opportunities for differentiated learning (Tercek, 1997).

Cross-age interactions can be important for social learning, contributing to a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. In the Aotearoa context, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) places emphasis on holistic development and the value of diverse relationships. Environments that reduce opportunities for these cross-age interactions may not fully nurture the diverse learning pathways of tamariki.

Mixed-age grouping: Benefits and challenges

Ākonga

Social and emotional learning for tamariki can be strengthened in mixed-age groupings by fostering prosocial behaviours such as altruism, cooperation, sharing, compromise, empathy, and respect for others (Rouse, 2015; Teszenyi & Hevey, 2015). Older tamariki often show responsibility, patience, and tolerance by mentoring and modelling positive behaviours for younger peers, who in turn benefit from these examples (Beach, 2013). Caring for younger tamariki can also boost the self-esteem and confidence of their older peers (Wu et al., 2022).

Mixed-age groupings in ECE are often associated with advantages for cognitive and language development, as older tamariki scaffold learning for younger peers. This creates a "stretching" effect, allowing younger tamariki to engage in more advanced tasks and activities that they might not initiate independently in same-age groups (Aguiar & Aguiar, 2022). Peer role modelling reflects a tuakana–teina approach to learning which is founded on two core Māori principles: whanaungatanga (the importance of kinship ties between whānau) and ako (meaning both to learn and to teach) (Beach, 2013).

In mixed-age settings, tamariki have access to a wider range of language experiences which is beneficial for vocabulary acquisition (Justice et al., 2019). Some studies have found that the best outcomes for language development occur when the age range within the classroom is between 14–26 months (Elwick & White, 2022; Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022). The variety in developmental skills offers a supportive context for expanding language acquisition, which Edwards et al. (2009) suggest can be beneficial for tamariki who are learning English as an additional language.

Mixed-age settings offer benefits for relationships within ECE environments, fostering a sense of community, and promoting deeper connections among tamariki, kaiako, and families. With fewer transitions between rooms, strong, reciprocal relationships can be established and strengthened over time (Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022; Rutherford & Whittington, 2013). This allows for siblings and extended whānau to be together in a family-like environment which may enrich familial relationships and minimise the anxiety of younger tamariki (Beach, 2013). In mixed-age settings, younger siblings may cling to older ones, limiting peer interaction, while older siblings may take on caregiving roles that restrict play for both (Teszenyi & Hevey, 2015).

While mixed-age models offer potential benefits, research also notes some challenges that may arise. For older tamariki, one concern is that their learning progress could be affected if opportunities for challenge are limited. According to Tercek (1997), older tamariki may not be challenged academically or may feel their learning is impeded by the needs of their younger peers, and feel burdened by the constant need to help younger classmates. For younger tamariki, some studies indicate that interactions with older, more physically confident peers can sometimes lead to feelings of intimidation, or in some cases, peer bullying (Sarigoz & Deveci, 2023; Tercek, 1997). The developmental gap may also create social dynamics that younger tamariki find difficult to navigate, which could impact confidence and motivation if not well supported (Sarigoz & Deveci, 2023).

Pedagogical considerations for infants and toddlers

Infants and toddlers have distinct pedagogical needs that must be considered when making decisions about groupings. Decisions about whether to group children by age or integrate them across a wider age range can significantly affect attachment, stress levels, and the quality of interactions. For example, Rutherford and Whittington (2013) examined changes in groupings in an infant and toddler setting. Previously, groups ranged from 10 infants with three kaiako to 20 older toddlers with up to four kaiako. Frequent transitions between rooms disrupted attachments and created stress for tamariki and kaiako. Under the new model, children aged 6–38 months remained in the same room with three kaiako and approximately 12 tamariki. This structure reduced transitions, enabling stronger attachments through continuity of care. Combined with smaller group sizes and consistent kaiako, the change supported an unhurried environment where individual routines were respected, kaiako spent more time interacting with each tamaiti, and relationships between kaiako, whānau, and tamariki were strengthened.

Whānau perspectives

Building a sense of community is especially important in cultures that value collectivism, where tamariki are understood in relation to their whānau, culture and community. Beach (2013) suggests that a mixed-age setting reflects whānau oriented grouping which strengthens the whole whānau involvement in learning. It recognises that tamariki are culturally embedded and views the tamaiti within a “wider, broader, holistic framework” (p. 76) rather than as a separate entity.

Some whānau perceptions of mixed-age groupings highlight concern for the physical safety of younger tamariki when grouped with older peers (Edwards et al., 2009). Additionally, some whānau perceive that the mixed-age model primarily benefits younger tamariki by providing advanced role models, at the cost of impeding the progress of older tamariki (Dai, 2025; Edwards et al., 2009). These apprehensions indicate a lack of parental conviction in the model's pedagogical advantages, with many whānau appearing more comfortable with the familiar, structured progression of same-age environments.

Kaiako perspectives

Kaiako in mixed-age classrooms may be more inclined to see tamariki as agentic individuals with diverse needs and interests rather than holding strict age-related expectations (Rouse, 2015). Kaiako provide materials and activities based on individual strengths and needs rather than chronological age; reflecting a positive, credit-based view of tamariki (Beach, 2013; Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022). Both pre-planned and spontaneous experiences allow for greater flexibility to respond to the interests and learning goals of each tamaiti (Aguiar & Aguiar, 2022).

Kaiako in mixed-age settings may encounter professional challenges stemming from the diversity of the group. Some research suggests that kaiako can experience an increase in workload and the complex task of designing and implementing a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for a wide range of abilities and age levels (Sarigoz & Deveci, 2023). Difficulties may also arise when teaching in a larger mixed-age group that includes tamariki with disabilities, which can heighten professional demands and requires flexible practices and specialised competencies (Aguiar & Aguiar, 2022). For some kaiako, this complexity raises concerns about the physical safety of younger tamariki interacting with older, more boisterous peers (Rouse, 2015).

The mixed-age model can place higher expectations on kaiako, requiring advanced skills in observation, communication, and differentiated teaching. These demands may

be particularly challenging in the context of the widespread teacher shortages in the ECE sector, making it difficult to staff mixed-age environments with adequately trained and supported professionals (Dai, 2025). Without sufficient resources, planning time, and ongoing professional development, the demands of the mixed-age model may lead to teacher stress and negatively impact the quality of education provided.

Environment

Mixed-age environments are often considered supportive of tamariki growing and developing at their own pace. Katz (1995) suggests all tamariki are at different levels of learning, whether in same-age or mixed-age groupings, and a mixed-age setting reduces pressure on tamariki to achieve “normative” milestones. Variations of behaviour and ability within a mixed-age group are to be expected. Therefore mixed age groupings are potentially more responsive to the individual differences of tamariki, regardless of age. Magnusson and Bäckman (2022) suggest that individualised teaching reduces competition and comparison among tamariki, while supporting inclusion and meeting diverse learning needs. This could be of particular benefit for tamariki with disabilities, when teachers consider the unique strengths, needs and abilities of each tamaiti (Plotka, 2016).

Considerations for implementation

Implementing mixed-age or same-age groupings in ECE requires consideration of curriculum design, the role and training of kaiako, and broader institutional and community aspirations. In Aotearoa, mixed-age practices emphasise reciprocal, relational learning (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). These relational dynamics mirror family-like environments and contribute to holistic pedagogical practice. ECE services must ensure that age-grouping decisions reflect their philosophy, pedagogical goals, and the bicultural principles embedded in *Te Whāriki*. Mixed-age grouping can foster tuakana-teina relationships and whanaungatanga, which are central to Māori pedagogical traditions (Ritchie & Rau, 2006). Services may also consider same-age grouping where priorities include school readiness or age-specific developmental outcomes (Dai, 2025). Both models present unique benefits and challenges, and decisions should be made with careful attention to cultural obligations and educational aims.

Communication and consultation

Whānau and community consultation is a vital component of implementation regardless of which grouping model is chosen. Dai (2025) stresses the importance of enhancing parental awareness during transition. Parental engagement through joint whānau–kaiako meetings and informal interactions foster greater mutual understanding and confidence in mixed-age settings (Rutherford & Whittington, 2013; Wang, 2023). Robust documentation practices provide whānau with insights into the progress of tamariki, easing concerns about developmental appropriateness. Addressing concerns requires ongoing transparent communication, proactive guidance, and structured review processes.

Curriculum and environment considerations

In mixed-age settings, curriculum design often emerges from child-led play. Flexible activities and natural peer interactions can allow learning to unfold in inclusive, multi-level ways (Wang, 2023). Project-based learning works well, as tamariki of different ages contribute at their own levels, fostering collaboration and shared ownership (Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022). Mixed-age groups encourage natural scaffolding, as older tamariki support younger peers, and younger tamariki observe and imitate more advanced behaviours (Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022; Wang, 2023). Effective implementation depends on curriculum resources that can be adapted for different ages and learning needs, allowing kaiako to modify activities and materials for mixed-age participation.

In same-age ECE settings establishing an environment to meet the perceived requirements of the age group can seem straight forward. However, all tamariki of the same age are not necessarily at the same stage of development and can have a wide variety of interests and needs (Teszenyi & Hevey, 2015). To meet this variety the resources and equipment required within a single age room may need to be more extensive than otherwise thought.

Role of the kaiako and kaiako training

The role of kaiako varies in mixed-age and same-age contexts. In mixed-age settings, teachers become facilitators of dynamic learning communities, guiding interactions based on tamariki social dynamics rather than following age-related curriculum and

learning goals (Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022; Wang, 2023). This facilitator role demands adaptability, responsiveness, and a deep understanding of tamariki development and learning trajectories. In recognition of this, employers should find ways to provide ongoing professional learning and practical experience to ensure kaiako maintain the rich variety of skills required for engaging tamariki from infancy to six years old (Brandt & Menning, 2024).

Kaiako play a critical role in supporting mixed-age learning. They must observe and document the individual learning of tamariki, ensuring progress is supported (Magnusson & Bäckman, 2022). Professional development is critical for equipping teachers with the skills needed to balance flexibility with structure in mixed-age settings. Ongoing training in differentiated instruction, curriculum management, and classroom organisation is key to successful implementation (Sarigoz & Deveci, 2023).

Conclusion

Implementing mixed-age or same-age groups in ECE is not a one-size-fits-all decision. Mixed-age grouping offers rich opportunities for social-emotional growth, relational pedagogy, and peer learning but requires flexible curriculum design, skilled facilitation, and strong whānau engagement. Same-age groups provide predictability, clarity in curriculum delivery, and greater parental confidence but may limit opportunities for cross-age mentorship. Ultimately, deciding on and implementing a grouping structure requires alignment with the philosophy, cultural values, and ongoing professional development of the ECE setting and community to ensure tamariki, families, and kaiako thrive in the chosen model.

Reflective questions

1. Do you know the rationale behind the groupings in your early learning setting?
2. How does your current way of grouping tamariki reflect the philosophy of the setting?
3. What might be the benefits and challenges of a different way?
4. What do whānau value most about your current grouping approach, and how might a change align, or conflict with their aspirations for their tamariki?

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AUTHOR PROFILE

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Raewyn has wide experience in teaching, managing, professional development and lecturing in early childhood education and teacher education, as well as management roles in the disability and sports sectors. This wide experience has informed a deep understanding of both the early childhood sector and diversity. She has been an Education Leader with Te Rito Maioha since 2019. Raewyn is passionate about challenging taura to stretch themselves, their critical thinking, their reflective practice and how this can positively impact the learning outcomes for tamariki. She believes in learning alongside taura and providing support and guidance for each person's needs. Raewyn is continually inspired by the staff and students she works with, their passion, resilience, humour and persistence.

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Victoria Kees, Te Rito Maioha ECNZ

Victoria is a course leader and lecturer at the Ōtautahi takiwā of Te Rito Maioha ECNZ. She has more than 20 years of experience in Early Childhood Education and has held various positions such as teacher, head teacher, and centre manager. Victoria's teaching interests are centred around the importance of ako and fostering the skills and knowledge of students and the wider learning community. Victoria prioritises incorporating diverse perspectives and identities into the learning process and creating a safe and inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and encouraged to share their knowledge and thinking.

Sherideen Lange, Te Rito Maioha ECNZ

Sherideen has worked in the education sector for over 20 years; first as an infant and toddler teacher in an early childhood setting, then in the tertiary sector in a variety of academic roles. In these roles, she has had the opportunity to work collaboratively with kaiako to provide quality environments for infants and toddlers as well as supporting taura with their learning journey. Sherideen values challenging taura to

be the best they can be, in order to positively impact learning outcomes for young children. She believes that actively fostering safe, trusting, inclusive learning environments will allow all tamariki and tauira to feel valued and empower them to thrive.

Rachel Winslow, Te Rito Maioha ECNZ

Rachel's role at Te Rito Maioha is the Programme Leader/Kaiārahi Hotaka for the Level 5 programmes, including our three New Zealand Diploma in Early Childhood Education qualifications specialising in Aperfield Montessori, Pasifika and Home-Based Care. Rachel's teaching philosophy is centred around care, respect, and relationships. In her online classroom, she lets her students share their experiences, critically reflect on practice, and show authenticity and vulnerability with their peers in the online learning space to challenge their thinking and practice. Rachel enjoys working with students as it gives her a chance to reflect on her teaching as well.