

'Multi-age Grouping'

by Robin Booth



There is silence. Joshua watches Etienne carefully shape and construct some furniture for his model house. We are all involved in the "Open Creative Time" where all our children initiate and work on things they are interested in. These two boys have an age gap of 7 years between them yet there seems to be an unwritten understanding that this is okay. The teachers notice that something special is taking place.

Soon Olivia joins the group. She is six and a half years old.

Etienne: "This is the table with the candlestick."

We can see Etienne is beaming with pride as he acknowledges the respect these younger children are giving him. We can see his self esteem rise further. These are the signs we are looking for. So we take it a step further.

Teacher: "Olivia also built a house a few weeks back. Would you like to show the other children your house Olivia?"

Etienne: "Oh cool. Yes let's see it."

We move across to where Olivia's house was. She is nervous. We support her by asking the right questions that will enable her to share her experience.

Teacher: "Tell us about your house Olivia. What have you done here?"

She began sharing her experience. Out came the ideas and the memories. The other children nodded their heads, asked further questions and commented on the good ideas.

Etienne: "Nice house."

Olivia: "Your house is very nice too."

Etienne: "Thank you."

Olivia: "Pleasure".

Olivia was beaming. Her voice was strong. Her self esteem rose further. We knew that. We understood that, so we took it a step further and included more of the other children.

Teacher: "Joshua, would you also like to build a house?"

He was ready. He had an array of ideas, and we went in search of materials. What started as a house soon changed into a ship. We could see the link to some of the other projects the children were working on. This affirmed that they were building blocks for his thoughts and ideas, and not just copied ideas. He took them and moulded them. The other ideas were just the foundation from which he could leap frog into his new creativity and thoughts. Soon Matthew came over to view what his friend was doing. Again the sharing of ideas and experiences motivated Matthew (3 and a half years old) to find his own project.

In our schooling environment we use self esteem, confidence and emotional intelligence as personality building blocks in the same way that children use clay and art materials. We build and nurture these elements in a conscious and consistent way, creating a space that is genuine, sincere and relevant to their lives and development.

Children access each other in the same way they access the materials. They use each other to create a sense of belonging and to explore more about who they are. This is the emerging paradigm of relationship based education.

We are still excited when we see the impact we have on the children, beyond the classroom environment. This is the growth of their skills in relationships; working and being with each other. Later in the week we notice an outside scenario of Etienne talking to the younger children. We observe he is sitting at eye level to the younger children. We see he is engaging them, allowing them to work as a group. We soon realise there is some serious conflict resolution going on here. (One bike to ride on and five children who want to ride it.) And we know where Etienne learned to facilitate a group like this. Like Joshua in the creative room, he watches, he observes and he imitates those teachers, adults and children around him. **We know that who we are and how we engage with others will impact on these children's and parents' lives in ways far beyond scholastic potential. As a school we work with this understanding, consciously. We live and learn together.**

