



Composite Class Groupings Rationale

Relationships are the Key

Composite' classes most often consist of one class containing two grades or years of schooling. You might also hear the term 'split grades' being used. Extensive research shows it makes no difference to performance whether students are in a straight or composite class. Furthermore, it is the teacher and their relationship with the students that plays a key role and is significant in the development of students. The nature of a teacher and their relationship with his or her students dictates the impact they will have on students. Strong teacher student relationships shape the way children think and act in school. When a student has a good relationship with their teachers, they are more likely to feel positive about class and about school in general. They are also more willing to have a go at hard work, to risk making mistakes, and to ask for help when they need it.

At Success Primary, we see positive relationships as our priority and from this our class structures are determined. There are other factors such as peer relationships, inclusivity and academic diversity that also guide class placements. We have extremely dedicated teachers who foster positive relationships with our students and we are confident this in turn will develop good learners. Research shows that constructive teacher student relationships have a positive impact on students' academic results. At Success, we have highly dedicated teachers who have the ability to maximise the learning potential of all students in their class regardless of the class structure.

Composite classrooms, in which children from two or more year levels are combined within one grade, have become common in many schools around the world. Often referred to in a variety of ways, including "multi-age", "multi-grade", "split-grade", "mixed-grade", "combined" or "non-graded" classrooms, they define classes in which students of varying ages, abilities, or interests might be grouped together.

Why have composite classes?

Composite classes are a practical response to the problem of uneven grade enrolments; for example, when there are too many students to form one 'straight' grade but not enough to form two. Combining students in this way is often an administrative solution that not only allows schools to ensure more consistent class sizes, but enables them to address gender balance issues within each class; more easily match teachers to student need; maximise school and teacher funding and resources; and cope with declining or increasing enrolments.

Some schools, however, regard composite classrooms as optimal for student learning and incorporate them as an educational choice, rather than a purely administrative one. At Success Primary School we have and will continue to incorporate composite classes from time to time as an educational choice within a school year. Factors that influence this decision are based on teacher strength and student academic and social/emotional need.

Perceptions of Composite Classes

Despite favourable research regarding student cognitive and social growth in composite classrooms, negative perceptions persist, particularly among parents. Many fear their children will be unable to keep up with work; will have fewer friendships; that younger children will be overlooked or that older children will not be sufficiently

challenged; that children with learning difficulties will suffer more anxiety; bullying may be an issue or that the curriculum for each year level will be inadequately covered.

Aligned with current research, at Success Primary School we believe education is not only about academic achievement and age is not an accurate predictor of a child's development. Wide-ranging student abilities exist in children of the same age, and not just in composite classes. Multiple studies conclude it makes no difference to performance whether students are in a straight or composite class. Experts agree the most important factor in determining how well a student does is the quality of the teacher and providing a 'differentiated' curriculum caters to all children as individuals, according to their needs.

Composite education is backed up by the theory of teaching by 'stages, not ages'. Whilst we are guided by the WA Curriculum as a mandatory teaching document, students are able to work to their own developmental level, rather than grade expectations. The quality of teaching, combined with student interest and engagement, are considered more important than class structure, whatever form it may take. Research, which has been predominantly conducted in primary schools, suggests there is no visible difference between composite and straight grade classrooms in terms of academic performance.

Benefits of Composite Classes

Here are some key benefits of composite classes:

- Changing the focus of learning from achieving a certain 'grade' to individual personal best alters the nature of the learning experience to lead children to value learning and the learning process.
- Students develop a greater respect for individual differences across the board.
- Offer a broader range of friendship opportunities encouraging more cooperation and tolerance.
- Older students are able to practice and reinforce their own skills as they teach them to younger students as mentors and experts which can lift their self-esteem. Higher order thinking skills are required when teaching concepts to peers. It is one thing to understand a concept yourself, however a higher level of understanding is required when explaining a concept to someone else.
- Older students provide a model of appropriate behaviour for the younger students – this also means less behavioural problems in the classroom because younger students integrate quickly into established class routines as modelled by the older students.
- Younger students are able to seek help from a wider range of people rather than relying on the teacher to help them all the time.
- Younger students generally aspire to emulate older children in their work.

Conclusions

Many argue that problems relating to composite classrooms arise when teachers, students and parents are not prepared for a composite situation, and that these fears can be easily alleviated with openness and good communication. For the most part, however, the quality of teaching, combined with student interest and engagement, are considered more important than class structure, whatever form it may take.

Teachers actually manage workloads for a range of ages and abilities in any given class, not just composite classes! As children may start school later than others, have an early or late birthday, or may have been kept back or advanced a year, there will always be a mix of ages and abilities. Age isn't the only factor either – some students may be brilliant at Maths and average at English, while others have the opposite skills and struggles. Some students are better at working independently, while others need things broken down into very small bites. So teachers are already good at taking a class task and making sure each student can master the skills required in the curriculum guidelines.

Questions that may arise.....

How can teachers teach different grades?

An example may be the class may learn a form of writing, and then the teacher will assign different activities and assessments that differ in level of difficulty between the grades to meet individual learning needs. The teacher may also offer varying levels of instruction to small groups within the class – set one group a task and then provide a varied level of instruction to the other.

What is differentiation?

Differentiation, a term used often in education to describe the act of taking a concept being taught universally to all students within a class, and creating related tasks at varying levels of complexity. When differentiating instruction in this way, teachers are providing for the needs of students at multiple levels of understanding at the same time which in turn allows students to see clearly not only where they are at, but where they are going.

What are the social implications?

Socially, advocates argue that students in multi-age grades are better able to make friends across age groups, and learn to be more confident and assertive and are comfortable in a group. In the long term, they become more adept at problem-solving and independent learning. The skills of co-operating, sharing and tolerance and being able to mentor other students are very strong in multi-age classrooms.

What are the learning implications?

As already mentioned, it is strongly researched and believed that grade structure is immaterial and schools should be providing a 'differentiated' curriculum: one that caters to all children as individuals, according to their needs. At Success Primary School children are taught in accordance to their individual needs.

Whatever choices Success Primary School make in relation to class structure, we will most definitely have the students and their learning needs at the forefront of the decision making process. It is important to talk through any concerns you may have with the class teacher or Administration Team.