

Composite Classes - Stages not Ages

At the beginning of the new school year your child might be in a composite class. If your child is younger you may query - will my child be able to keep up? If they are older - will my child be held up?

By "composite classes," we mean putting two consecutive year-groups together in one class. Some of the overseas literature refers to multiple ages in the one class, such as you would associate with small country schools where you may find a bigger range of ages in the same class.

Over the years composite classes have been the source of controversy, with parents sometimes believing that their offspring is being disadvantaged in some way if they are placed in a composite class.

The key to understanding composites is realising that growth is determined in *stages* and not magically by *ages*.

Composite classes doesn't mean your child is dumb or a genius. It doesn't mean that they will get work that is too hard or not hard enough.

Although a child might be chronologically older or younger - their maturity, social needs, academic needs and behaviour are uniquely their own. Some need stimulating, some need more maturing. Some have needs in certain areas, but not in others. An obvious example is that although all 7 year olds may be the same age, it is unrealistic to expect that they are all at the same level of ability in reading or in PE, etc. even if they are all placed together in one class. Far better that they be grouped according to need, thus they will gain confidence and skill by working with their peer ability level. There is no hard and fast rule that says a 'straight' class will meet a child's needs any better than a composite class. Children all get there, the path may be different but the destination is the same.

Children have always been in multi-aged classes. The ages of kindergarten students range from three years and nine months to five years, a 13 month difference! Yet some children start school barely toilet trained where others are quite mature and are already reading at an advanced level. Same class but different stages.

It makes sense then to group children who are going through the similar stage so they can relate, help and experience together. Even within the same class, children will be at different levels. New Zealand teachers are trained in identifying this. We are renowned the world over for extending those who learn more quickly and supporting those who are slower. Unlike other countries where whole-class teaching is often the norm, NZ teachers are trained to teach in ability groups. Straight classes require as much group teaching as composite classes because this is the hallmark of good teaching. There is no difference in the range of abilities present in a straight class compared to a composite.

The good thing about composite classes is that it draws attention to individual needs and development and facilitates individualised learning (sometimes called Personalised Learning).

Older students are not held back in composite classes. There is no one curriculum level per age group in NZ. It is not as simple as Year 1 learns Level 1, Year 2 learns Level 2, which is common practice overseas but does not make it superior to the NZ system. In fact, the NZ curriculum is set up in developmental bands which range from 1-3 years per level. Invariably students in any one class are all at different permutations of these curriculum bands, whether they be in straight classes or composites. Separate programmes are used, in most curriculum areas, for the different groups of students according to their level of development or ability level, and there are some whole class activities such as in art and drama.

Composite classes can provide significant benefits to both the younger and older students in the class. Older students can benefit from helping younger students in co-operative learning situations. The younger students have the opportunity of enhanced learning experiences where they are ready for it. There are many examples where younger children can show older ones a thing or two! Role models and leaders can come from both the younger and older children; the children who excel at these traits do so irrespective of age.

At the vast majority of New Zealand schools a decision has been made to have composites. This decision is based on research about what makes a difference to, and benefits, students. The research for composite classes supports what many experienced teachers know. In one study by a researcher called Pavan in 1992 it was found that students in composite settings did as well as, or outperformed, students in single graded classrooms. While that is positive perhaps the most significant findings come from the research of people like Pratt (1993) that identified that composite classrooms are “socially and psychologically healthy places.” Students from composite settings outperformed students in single age settings on more than 75% of the affective measures tested and had fewer discipline issues.

The findings showed that composites provided a natural setting in which older students had the opportunity to tutor younger students. This had positive outcomes for both the younger students and those who were the tutors. Others researchers French, Waas, Stright and Baker (1986), found that students in composites had had more opportunities to be leaders including many who may not have shown leadership in other settings. In other studies evidence showed that where students are in composite classes and are then cross-grouped for one or two subjects e.g. reading, there is an increase in their achievement.

Research, both in New Zealand and overseas, has shown no detrimental academic effects from composite classes but many additional benefits. A major review of international research into multi-age classes was undertaken by Veenman (1995). He investigated 56 studies in 12 countries including Australia, looking at the cognitive and non-cognitive effects of multi-age and single-age classes. He found that there were no differences found with respect to maths, reading, or language and that with respect to attitudes towards school, self-concept and social adjustment, students are sometimes advantaged by being in multi-age classes instead of single-age classes. Research from the UK has shown children in composite classes do ‘no better or worse’ academically than their peers in a straight grade class, but that, socially, their development is enhanced. They are more confident, can operate better as part of a group, are more assertive, become more independent learners and better problem-solvers. They also make friends outside of their standard age-groups. In later life, if we have a one year age difference with someone this becomes of no consequence.

A University of Glasgow study found that in Europe, there is

“no evidence to show that composite classes affect pupils’ academic performance adversely. It is possible that pupils may gain socially from the experience and show non-cognitive benefits which to date have not been quantified... the academic performance of pupils in composites may ‘simply be no worse and simply no better’ than that of pupils in single-age classes. Some evidence from Scottish primary schools seems to suggest that pupils in composite classes may even have out-performed any other group in the... assessment process.”

Anderson & Parvan (1993) analysed 64 research studies in the US and Canada and found that schools with composite classes were most likely to benefit students from all circumstances and all ability ranges. They noted that longitudinal studies show that the longer the students are in a composite programme the more likely it is that they will have positive attitudes and high academic achievement. Of the 64 studies, 58% found that students in composite programmes had higher academic achievement scores than those students in single-graded programmes; 33% showed the attainment was the same and only 9% showed that the students in multi-age programmes performed worse.

In Australia when the NSW Government discussed this matter in parliament, the Minister of Education V. Chadwick said, “Composite classes have always existed in public education and always will. Educational research by experts says that composite classes are not

educationally detrimental; for acceleration of gifted students, they are an educational necessity.”

A New Zealand research project led by Ian Wilkinson and Richard Hamilton to study learning to read in composite classes (in which our principal - when a classroom teacher - took part) found that being in a composite class did not contribute to lower reading. The most important factor in reading success was the nature and the quality of the instruction.

Composite classes are not new. They are a common form of class organisation in schools in all nations' education systems. In most schools that adopt the practice - while straight classes may operate from time to time - the decision is often based more on a “numbers game” caused by uneven patterns of enrolments. By juggling the numbers of students, schools attempt to come up with the best solutions to provide an equitable and practical school structure in any one school year. This ensures that no one age group in a school has too many or too few children in each class.

There is no empirical evidence for any assumption that student learning is hindered in composite classes. Ultimately, whether children are in composite or straight-age classes, it is not the age combinations that matter. What matters is the quality of teaching and learning and the relationship between the child and the teacher.

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www.schoolparents.canberra.net.au,” All In Together? An overview of the literature on composite classes”, Valerie Wilson, SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow, www.scre.ac.uk

http://www.northsydneydem.com.au/5-community/4-info/files/2007-Composite_Classes.pdf

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