

Composite Classes

- Stages not Ages

At Trinity Gardens School we have a combination of composite and straight classes. What does this mean for children and their learning from year to year? Naturally, questions arise when students are placed in a composite class: for the older group - will my child be held back? For the younger group - will my child be able to keep up?

Children have always been in composite or multi-aged groupings. The ages of students currently in our reception classes alone can vary by 16 months. 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. Whether working with a straight or composite class teachers need to provide opportunities for students to develop at their own pace.

Composite classes are not new. A composite class is a class with students from more than one year level eg reception / year one, 2/3, 6/7. The terms reception, year 1, 2, 3 etc may not necessarily refer to the level of work or to the development of a child but are a guide to the amount of time a child has been at school. Teachers use the year level outcomes from the Australian Curriculum to plan the class learning program. The key to understanding composite classes is realising that growth is determined in stages, not ages.

Even within the same class, children will be at different levels. Teachers recognise this and extend the work of those who learn more quickly and give more support to those who need more time. The class then becomes outcome based rather than competition based - this method of teaching also applies to straight classes. The outcomes for each specific year level are described in the Australian Curriculum.

Why have composite classes?

Children belong to a variety of groups. Some of these groups have a diverse age range. Within families, neighbourhood and friendship groups, sports and clubs, younger and older children play and learn together.

In schools, the arrangement of classes into multi-age groups provides the opportunity for children to work with others of various ages and benefit from the broad range of knowledge, skills and experience in the class.

This way of organising classes assists schools by:

- providing more options for placing children and teachers
- providing flexibility in class structures to provide for needs of individual children and identified groups

- enabling even class sizes and even distribution of boys and girls across classes
- building long term relationships between teacher, child and parents when children stay with the same class teacher over more than one year.

DECD provides funding to schools to establish our classes using the following formula - one teacher per 26 students for Reception to Year 2 and one teacher per 30 students for Year 3 to 7.

How do composite classes benefit children?

Composite grouping is one strategy that supports teachers in providing quality education for students.

Multi-age groups provide opportunities for children to:

- work together and learn from each other
- work at their own rate, experience success and acknowledge the success of others
- accept, value and care for others as individuals
- be in the same class as other members of the family group
- foster a 'sense of community' as they share the responsibility for learning
- to stay with the same class teacher if required over a number of years enabling teachers to develop a detailed understanding of each child, their ability and their potential.

Does the placement of my Year 4 child in a Year 3/4 class rather than a Year 4/5 mean that he or she is less able?

In determining the placement of children in multi-age classes, teachers consider maturity and independence, gender, friendship groups, length of time spent with the teacher, balance of class numbers, physical layout of the school and parent requests.

Will my child miss out on any work or have to go through similar work again, as a result of being in a composite group?

When children move from class to class they continue to work at their own rate with support and encouragement from the classroom teachers and the classroom program.

There are times when children do 're-visit' particular topics or concepts as a part of learning. This enables them to develop their thinking, build on previous knowledge and explore other possibilities.

Records of each child's learning are kept in a variety of ways by schools, to assist teachers in identifying growth and levels of development. This information is shared with

other teachers, parents and the child. These records form the basis of planning and programming future learning activities that build on the knowledge, skills and experience of each child.

Will my child's learning be hampered in any way if he or she spends time helping other children?

This interaction assists each individual's learning. When children work together cooperatively, each child's ideas and understandings are clarified and developed through sharing, explaining and exploring with others.

Working with others gives children opportunities to practise what they have already learnt, to use skills in a variety of situations and to share different learning styles and strategies.

These experiences also enable children to develop skills in cooperation, communication and leadership, to build confidence and self-esteem and to accept and value difference in each other.

With the wider age range in composite groups, is it more difficult for the teacher to provide individual attention to my child?

In any class there is a range of abilities and teachers are able to cater for individual differences.

Teachers work in a variety of ways, sometimes with the whole class, perhaps for a class story, discussion or sharing time; but more often with small groups or individuals.

In the process of learning children use resources and materials, explore, plan and design, experiment, talk, share and record their investigations and achievements. Throughout this process teachers monitor children's learning and record it in a variety of ways.

The advantage of composite classes is that it draws attention to individual needs and development and facilitates individualised learning.

Research has shown children in composite classes may perform at least as well academically, are above average in terms of social development and appear to develop more positive attitudes towards school. 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.

It is interesting that school is one of the few places in society that we organise people into age groupings. For example when in the workplace we need to be able to relate to people of all ages. Students are encouraged to learn a range of skills currently valued by employers. Children develop independence and the ability to cooperate. They learn to help and be helped, they learn to be teachers and learners, and they learn to work together with people from a range of ages and backgrounds.

Want to find out more? Contact your child's teacher or speak to a member of the leadership team.

Developed February, 2015