

What is a Combined/Multi-Age Classroom?

The definition of a combined-grade classroom remains fairly consistent in the literature. According to Mason and Burns (1994), a combined-grade class is defined as “an organizational structure in which students from two or more adjacent grade levels are grouped with one teacher for most of the school day.” In many cases, combined classes are the results of an administrative decision which has been made due to a population imbalance or declining enrolment in school. However, there are a growing number of educators who believe that combined-grade instruction has many advantages for students and, therefore, purposely design combined-grade classes on a school-wide basis. More educators are making the choice to group students in combined-grade groupings or multi-age classrooms, based on the education benefits for children (rather than making a decision based on economic pressures or fiscal restraint.)

In reviewing the research on combined grades, a considerable amount of literature about “mutli-age” groupings is found. With **multi-age** groupings, classes are intentionally created as a result of philosophical or pedagogical orientations. This is done on a school-wide basis. This may or may not be the case with the growing number of **combined-grade** classes in both urban and rural areas.

For the purposes of this document, the term “combined-grade” is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “multi-grade”. While these terms are sometimes considered to be synonymous with “split grades,” there is an important distinction to be made. The term “split grade” connotes an image of two separate groups housed within one classroom. Each of these groups is taught separately from the other and rarely is the entire class taught together. In a combined-grade classroom, however, **one** learning community is taught parts of the curriculum together. A distinction in actual grades is made for purposes of student assessment and evaluation.

Conclusions Based on Research

The conclusions and statements listed below are based on research and clearly indicate the high-quality teaching and leadership (by the classroom teacher) are key factors in improved achievement. Many of these statements are synonymous with good teaching in both single and combined-grade classrooms.

Academic (Intellectual) Student Learning

- Being a student in a combined-grade classroom does not negatively affect academic performance.
- Children in the younger age group, in a combined-grade group, score higher on basic skills when compared with students from a single-grade class.
- Combined-grade classes are beneficial for all learners, especially when the learners stay with the same teacher for two consecutive years, as current research heavily supports the benefits of remaining with the same teacher for two years.
- Combined-grade groupings allow children to work at different levels; remediation or enrichment work can be experienced without being obvious to others in the classroom.
- Students in the older grade in the combined-grade grouping benefit from being able to internalize previous learning, by having the opportunities to be the “experts”.
- Learning is 90% more likely to be retained when given the opportunity to teach to someone else.

Affective (Social/Emotional) Student Learning

- Students in combined classes have a more positive view of themselves as learners than students in single-grade classes do.
- Combined-grade students have more positive peer interactions, and feel closer to classmates than students in single-grade classes.
- There are higher concepts of self among students in combined grades.
- A productive classroom environment is contingent upon the understanding that teachers will develop one learning community, within a framework that fosters group spirit and solidarity.
- Younger children in the combined group feel more secure, confident and appreciated.
- Social participation is heightened for the younger students.
- Older grade members of a combined class develop a stronger sense of responsibility.
- The social skills of helping, sharing and taking turns are developed.
- Combined-grade classes allow more leeway for children’s naturally uneven social and emotional development.

Questions Parents Ask About Combined Grades

These answers to frequently-asked questions will provide a more comprehensive understanding of combined-grade classrooms.

1. What is a combined-grade or multi-age classroom?

A combined-grade or multi-age classroom contains children from two or more grade groups. Students work together as one learning group on common themes, inquiries, topics and activities.

2. How can a teacher teach two grades at the same time?

In our school, the themes or topics in content areas are looped in a two year cycle so that all curriculum topics from both grades are addressed. The teaching team plans inquiries that include multiple entry points to allow all students to engage in learning tasks. In our grade 5 and 6 classes, the teachers may be planning to provide a combination of grade specific content instruction and interdisciplinary projects that will include common curriculum outcomes. Within all grade team classrooms, professional learning team meetings (during early dismissals) include learning support teachers. This provides opportunities for additional teachers to work with the classroom teachers to organize/support flexible learning groups based on learning needs, abilities, or interests. These groups can change within one content area or across many different content areas depending on the learning goals determined by the teaching team. An example might be literacy time (read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, modeled/shared writing, interactive writing, independent writing) or numeracy time (various groupings based on instructional needs, use of interactive tools, or learning modalities in mathematics). Task expectations are modified to allow for different learner expectations. Yes, managing a combined-grade classroom is a bit of a juggling act. But all classrooms, whether single or multi-grade, have a wide range of student needs. The combined-grade classroom offers a little more flexibility for accommodating these diverse needs. For information on Balanced Literacy see: <http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/de/pd/instr/strats/balancedliteracy/index.html>

3. Isn't this difficult for the teacher?

There's no question – it takes a skilled and dedicated teacher to effectively manage a multi-age classroom. The teacher has to be able to work collaboratively within the professional learning team, really know the curriculum and understand connections between subject areas. The teacher has to be flexible and has to be an excellent planner. But there are also rewards for the teacher. Enhanced curriculum knowledge and more comprehensive planning with the teaching team

ultimately make the teacher's job easier and provides richer, more relevant, engaging and rigorous learning experiences for the students.

4. Won't my child get bored doing some of the same topics as last year?

In a two year cycle, grade specific topics are not repeated although some concepts and generalizations may be revisited/reviewed as they apply to new learning topics/themes. Increasing children' background knowledge only enhances their learning – there are always concepts to explore in greater depth or from other perspectives. For example, a topic can be viewed through the lens/point of view of a mathematician, artist, archaeologist, scientist, musician, storyteller, writer, environmentalist, anthropologist, athlete, or philosopher.

5. Will my child fall behind?

The research is consistent on this issue – there are no negative effects on the academic achievement of students in combined-grade classrooms. Studies show that social development is actually enhanced in combined-grade settings.

6. How can I be sure my child is keeping up?

We use many strategies for monitoring student growth throughout the school year. Baseline assessments, continuous formative assessments and end of term summative assessments will provide data on individual student progress. Progress reports, student-led and parent-teacher conferences will keep you up-to-date on your child's current level of achievement. Samples of student work, co-constructed teacher/student/peer rubrics, project assessments and learning logs are all useful indicators of how and what children are learning.

7. How is the school deciding which child goes into which grade configuration?

These decisions are made on a year-by-year basis. There are many considerations: number of students in each grade level, how many boys and girls there are, and the range of learners in each age group. We strive for a diverse group a each grade level.

8. Why are combined grades more common now than they were years ago?

There are a number of complex influences at work. There are proportionally more special needs students now, and because the general school population is more transient, it is more challenging for schools to organize for instruction. Financial constraints also play a part in the decision. However, combined grade and multi-age classrooms have always existed and will likely exist well into the future.

9. Are there any disadvantages to combined-grade classrooms?

Combined-grade, multi-age classrooms are challenging for schools – they require more long-term planning. Teachers must be competent, creative, effective collaborative planners and managers.

A factor that does work against the success of combined-grade classrooms is the perception that parents might have. We're hoping that information such as this will help parents see the combined-grade classroom as a positive learning environment for their child.

Current research shows that children in combined-grade classrooms are not at an academic disadvantage. In fact, there are several documented advantages for children.

10. Are there advantages to combined-grade classrooms?

Yes! Children will become more independent workers and will have more opportunities to work cooperatively with others. It is our intent that all students will be challenged through multi-level, open-ended tasks and personalized learning opportunities. In addition, children will have more opportunities to teach and learn from each other; a win-win situation for both grades.

11. How will provincial tests be handled in these multi-age/combined classrooms as this has not been done previously in the school?

There have been a number of years in Captain John Palliser's history when classrooms have contained two grades. In the past, CJP has had combinations of K/1, 1/2, 2/3, 3/4, 4/5, and 5/6. This is due to many factors that impact decisions to offer multi-age classes. Preparation for provincial achievement tests occurs regardless of grade group configuration. As is the case in all grades, critical thinking skills and strategies for comprehending a variety of forms of text, graphics, tables and formulas is reviewed, particularly in the area of time management (pacing during a timed assessment) and strategies related to multiple choice assessments.

12. Will the students have the same teacher for two years?

That really depends on what happens from one year to the next. The student is at the centre of our decision making. It is assumed that having the same teacher would be the best scenario; however, there are always individual cases to consider. Sometimes the teacher moves to another school or the school population changes. Classrooms in a school are organized based on many variables.