

Composites - Stages not Ages

At the beginning of a new school year, many parents might suddenly find their child in a composite class. Naturally, questions arise: for the older group - will my child be held back? For the younger group - will my child be able to keep up?

Composite classes have been the source of much controversy over the years, with parents often believing that their offspring is being disadvantaged in some way by being in one. The key to understanding composites is realising that growth is determined in stages and not magically by ages.

Composite classes teach children who are at compatible stages - not ages. It doesn't mean your child is dumb or a genius, it just means that they are going through a stage either sooner or later than others.

It would be ludicrous to presume that all toddlers, once they reach the age of two, are toilet trained and talk in sentences - some will, some won't but they all will in the end. Stages of all sorts continue throughout childhood and into the teenage years - puberty catches up to everyone at some point.

Although a child might be chronologically older - their maturity, social needs, academic needs and behaviour may be akin to a Year 3/4 balance rather than a straight Year 4 or a Year 4/5. Alternatively, a child may be quite mature and requires the stimulation of a Year 4 or Year 4/5 group. They all get there, the path may be different but the destination is the same.

Children have always been in multi-aged classes anyway. The ages of kindergarten students range from four and nine months to six and six months, an 18 month difference! 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. Teachers recognise this and usually extend the work of those who learn more quickly and give more attention to those who are slower. The class then becomes outcome based rather than competition based - this method of teaching also applies to straight classes.

The good thing about composite classes is that it draws attention to individual needs and development and facilitates individualised learning.

Managing composite classes requires experienced teachers. Teachers in the ACT are well-versed and experienced in conducting programs in composite classes.

Older students are not held back in composite classes. Separate programs are used, in most curriculum areas, for the different groups of students

according to their level of development. There will be some joint 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.

The Department of Education says that overseas research has shown children in composite classes do no better or worse academically than their peers in 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.

Composite classes have always existed. Traditionally smaller schools have had to use composite classes to place all their pupils in classes - this is still relevant in many country schools.

Composite classes, also known as multi-age, multilevel, fluid or vertical groups, are here to stay. Schools in the ACT are very careful in allocating students to composite classes, particularly in ensuring the younger students are mature enough to cope. If you have a child in a composite class and are concerned, talk to the teacher and the principal. Ask why your child has been placed in a composite class and ask how you can help enhance your child's development within the class. Schools usually respond sympathetically in responding to parental concerns about composite classes and will make changes where students are not coping.

Susanne Witt