Staged Class Groupings Information for Parents

In primary schools, classes are organised in a wide variety of ways. *Composite classes* are one such type. Classes that are made up of children of different year levels have traditionally been called composite classes. In recent times, these classes have also been labelled stage-based classes, multi-aged or family classes. There are two reasons why these classes are formed:

- **Administrative** - this is where there is an uneven enrolment in school years and classes need to be formed across a number of school years. This occurs in most primary schools and especially in smaller primary schools.
- **Educational** - where classes are formed on the basis of educational rationale as they are seen to have educational benefit for the student.

Classes are formed following either of the above criteria or a combination of these criteria.

At the beginning of a new school year, parents may find their child in such a class. Composite classes have been the source of much controversy over the years, with parents often believing that their child 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.

Some points worth noting are:

**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. Any class of more than 1 student is technically a ‘composite’, so the terminology is no longer appropriate.

Straight-age grades originated in the 1850s in America and were then adopted by many countries around the world. This factory model for schooling was intended to prepare workers for the industrial society of the time. Same class but different stages.

**Older students are not held back in composite classes.** Teachers know that different children learn at different rates and in different ways and already individualise learning.

**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. Through multi-age learning groups, students begin to see themselves and others more realistically. They come to appreciate the diversity of talents, skills, and abilities of their classmates. This leads students to use more appropriate and varied criteria than just age as a basis for building relationships and learning from one another. **The multi-age learning groups provide additional opportunities for children to develop a wider range of social skills.**
Research shows that 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.

The key to understanding composites/staged classes is realising that growth is determined in stages and not by ages. 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 Board of Studies syllabus documents from which we teach refer to "stages" of development and reflect the developmental nature of learning in young children. Unfortunately publishing companies print their workbooks in 'years', which gives the community a false impression of teaching.

The DET published the report Multi-Age Classes in NSW – 1997 which found that these classes based on educational principles do not disadvantage students academically and actually benefit them socially and emotionally (p 23). 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 need it. The class then becomes outcome-based rather than competition-based.

This multi-age philosophy places each learner at the centre of the considerations of curriculum and classroom practice. Children are able to progress at their own rate without regard for restrictive ‘grade’ expectations. Overseas research has shown that children become 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, develop tolerance & diversity. Multi-age grouping creates an environment at school similar to that of home, resulting in greater continuity, thereby easing the transition to the school environment.

The fundamental difference between multi-age grades and straight age grades is in the way the curriculum is planned and delivered. In our multi-age learning groups we accept that different children learn at different rates. Our integrated curriculum is planned to reflect the developmental stages of the children.

Research shows that children in multi-age learning groups appear to be more caring and cooperative with each other. Diverse social groups provide opportunities for the older children to reflect on the needs of the younger ones and they are more likely to see the younger children to be in need of their care and help. Older children provide valuable role models for the younger children both socially and academically. Year by year as the classroom structure changes, all children gradually find more opportunities to develop and practise their own leadership skills.

Check out the NSW DET website’s information on stage based learning at: http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/programs/classsize/multiage.php