

Bayview Primary School

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Composite Classes at Bayview School

It is a reality that composite classes will play a part in the organisation of Bayview School next year and in years to come as they do in most New Zealand schools. Composite classes seem to cause some concerns to parents who may not fully understand why schools have them. Hopefully the information below will help clarify the situation.

Composite classes is the term given when two year groups are placed together e.g. Y3/4. Composite classes are very common in New Zealand schools. Some schools have mainly straight classes (all one year group) and use composite classes at different levels when it is necessary to ensure student numbers are manageable and equitable in all classes. Other schools in New Zealand choose to have every class as a composite throughout the school. Bayview School has used a combination of both straight year classes and composite classes. All schools have different reasons for the structure they implement, but there is no evidence to prove that one or the other provides a BETTER academic environment.

It is an undisputed FACT that in any class there is a range of ability, with children working above, at or below their age and expected curriculum level. All classes regardless of whether they are composite or straight year groupings are based on recognising differences and not seeing students as the same; children are taught according to individual need, not age. Rather than the old fashioned notion that we teach the entire year group something just because of the year they are in, we have for a number of years taught according to identified needs. New Zealand has led the way globally in teaching the individual student. Once teachers have established what the children's learning needs are, they group them for instruction at a common level. So your child will participate in reading, writing and maths lessons in small 'ability' groups regardless of the structure of the classes. As your child's learning needs change, they will be moved from one group to another within the class. At other times it is important that children are grouped differently, sometimes socially so that they can experience working with different people in their class. Research by social constructivist Vygotsky (1896 – 1934), showed that learning happens most effectively when a person is provided learning that is challenging at their own level. By following this concept learning should never be boring because it is too easy and neither should it ever be too difficult so a child struggles. What this in effect means is that all classes, whether they are composite or not, will be operating groups at a variety of levels at the same time as part of the normal delivery of the curriculum. There is not and never has been a set learning programme at each particular year level, rather there are expectations set at curriculum levels. It is also possible that a class, whether composite or same-year level, may have teaching and learning programmes that cover more than the one curriculum level. Teachers are very skilled at adapting a learning task in order for it to challenge one set of children while being achievable for others.

Socially older children in a composite class get more leadership opportunities and frequently build self-esteem, they become role models to the younger class mates, while

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often younger children aspire to do work like the older children in the class. A rumour that often does the rounds in many a NZ school ground or carpark is that the struggling students at the higher academic level and the more capable students at the lower academic level would be chosen for a composite class, or that the learning will be dumbed down to cater for the younger year level. I assure you this is absolutely not the case. All classes (including composites) are formulated considering a total balance in each classroom considering social, behaviour, ability, gender, ESOL and age range etc. Children unfortunately do not enrol in school in nice tidy multiples of 29, 23 or even 18, which are the suggested class sizes for New Zealand schools. By combining two year levels in one class, schools successfully keep class sizes at a manageable level. If only straight classes were only ever considered it is possible that one year group (in middle to senior school) could have 33 children in each class while another year group only has 22 children in each class. This also impacts greatly on staffing and to employ another staff member to cater for numbers is just not feasible. Composites are not a cost saving exercise. In fact, because there is no difference in the academic opportunities children receive in either structure, it becomes very difficult to justify spending extra money just to have straight classes when we know it is the teacher who makes the biggest difference not the composite/straight organisation.

There is evidence to support that, whether a child is in a straight class or a composite class, there will be no difference in overall academic progress. Veenman (1995) found that there were no consistent differences in student achievement between multi-year and single-year classes. The overall median effect size for cognitive outcomes was 0.00. Therefore Veenman concluded that the academic performance of pupils in composites may “simply be no worse and simply no better” than that of pupils in single-age classes. As an educational professional I am convinced composite classes are not something to be concerned about. The quality of the relationship between your child and their teacher has been proven to have a far greater impact on the learning that takes place. Our own renown John Hattie states from his research titled 'Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement' (2008), that it is in fact effective and pertinent feedback (ie: telling students what they have done well, positive reinforcement, and what they need to do to improve, corrective work, targets etc, as well as clarifying goals), that will have the biggest effect size (impact) on student learning.

I hope this clarifies any questions you may have had concerning composites.

Kind regards

Diane Raynes
Principal

References

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