



Split Grade / Combination Classes

What are they?

Split grade classrooms group together students from two or more grades in one classroom with one teacher; for example, a “1-2 split” class will have some first graders and some second graders in one classroom. Some school districts call them multi-grade or combination classes.

Why do we have combination classrooms?

Formulating student classroom assignments at the beginning of the school year is a complex process. It typically involves the input of the school principal as well as the input from classroom teachers. Many factors are considered to develop educationally sound groupings. A priority is placed on creating a balance required for a good instructional environment. Staff carefully evaluates the social, academic, and emotional needs of every child. Placements are not random as the goal is for each child to have a successful experience.

When new students enroll in our schools, they are distributed based on class size averages. District policy has set class size averages for grades TK – 3 at 24 students, while 36 students make up grades 4 – 6. When school enrollment numbers in a particular grade level fall well below the District average, it becomes necessary to create a combination class.

When a student is assigned to a combination class, the child will have the unique opportunity of enjoying an exciting year filled with a variety of learning experiences. Parents are often concerned and sometimes wonder why their child has been placed in a combination class. As detailed above, the staff and principal carefully consider each and every student prior to assignment in a combination class; such as students who are independent workers who are self-motivated and express a positive attitude toward learning.

How common are they throughout the world?

- In New-Zealand, which has the highest literacy rate in the world, students of different ages are often grouped together in the same classroom.
- In Western Australia, more than 85% of the schools use split grade classrooms.
- In the Netherlands, 53% of the teaching staff is responsible for a split grade classroom.
- In Switzerland, 23% of the classrooms are split grade.
- In France, the United States and the Nordic countries, split grade classrooms have been used for a long time to group children of different ages together.
- In Canada, 20% of the students are registered in split grade classrooms.

Requirements of a Split Grade Class

The teacher must:

- Prepare and teach different subjects which vary from one curriculum to the other.
- Manage the class (offer educational activities and maintain discipline).
- Understand what is particular to each subject.
- Know how to integrate subjects.
- Know and apply different educational strategies.
- Have confidence in the students' adaptability.
- Constantly ensure that students progress at their own rate.

What must a split grade classroom teacher do?

- Explain similar and particular educational objectives.
- Plan different educational activities.
- Establish routine and schedules.
- Group students with the same skills together to ensure everyone learn in the same way.
- Group students together in homogeneous groups when teaching particular concepts.

- Organize educational areas where students can work on their own.
- Plan educational activities that involve the cooperation of all students.
- Integrate some subjects (science, technology, mathematics).
- Teach different parts of the curriculum simultaneously.
- Devote time to each student in a fair manner.
- Regularly communicate with parents.

Dr. Joel Gajadharsingh (University of Saskatchewan) has been a leader in North American research in combined grades. In 1991, the Canadian Education Association summarized his extensive findings and concluded the following:

1. Children in combined classes get an education that is just as good or better as in single grade classes.
2. Children in classes where there is more than one level learn to become more independent, responsible learners and develop a greater degree of social responsibility. They also develop better study habits and a more positive attitude towards school.
3. 85% of teachers considered the achievements of students in multi-grades to be equal or superior to the achievement of students in single grades in language arts, mathematics, sciences and social studies

Children in split grade classrooms also benefit through social interactions with younger or older classmates. Similar to the social dynamics seen in families, younger children pick up on more developed social skills and knowledge from the older students. Older students assert responsibility over the younger students. Diversifying students, in age, also encourages tolerance and acceptance among peers.

In the two credible recent reviews of the research, the findings have shown no differences in academic achievement between multi-grade classrooms and single-grade classrooms (Veenman, 1995; Mason & Burns, 1997).

Veenman's (1995) research found that a majority of combination multi-grade classes performed no better than single-grade classes in terms of attitudes towards school, self-concept, and personal and social adjustment. Mason and Burns (1997) examination of combination multi-grade classes found similar non-significant affective benefits.

For pedagogic multi-grade classes, however, Veenman (1996) found a "very small" effect, showing slight benefits for pedagogic multi-grade classes in terms of attitudes towards school, self-concept, and personal and social adjustment.

In one study, multi-grade classrooms tended to outperform single-grade classrooms for all students, regardless of their background (Ong, Allison, & Haladyna, 2000).

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