



KOORANA PRIMARY SCHOOL

MULTI-AGE GROUPS: A TEACHING/LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Parents/Caregivers often want to find out about classes where children of differing ages are grouped together. In primary schools 'multi-age groups', 'composite classes', 'vertical groups', 'family groups' are names used to describe these class arrangements. In this brochure the term 'multi-aged groups' is used to describe such groupings.

Multi-age grouping is not new. Primary schools, and in particular country schools, have traditionally used this organisational arrangement to ensure equal class sizes and support for children's learning.

Why have multi-age groups?

Children belong to a variety of groups. Some of these groups have a diverse age range. Within families, neighbourhood and friendship groups, sports and clubs, younger and older children play and learn together.

In schools, the arrangement of classes into multi-age groups provides the opportunity for children to work with others of various ages and benefit from the broad range of knowledge, skills and experience in the class.

This way of organising classes assists schools by:

- Providing more options for placing children and teachers.
- Providing flexibility in class structures to provide for needs of individual children and identified groups.
- Enabling even class sizes and even distribution of boys and girls across classes.
- If children stay with the same class teacher over a number of years, building long term relationships between teacher, child and parent.

How do multi-age classes benefit children?

The Western Australian Curriculum Council *Curriculum Framework* challenges schools to provide quality education for all students. Multi-age grouping is one strategy that supports teachers in providing quality education for students.

Multi-age groups provide opportunities for children to:

- Work together and learn from each other.
- Work at their own rate, experience success and acknowledge the success of others.
- Accept, value and care for others as individuals.
- Foster a 'sense of community' as they share the responsibility for learning.
- To possibly stay with the same class teacher over a number of years enabling teachers to develop a realistic and detailed understanding of each child, their ability and their potential.

Principles of the Curriculum Framework

The Curriculum Framework for Western Australian schools is underpinned by seven key principles. These principles guide schools in whole-school planning and curriculum development.

1 *An encompassing view of curriculum*

Curriculum is much more than a syllabus. A syllabus normally outlines the content to be taught. Curriculum on the other hand is dynamic and includes all the learning experiences provided for the student. It encompasses the learning environment, teaching methods, the resources provided for learning, the systems of assessment, the school ethos and the ways in which students and staff behave towards one another. All of these provide experiences from which students learn. Together, they add meaning, purpose and enjoyment to students' lives. Particular attention is required to ensure that there is congruence between the various dimensions of curriculum.

2 *An explicit acknowledgment of core values*

People's values influence their behaviour and give meaning and purpose to their lives. While there is a range of values positions in our pluralistic society, there is also a core of shared values. The Curriculum Framework is underpinned by these shared values, which can be summarised as follows:

- A commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and achievement of potential
- Self acceptance and respect of self
- Respect and concern for others and their rights
- Social and civic responsibility resulting in a respect and concern for the environment

3 *Inclusivity*

The Curriculum Framework is intended for all students in Western Australian schools. Inclusivity means providing all groups of students, irrespective of educational setting, with access to a wide and empowering range of knowledge, skills and values. It means recognising and accommodating the different starting points, learning rates and previous experiences of individual students or groups of students. It means valuing and including the understandings and knowledge of all groups. It means providing opportunities for students to evaluate how concepts and constructions such as culture, disability, race, class and gender are shaped.

4 *Flexibility*

The curriculum must be adaptable to the particular needs of different schools and communities. It must also be responsive to social and technological change and meet students' needs arising from that change process. In particular, it must encourage effective use of new technologies as tools for learning. The Framework provides a balance between what is common to the education of all students and the kind of flexibility and openness required for education in the twenty-first century.

5 *Integration, breadth and balance*

Effective education enables students to make connections between ideas, people and things and to relate local, national and global events and phenomena. It encourages students to see various forms of knowledge as related and forming part of a larger whole. While opportunities to specialise must be provided to allow for specific talents and interests, all students need a broad grasp of the various fields of knowledge and endeavour. They also need experience in building patterns of interconnectedness which help them to make sense of their own lives and of the world.

6 *A developmental approach*

Students develop and learn at different rates and in different ways, constructing new knowledge and understandings in ways which link their learning to their previous experiences. The developmental approach of the Curriculum Framework accommodates these needs. At the same time, it provides students and their parents with a clear sense of the direction of students' learning, and through appropriate assessment and reporting procedures, of how students are progressing.

7 *Collaboration and partnerships*

Education is the shared responsibility of students, teachers, parents, tertiary educators and the community. Successful implementation of the Framework requires a collaborative approach to planning by all concerned and collective responsibility for students' achievement of the intended outcomes.

Multi-age Grouping and Children's Learning

Multi-age grouping supports the view that learning is a continuous process, and that we learn from and with other people. The following approaches to learning, often used in multi-aged as well as 'straight classes', assist in providing rich learning experiences for students.

Cooperative Learning

Children develop the ability to:

- Work cooperatively with peers.
- Accept and understand differences.
- Develop positive attitudes to self and others.
- Increase achievement and cognitive development.

Role Models

Multi-age groups provide opportunities for children to learn from each other by:

- Modelling appropriate behaviour, cooperation and sharing, understanding and tolerance.
- Sharing knowledge of classroom routines, rules and organization.
- Verbalising the learning process, sharing strategies, different ways to use equipment, and methods of recording.
- Sharing enthusiasm and enjoyment.

Cross Age Tutoring

When children work with older/younger children each child's ideas and understandings are clarified and developed through sharing, explaining and exploring with others. These experiences also enable children:

- To develop skills in cooperation, communication and leadership.
- To build confidence and self esteem.
- To accept and value difference in each other.

Catering for Individuals

Multi-age grouping provides an ideal setting for the teachers and the classroom program to:

- Support children with special needs, children with learning difficulties, Non English-Speaking Background children, Aboriginal children, children with disabilities, children with gifts and talents through catering for children at all stages of development.
- Challenge the range of children across year levels using open ended tasks and questioning.
- Involve children in planning the program and reflect their interests and experiences.
- Work in a variety of ways, sometimes with the whole class eg class story, discussion or sharing time, but more often with small groups or individuals.
- Use resources and materials, investigate, hypothesise, plan and design, solve problems, experiment, talk, share and record their investigations and achievements.
- Develop independence in children to work cooperatively and to take responsibility for their own learning.

How can I find out more?

Ongoing communication between home and school helps parents and teachers to build effective partnerships that support children's learning. Please feel free to consult with the school about class structures.

You may also wish to:

- Spend time helping in the classroom.
- Attend information sessions organised by the school staff, parent group or school council.
- Talk with the teacher, deputy or principal.

As partners in the learning process, it is important that parents are informed about school structure and classroom organization. It is also important that you share your insights and knowledge about your child with school staff.

Some Frequently Asked Questions

Does the placement of my Year 6 child in a Year 5/6 class rather than a Year 6 class mean that he or she is less able?

Year levels indicate the length of time spent at school and not the knowledge, skills and experience of children in that year level. Classes/groups of children are made up of individuals operating at different rates and different levels. In determining the placement of children in multi-age classes, teachers consider maturity and independence, gender, friendship groups, length of time spent with the teacher, balance of class numbers, physical layout of the school and parent requests.

Will my child miss out on any work or have to go through similar work again, as a result of being in a multi-age group?

When children move from class to class they continue to work at their own rate with support and encouragement from the classroom teacher and the classroom program. There are times when children do 'revisit' particular topics or concepts as part of learning. This enables them to develop their thinking, build on previous knowledge and explore other possibilities.

Records of each child's learning are kept in a variety of ways, to assist teachers in identifying growth and levels of development. This information is shared with other teachers, parents and the child. These records form the basis of planning and programming future learning activities that build on the knowledge, skills and experience of each child.

Will my child's learning be hampered in any way if he or she spends time helping other children?

This interaction assists each individual's learning. When children work together cooperatively, each child's ideas and understandings are clarified and developed through sharing, explaining and exploring with others. Working with others gives children opportunities to practise what they have already learnt, to use skills in a variety of situations and to share different learning styles and strategies. These experiences also enable children to develop skills in cooperation, communication and leadership, to build confidence and self esteem, and to accept and value differences.

With the wider age range in multi-age groups, is it more difficult for the teacher to provide individual attention to my child?

In any class there is a range of abilities and teachers are able to cater for individual differences. Teachers work in a variety of ways, sometimes with the whole class, perhaps for a class story, discussion or sharing time, but more often with small groups or individuals. In the process of learning children use resources and materials, explore, plan and design, experiment, talk, share and record their investigations and achievements. Throughout this process teachers monitor children's learning and record it in a variety of ways.

A comparison of mixed-age classrooms and traditional classrooms

The table compares some key philosophical and organisational differences between mixed-age and traditional classrooms. Use the table to analyse or reflect on the practices at your school.

Mixed-age	Traditional
Teachers have child-level expectations	Teachers have year-level expectations
Curriculum is integrated	Curriculum is divided into levels
Developmental levels are the planning focus	Year level expectations are the planning focus
Independence and responsibility for children's own learning is encouraged	Teacher takes control of children's learning
Small group and individual focus	Whole class focus
A range of activities is offered simultaneously	One main activity undertaken by all children with adjustments as necessary
More use of open-ended tasks	Preponderance of closed tasks
Role models of different ages and experiences	Role models of similar age and experiences
Flexible timetable	Timetable regulated by learning area focus
Teacher becomes facilitator of learning	Teacher tends to direct the teaching
Range of resources to accommodate greater range of year level needs	Limited range/access to resources beyond year level needs
Encourages risk taking	Teacher directs and controls the learning
Acceptance of differences	Expectations of similar achievements
Cooperative skills practised	Comparison with peers - competitive emphasis
Group collaboration and cooperation emphasised	Inter-group competition emphasised
Emphasis on discussion with and between children	Emphasis on discussion between teacher