

# COMBINATION CLASSES: MYTHS & REALITIES

The debate around combined classes has generated a great deal of research, including Trusty and Beckenstein (1996) and Gorrell (1998). Although the findings continue to raise a number of controversial points, the general and significant conclusion is that combined classes are just as effective as straight grade classes and in fact may offer additional benefits.

## THE RESEARCH!

Dr. Joel Gajadharsingh, of the University of Saskatchewan, was the leading North American investigator of combined classes. The Canadian Education Association (Gajadharsingh, 1991) 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 toward 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.

## ACHIEVEMENT

B.A. Miller reviewed 13 experimental studies assessing academic achievement in single-grade and multi-grade classrooms. He concluded that there were no significant difference between them (ERIC Digest, No. ED355 178).

## THE NON-GRADED ELEMENTARY

John Goodlad completed a very detailed study in 1987 called "The Non-Grade Elementary School." The study revealed that on average there was a five year span of development found in a singlegrade group. In combined classes, representing two or three grades, the span was about six years of difference in the various aspects of pupil development.

## MULTI-GRADE CLASSES

S. Veenman completed a research paper on multigrade classes in 1995. He reviewed fifty-six studies from twelve countries, including Canada. Forty-eight multi-grade classes were studied. Thirty eight of the fifty six studies looked at overall achievement in math, reading and language. Of the thirty eight studies, twenty eight found no overall effects on achievement. In four other studies, significant and positive effects were found favouring mult-age classes. Eleven other studies found no significant difference in cognitive achievement, whereas in the non-cognitive area, multi-age classes generally scored higher.



## FACTORS FOR MULTI-GRADES

A review of Veeman's results by Mason and Burns (1996) concluded that multi-grade classes are appropriate for many students. They do not dispute Veeman's findings, but they do suggest there were factors in place that contributed to the outcome of his study. These included careful selection of students, class size, the skill of the teacher and the school supports in place to effectively manage a combined class.

## MYTHS AND REALITIES

**Myth 1:** If my child is in the lower end of a combined class they will receive a superior benefit from being exposed to the higher grade program. Conversely, if my child is in the upper grade of a split class it is because they have been underperforming the previous year.

**Fact:** The curriculum for each grade is well defined and each child will receive a program which is specific to his/her learning requirements. Dr. Joyce Simmons once referred to combined grades as a unique environment where enrichment and independence can both be nurtured.

**Myth 2:** Children in combined classes receive less attention to individual needs than those in a single age class grouping.

**Fact:** Students need to be accommodated as much as possible, regardless of placement. Resources and supports within a school are available equally to all students.

**Myth 3:** Students in straight grades benefit more than those in combined classes because they are working at the same level.

**Fact:** Every classroom, whether combined or straight grade, will be made up of children with wide variations in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In many curriculum areas, a combined grade classroom actually offers a much wider range of educational experiences for students and they develop broader and more varied friendships.

**Myth 4:** Instructional approaches are more advantageous when students are placed in straight grades.

**Fact:** Teachers have spent a great deal of time honing their instructional skill. Classrooms are alive with a variety of experiences throughout the day. Children spend time at activity centers, producing independent projects and interacting in a variety of group exercises. In all effective classrooms children who need to spend more time on a particular concept may do so in a nonthreatening way. In the combined classroom, older students have the added opportunities of peer teaching and leadership experiences while younger children may model on the behaviours and learning of the older students. Parents recognize the benefits of interaction between the older and younger children in their families. Combined grade classrooms provide exactly the same opportunities.

**Myth 5:** The reason for placing a child in a combined class appear to be "numbers" driven.

**Fact:** The composition of a combined class is very carefully considered by the principal and staff. The teacher is well prepared in the variety of teaching techniques now used in all classrooms.

**Myth 6:** Overall achievement of children in combined classes is jeopardized.

**Fact:** Research to date on combined classes simply says this is not true. There is little or no difference in the academic achievement of students. Studies conducted on children in combined class settings clearly indicate significant and positive gains in personality and social development compared to single grade classrooms. Careful planning leads to highly successful classrooms and parents familiar with combined classroom settings have been please with the progress of their children. The focus for classroom instruction, regardless of its combined or single grade status, is student learning and achievement.

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Mason, D.A., Burns, R.B. (1996). Simply No Worse and No Better May Simple Be Wrong: A Critique of Veenman's Conclusions About Multi-Grade Classes. Review of Educational Research. 66 (3), pp. 307-322

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