

What is teaching and learning in a mixed-age class?

A short activity...



Mixed age classes occur when a single teacher instructs more than one year-group of students in the same classroom. Mixed age grouping is most commonly found in 'small' primary schools because there are insufficient teachers to organise the range of year groups into single-cohort classes. However, this form of classroom organisation may also occur in larger primary schools when there is fluctuating or uneven enrolment. Although mixed age classes are generally created out of administrative necessity, in some schools they may be formed for pedagogical reasons. In this country, such mixed age grouping by choice is often referred to as 'vertical grouping' (Draisey, 1985; Dixon, 1976).

When schools have an increasing number on roll the alternative to mixed-age classes can result in classrooms catering for in excess of 35 children to accommodate whole year groups.

In *The Benefits of Mixed Age Grouping* (1995), Katz provides a clear understanding of what "mixed-age grouping" means. She writes that "Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them." In most families children are born one at a time, and if the

parents opt to have more than one child, the children are spaced out over a few years. In the home, the older children help the younger ones with certain tasks. In this helping relationship, the younger and older children work together to help the younger learn new skills.

Take, for example, tying shoes. Children who have mastered this skill will often help other siblings tie their shoes. The skilled child has the opportunity to develop her patience, as well as the verbal skills necessary to communicate the steps to the child who is still learning the new skill. Often, an older child may read a story to a younger child, occasionally pointing out letters of the alphabet as they read. The older child has the opportunity to develop and solidify reading abilities, while the younger has an opportunity to develop listening and early reading skills. These sorts of opportunities occur naturally in a home environment.

Benefits of mixed-age teaching

The research supporting mixed-age classrooms indicates that academic achievement is the same as, or better than, the academic achievement of children in same-cohort classrooms. Mixed-age

classrooms do not negatively affect student achievement, and students in these classrooms have significantly more positive attitudes toward school, themselves, and others (Stone, 1998; Veenman, 1996). The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) lists the following benefits of multiage classrooms:

- Children are able to spend several years with the same teacher. This allows the teacher to develop a deeper understanding of a child's strengths and needs, and is therefore in a better position to support the child's learning.
- Children have several years to develop, and are able to see themselves as progressive, successful learners.
- Children are viewed as unique individuals. The teacher focuses on teaching each child according to his or her own strengths and needs, unlike in same-cohort classrooms that often expect all children to be at the same place at the same time with regard to ability.
- Children develop a sense of family with their classmates. They become a "family of learners" who support and care for

each other (our whole school ethos). Other opportunities for children to be with their year group peers are times such as Worshiptime, lunchtime, sports activities, SEAL time, school trips etc

- The spirit of cooperation and caring in a mixed-age class makes it possible for children to help each other as individuals, not see each other as competitors.
- Children are invited to take charge of their learning, by making choices at centres and with project work. This sense of "ownership" and self-direction is the foundation for lifelong learning.