

INTRODUCTION

Parents/caregivers often want to find out about classes where children of differing age groups are grouped together.

Multi-age grouping is the deliberate mixing of age groups of more than one year in the one class. It is similar to groupings that occur in the family home; the workplace; or social gatherings.

It is done in the belief that there are advantages to be had in multi-age classes which cannot be gained in a graded class.

WHY HAVE MULTI-AGE GROUPS?

Multi-age approaches are as many and varied as approaches in the graded class but in general concentrate on the learning environment, exploring the questions of how children learn and interact with others, as they do so.

There is emphasis given to learning, rather than teaching; the difference being that children learn from a variety of sources, of which the teacher is only one, and as much as a teacher tries to teach, it is what the child learns that counts. Multi-age teachers often talk about stages, not ages.

HOW DO MULTI-AGE CLASSES BENEFIT CHILDREN?

Excellence in Education 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
- ❖ be in the same class as other members of the family group
- ❖ foster a "sense of community" as they share the responsibility for learning
- ❖ to 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

MULTI-AGE GROUPING AIMS TO:

- ❖ provide a secure and stable environment where all involved are allowed to work together for a longer period of time, free from the constraints of time-tabled growth, determined by a lock-step graded system
- ❖ minimize the trauma of entry into the school, by introducing all people involved to an established and supportive group
- ❖ eliminate age-graded, comparative assessment procedures
- ❖ provide an individualised and supportive learning environment that considers the development needs of each student with a social context
- ❖ challenge the structures of schooling that classify every school child with a grade number which can be interpreted as having the same fixed meaning
- ❖ acknowledge that learning is on-going and integrated, and cannot be limited to a rigid, prescribed curriculum
- ❖ allow the teacher to become a facilitator of learning, and also a co-learner within the classroom

SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How are students taught in a multi-age class? In a multi-age class students are taught in groupings that maximize the potential of their learning. Teachers take advantage of the range of experiences, knowledge and skills of the group to develop programs where the outcomes for students are open-ended. This means that students learn from the teacher and each other, and the teacher plans for, and expects different outcomes from each one, dependent upon these stages of development.

Won't my Year 2/3 child get bored learning the alphabet 3 years in a row? Basic skills such as learning letter names and sounds, and learning to count are taught to groups of students according to their need, in special skill classes. The multi-age structure of our early childhood classes gives us the flexibility to group the students on the basis of need rather than level. This happens mostly for numeracy and for part of the literacy program. At other times the more capable students assist the younger students to learn and practice basic skills.

Will my Year 2/3 child be expected to 'teach' the younger children? As in any class the responsibility for the teaching rests with the teacher. In a multi-age class older students naturally want to help younger students and frequently do so. Research shows that when older students teach information skill to their younger classmates their academic performance improves. They reinforce their own knowledge and skills, which in turn builds their self-confidence and self-esteem, and they come to a better understanding of the subject matter.

Won't my younger child be overwhelmed but the older, more competent children? It has been our experience that the older students spontaneously comfort and nurture the younger students. Most older students are sensitive to the needs of those who are younger and want to help the fit in. They show them where everything is, help them to read and write, play with them and look after them in the playground, and enable them to accomplish tasks far more complex than if they were in a single age grade. In a multi-age class younger and less able students have their needs met much more quickly and more often.

Won't my young child pick up bad behaviour from the older children? Because the older children fulfil a nurturing role, behaviour problems often decrease. The older students tend to self-regulate their behaviour in order to provide good examples. Also, the fact that all the older students practice being leaders for the class, helps to alleviate the pressure between older students competing for the role of 'boss' in the classroom. The aggressive and domineering behaviour that often leads to friction between children is not a problem.

I was educated in a single grade class. Why is a multi-age class better? Grading students was purely an administrative innovation of the mid -1800's devised to accommodate large numbers in a compulsory education system.. There was no educational basis to the decision, rather a strategy imposed on schools to suit the administration of the day. As children spend more time in groups at child care centres and preschools they are deprived of the information and models of competencies that were once available to them in naturally mixed age groups. Multi-age grouping gives older children the opportunity to develop and practice nurturing skills, while modelling those skills for the younger children. There is evidence to suggest that not only does this help children to develop socially, emotionally and intellectually, but it also reduces behaviour problems in the classroom.

How do teachers manage to teach all the different age levels? Teachers in a multi-age class are very much aware of each student as individuals. They focus on what each student knows, and needs to know, rather than on the body of information that has to be transmitted to the class. Because students remain with their teachers for more than one year where possible, teachers get to know each child and their needs very well. They use strategies such as team teaching, grouping for skill learning, cooperative learning groups, interest groups, peer tutoring and one to one instruction. The Early Years Program is a strong feature of our teaching.

SWANBOURNE PRIMARY SCHOOL



Will both my children be in the same class? Only if you want them to be. Placement of students in multi-age classes happens in consulting with teachers and the principal or deputy principal at the end of the year. Parents of preschool children who will be coming to school the following year are included in this consultation. This is the same process that already operates in our school. Siblings in one multi-age class is often quite successful because of the family atmosphere in these classes.

How will my gifted child be catered for? Students in multi-age classes learn to take responsibility for their learning from the beginning. They are encouraged to set goals and challenges for themselves and the teachers facilitate whatever it is they need to achieve them. There is a strong emphasis on Information Literacy in our school and we are fortunate to have excellent Information Technology resources in the school. Multi-age classes lend themselves to 'differentiating the curriculum', i.e. Tailoring lessons to individuals.

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 're-visit' 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 by schools 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 the opportunity to practice 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 so operation, communication and leadership, to build confidence and self-esteem, and to accept and value difference in each other.

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 way, 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.

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

- ❖ younger students became independent quickly and accepted responsibility for their learning as they follow the role-modelling of older students in the classroom.
- ❖ Greater opportunity for students to play and work with a wider range of peers.
- ❖ Older students reinforce and develop their leadership skills when they work in cross-age groups or act as peer tutors.

MULTI-AGE GROUPS

A Teaching/Learning Perspective

A guide for Parents/Caregivers