What Is A Composite Class?

Composite classes, also known as multi-age classes, have been the source of much controversy over the years, with parents often believing that their child is being disadvantaged in some way by being in one. The key to understanding composite grades is realising that growth is determined in stages and not magically by ages.

Composite classes teach children who are at compatible stages - not ages. It would be ludicrous to presume that all toddlers, once they reach the age of two, are toilet trained and talk in sentences - some will, some won't but they all will in the end. Stages of all sorts continue throughout childhood and into the teenage years.

Children have always been in multi-aged classes. The ages of kindergarten students range from four and nine months to six and six months, an 18 month difference! Some children start school barely toilet trained where others are quite mature and are already reading at an advanced level. Same class but different stages.

It makes sense then to group children who are going through the similar stage so they can relate, help and experience together. Even within a straight grade (the same year level together), children will be at different levels. Teachers recognise this and usually extend the work of those who learn more quickly and assist those who are slower.

At Mount Ridley Prep - 12 College, our grade structure is centred around composite classes. Currently, our children are grouped in Prep, Year 1/2, Year 3/4 Year 5/6 classes. These class groupings correspond with Victorian Essential Learning Standard (VELS) levels. Since 2006, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards form the curriculum taught in all Victorian schools. This curriculum is developmental and identifies what children should learn at particular stages of schooling, not within particular grades.

The Year Levels and VELS Levels correspond as follows:

- VELS Level 1 – Prep
- VELS Level 2 – Years 1 and 2
- VELS Level 3 – Years 3 and 4
- VELS Level 4 – Years 5 and 6
- VELS Level 5 – Years 7 and 8
- VELS Level 6 – Years 9 and 10

*VCE is implemented differently and therefore is not represented in the VELS structure.

Composite classes can provide significant benefits to both the younger and older students in the class. Older students can benefit from helping younger students in co-operative learning situations. The younger students have the opportunity of enhanced learning experiences where they are ready for it.

Overseas research has shown children in composite classes do no better or worse academically than their peers in straight grade class, but that, socially, their development is enhanced. They are more confident, can operate better as part of a group, are more assertive, become more independent learners and better problem-solvers. They also make friends outside of their standard age-groups.
Research has also shown that student achievement rarely relates to the structure of the class, but to the quality of the teacher. It is this that has the most significant impact on student learning, not whether they are in a composite grade, or a straight grade.

**What are the advantages of the composite class?**

- Children operate at their developmental level rather than their chronological age.
- Draw attention to individual needs and development.
- Facilitates individualised learning – all children can work at their level and children can be extended or supported.
- Younger children become more independent more quickly.
- Self-esteem is heightened as each child is encouraged to experience success.
- Younger children accept responsibility for their learning more readily as they follow the example of older children in the classroom.
- A focus on co-operation rather than competition.
- There is increased initiative, tolerance, self-motivation and co-operation in the learning process.
- Children are perceived to develop a more positive attitude to school.

**What are the advantages of working in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) levels?**

**Advantages for Students:**

- Students are able to be extended through the different year levels and across VELS levels.
- Students have an identity with a Level cohort. Activities such as excursions, organised sports activities and so on, revolve around these levels.
- Social benefits are extended within the level structure of the school.
- The whole school approach to curriculum development and planning means that students do not have to repeat themes.

**Advantages for Teachers:**

- Teachers identify with the level, plan in their level and meet within their level. Working in levels provides the College with greater cohesion.
- Curriculum implementation has been enhanced due to cooperative planning.
- Victorian Curriculum documents are reflective of levels and these levels relate to the way in which composite classes are formed at the College. This makes curriculum implementation a seamless process.
- Teachers are able to cater more effectively for individual learning needs.

**Advantages for Parents:**

- Students are grouped in class activities based on their individual learning needs, ensuring that the teaching they are getting is relevant to them.
- Students needing to repeat a year can do so without it being as noticeable.
- Parents are aware of the consistency across the levels and develop greater confidence in the teaching staff and school management.

At Mount Ridley Prep – 12 College, it is our belief that:
The Early Years and Middle Years Literacy and Numeracy structures complement the placing of students into composite grades and allow teachers to provide individual instruction for children based on their needs.

Most classroom activities can be “opened” so that they are either open-ended or multi-levelled, allowing children to work at their level and to show their understanding of topics.

As mentioned above, current research indicates that the quality of the teacher is what is most important in relation to student learning. However, the use of composite grades allows students to work at their developmental stage, provides teachers with greater flexibility, aligns with the Victorian Curriculum (VELS) and ensures that the whole school curriculum programs are delivered effectively and consistently.