

The Effects of Combined Classrooms in Elementary Schools—Putting Research into Practice

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### Abstract

Combined classrooms have been around since before the traditional same-age classroom settings emerged. Today, most classrooms are comprised of same-age students and this has been the standard for teaching in the last century. Due to the steadily declining birth rates, multi-age classrooms are becoming a common solution to the enrollment problems schools are facing today. The following paper will explain the many benefits that multi-age classes can have on students' learning experiences. The paper will attempt to share some teaching strategies that teachers can use to teach multi-age classes. Furthermore, the literature review will discuss stakeholders' opinions and how to deal with parental concerns. The following paper is intended to raise awareness about the reality of multi-age classrooms and offer solutions to a teaching model that has been seen as a last resort, temporary and neglected for so many years. Lastly, as a multigrade teacher myself, I provided insight from my own experiences over the past two years of teaching in these environments.

*Keywords:* combined classroom, split classroom, multigrade classroom, multi-age classroom, multigraded class, multi level classroom, mixed age grouping, nongraded classroom, advantages, disadvantages, benefits, achievement, effectiveness, cooperative learning, social skills, teaching, learning, challenges.

### The Effects of Combined Classrooms in Elementary Schools—Putting Research into Practice

Currently, combined classrooms seem to be a widespread option for many school administrators. If combined classroom does not sound familiar, it is because the term combined classroom is also referred to under various different names. The most commonly used one is split classroom; though some teachers are told by principals to not employ it in front of parents due to its negative connotation. Other known terms are multi grade classroom, multi-age classroom, multigraded classroom, nongraded classroom, mixed-age grouping, etc. Those terms will be used interchangeably in this paper. The combined classroom consists of a teaching model in which, teachers simultaneously instruct students from two or more consecutive grades in the same classroom (Stone, 1998). The multigrade classroom is actually not a new concept in teaching. It is an old teaching method that was widely used in 19th century one-room schools (Aina, 2001). Only much later was division of grades created, due to the fact that waves of immigration had brought in considerably more children than a one-room model could sustain.

At the beginning of each school year, a great deal of planning and preparation goes toward classroom formation and organization. Numerous elements must be considered during the classroom grouping process: overall student population, grants from the Ministry of Education, average classroom sizes, and much more. Principals have to take everything into account and then create the best possible combination of classroom assignments for their school. Most combined classrooms are created intentionally for the reason of declining or uneven enrolment numbers, as well as class size limits set by the Ministry of Education. Nowadays, many schools encounter low registration number at the beginning of the school year. Often times, school principals are faced with the inability to allocate the necessary resources to two full classes of different grades. They are faced with no choice, but to combine those two grades into



one classroom. As a result, some school administrators who come across declining or uneven enrolment numbers right at the beginning of the year have to get a grasp on things and teachers must hurry to plan for their unannounced new roles as teachers of a multi-age classroom.

Combined classrooms may not be a new concept, but it is a first time experience to many teachers, especially to new ones. We are expected complete our teaching degree with all the necessary skills to instruct in a randomly assigned classroom. Unfortunately, most teaching programs do not discuss the topic of how to teach in different classroom models, leaving new teachers who are appointed a combined classroom totally unprepared.

Most of us are accustomed to the single grade teaching structure in schools. An alternative classroom model requires a tremendous shift in our standards of schooling and how we believe learning occurs. Perhaps this alternative teaching method has many benefits. Learning these benefits will allow new teachers to better understand this teaching model. Subsequently, it will facilitate the learning curve and inspire teachers to develop innovative strategies to fine tune the existing ones.

The study of multi-age classroom environments emerged from my personal experiences as an elementary school teacher and as a means of personal development. I have been teaching multi-age classrooms for two years and the purpose of this study will be to explore the various benefits of a combined classroom structure, its teaching strategies and challenges. The end result will hopefully provide new insights and challenge the status quo that teaching is at its best in single-aged classroom settings.

After being assigned a combined classroom two years in a row, I decided to do research on multi-age classrooms to find the most relevant information on the topic. After having browsed through most databases and read many research articles, I have concluded that the

research base, studies and reviews on combined class settings are rather frail and unclear (Butler, 1998). One common point that most researchers have stated is that the combined classroom teaching approach is not likely to generate outcomes that will differ considerably from the single graded approach. After diligent research, I was able to find a number of articles that supported the multi-age classroom model. Few studies have successfully covered all the main facets of combined classes, thus the following paper will discuss the research and attempt to make conclusions.

The benefits of combined classrooms in elementary school are essential to literature, because it provides readers with the opportunity to learn the many aspects of children's growth, such as social interactions, academic achievement, and self-motivation within this model. Combined classrooms are a standing reality in our society and it is not something we can ignore. As teachers, we should be focused on how to implement them alongside the current curriculum. Once teachers become familiarized with the concept of combined classrooms in our schools' structure, understand the educational benefits and functions they bring to our children, we can then better make use of available resources. Moreover, we will be able to choose the appropriate teaching strategies to make our combined classroom a successful one.

## **Literature Review**

### **Part I—Understanding the Combined Classroom**

**Classroom formation and composition.** “The idea that classrooms have important compositional properties is found throughout educational literature” (Burns & Mason, 1998, p. 740). Classrooms are behavior settings that have been existent and studied for a long time. They provide researchers with the opportunity to measure social interactions and group structure. (Burns & Mason, 1998). They are particularly interesting because of their level of diversity,

formation and composition. That is because “class formation procedures lead to classes with particular teachers and class compositions, class formation and composition bear a cause-and-effect relationship to each other” (Burns & Mason, 1998, p. 740). As classroom formation procedures are subjective to various school factors and class formation procedures taken by school administrators to create particular class composition, the protocol is generally as follows (Burns & Mason, 1998):

District and School Factors → Class Formation Procedures → Class composition

Graded education was created because of a sudden expansion of immigrants in schools. Educator Horace Mann introduced the concept of graded education in the United States in the early 1900s. This is the practice of grouping children by their ages (Aina, 2001; Stone, 1997). Over a century later, multigrade classrooms are resurfacing as an alternative. School administrators and local communities are now influencing class formation procedures. The reason for this shift is because of the considerable uneven or declines in enrollment rates. The creation of every single classroom has important consequences for the parents, students, and teachers it involves. The outcome of the process greatly affects teachers in their curriculum planning, feeling about their teaching, and their sense of efficacy (Burns & Mason, 1998). For this reason, understanding the formation and composition concerning the effects of combined classrooms is crucial in order to recognize its advantages, as well as disadvantages. Knowledge about classroom procedures and composition is essential, in order to appreciate the result of combined classroom composition.

Research has shown that the classroom composition affects student learning. Aina (2011) stated, “the major belief behind the multiage classroom is that it can improve the teaching and learning environment for students to enhance student achievement” (p. 222). The purpose of her

study was to explore the contemporary trend of the multiage classrooms within real life environments. There is increasing evidence that illustrates the many benefits that combined classrooms encompass. The author compared interviews conducted at the beginning of the school year against interviews conducted at the end of the school year. Below are all the questions that guided her study were:

What are multiage? Where did it come from? How does it work? What are the strengths of this type of programs? What are its weaknesses? How does it work in reality? Can it lead us into the 21st century? How do teachers fit in? Where does the child fit into the scheme of this program? (p. 220).

As a result, Aina (2011) was able to assimilate a theoretical framework based on the questions she asked. These questions allowed her to make conclusions on the model of multiage classrooms, the teacher's responsibilities, and the advantages of this approach. After conducting the study, she reduced her data to focus on the benefits of multi-age classrooms. In essence, the multi-age classroom model makes it possible for teachers to cater their teaching styles and promote greater learning experiences for children. These types of class settings possess a greater flexibility compared to other educational settings. The author (Aina, 2011) further explored multiage classrooms by highlighting the different types teaching styles that would help maximize the benefits of this environment that will be discussed later on.

**Teachers' and principals' views on combined classrooms.** There has not been a substantial amount of research conducted on principals' views on multi-age classrooms (Mason & Roland, 2010). It takes a lot of effort and energy to formulate a curriculum that would satisfy multi-age groups (Jensen & Green, 1993). Often times, multi-age classrooms are a result of lack of student enrollment and budget constraints (Coskun, Metin, Bulbul, & Yilmaz, 2011; Mason &

Roland, 2010). Furthermore, lack of formal training for teachers and limited research on the subject of multi-age classrooms pose major challenges for these environments to widely gain acceptance (Jensen & Green, 1993; Mason & Roland, 2010). Although educators understand that the available research shows that multi-class environments benefits outweigh their disadvantages (Mason & Burns, 1995), the views that principals and teachers put in practice are different (Jensen & Green, 1993; Hoffman, 2003; McLain, Heaston, & Kitchens, 1995).

Generally, principals & teachers are against the implementation of multi-age classrooms in their schools (Coskun, Metin, Bulbul, & Yilmaz, 2011). Multi-age classrooms take considerable amount of planning, educating parents, and reformulating the curriculum to fit the needs of students. It is especially challenging to evaluate students' performance, because the lines of grading become blurred due to the student-centric approach to teaching and the general structure of the class (Connor, Cady, & Zweifel, 2006; Leeds & Marshak, 2002; Krockover, Pekarek, Riggs, & Shepardson, 2000). Teachers must already put a substantial amount of time planning and adapting let alone, the burden of then matching students' progress to the standards that already exist. It is interesting to note that studies do not show any differences in academic performance between students from multi-age and same-age class settings (Mason & Burns, 1995). All these new added responsibilities are major challenges for everyone involved and in order to ensure the success of this experimental approach to teaching with regards to societal norms, principals and teachers must work together just as they expect their students enrolled in multi-age classrooms to cooperate.

Mason & Roland's (2010) study suggested that the majority of school principals in their study assigned teachers to multi-age classrooms based on administrative policy and teacher characteristics. For obvious reasons, teachers who volunteer for the challenging assignment are

often favored to teach these classrooms. Some principals in their study picked teachers based on skill and experience. Principals cited preferring teachers who had past experience with both grade curriculums would be best suited to teach the heterogeneity of students in the class. Mason & Burns' (1995) study suggested that teachers are just assigned to classes based on which track they are on and assignments are completely dependent on the enrollment at the beginning of the year. In their study of 35 teachers, Mason & Burns (1995) concluded that 75% of the teachers would prefer to teach in more traditional class settings and that multi-age classrooms are, "twice the work and planning, stressful, problematic to deal with two curricula " (p. 41).

When choosing the students that would make up the composition of their multi-age classrooms, some principals would try to identify the most independent students who can be put to work on their own, while teachers diverted their focus to the other lesson (Mason & Burns, 1995; Ong, Allison, & Haladyna, 2000). Choosing the students is an important task and often teachers and principals must collaborate and put considerable time planning who will be enrolled in these classes (Mason & Burns, 1995). The most challenging facet for principals and teachers is that multi-age classes are a byproduct of necessity due to lack of enrollment (Mason & Burns, 1995) and budget constraints. Considering combining classrooms is their only option, it proves especially difficult, because multi-age environments require more effort and energy than same-age classrooms. This is generally an operational concern for principals due to lack of resources, rather than genuine interest in the benefits of integrating multi-age classrooms in their curriculum.

**New teachers' and parents' concerns.** A few studies have been conducted on teachers' and parents' concerns in regards to combined classrooms in effort to gain more understanding on the reason why this teaching model is viewed negatively. To accurately depict the reality of this

matter, most researchers chose to conduct their studies in the natural setting of an elementary classroom. Additionally, the majority of the participants of the studies are carefully selected due to their direct involvement with combined classrooms. Although literature provided evidence that combined classrooms promote children's learning, there are some concerns that should be clarified. Aina (2001) stated in her article that the two main concerns are the teachers' lack of training in combined classrooms and the parents' lack of understanding of this teaching model, because they are not familiar with it or have preconceived notions on the matter.

Novice teachers are mainly concerned about how to instruct in this type of classroom setting, because they were never exposed to it. As mentioned, the classrooms formation is a rigorous procedure that school principals have to go through every school year to ensure that each class formed is the best possible mixture. In spite of this, unforeseen events, such as last minute enrolments or dropouts can alter classrooms formations at the very beginning of the school years. It is essential that new teachers become familiar and understand this teaching model. If they are given a combined classroom or are told that their single graded classroom will now become a combined classroom, they will be better prepared to use the resources that are available to them.

Mulryan-Kyne (2007) believed that when teachers familiarize themselves with all the educational advantages combined classrooms can bring to the learner, just as much as the educator, they can then choose the appropriate teaching strategies to make their combined classroom a success. Choosing the most suitable teaching strategies require the teacher to not only know her classroom as a whole, but each and every single child in the classroom as an individual (Kasten & Clarke, 1993). Preparation time, classroom management and lack of teaching materials, are to name a few other concerns teachers have about combined classrooms.

Having practical training and support in place will facilitate novice teachers' planning time, structure of the classroom, and provide quality teaching in their combined classrooms (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007).

On the other hand, parents' primary concern is if this classroom model will be beneficial to their child's learning. Veenman (1995) found no noteworthy difference in achievement between multi-age and single grade classes and stated that grouping alone is unlikely to have an effect, in his studies of different types of multi-age classrooms. Cornish (2006) studied parents' views on multigrade classrooms and they were asked questions associated to their attitudes towards and beliefs about multigrade classrooms. The study confirmed with anecdotal findings and research evidence that parents' do not like combined classrooms as "a large majority [were] not happy about how their child's [combined classroom] operated even though many admitted to not understanding how it operated" (Cornish, 2006, p. 129). Most parents have a lot of inquiries, as they are not familiar with combined classrooms (Kasten & Clarke, 1993).

Parents need clarifications and reassurance on the way this model is implemented in the classroom and the teacher must be ready to address their concerns (Mason & Roland, 2010). In order to better inform the parents on the issue, teachers of combined classrooms must have a comprehensive understanding of the approach and how it can benefit each child in the classroom when taught effectively. "It is not surprising that for most parents, achievement, social issues and their assessment of the quality of the teacher determined their views about the success or otherwise of the class structure" (Cornish, 2006, p. 139). The role of a parent is crucial in growth of their child, so teachers must include parents by enlightening them on the process of their child's learning. Ultimately, the parents in Cornish's (2006) study agreed that the quality of the teaching is much more important than the kind of classroom organization.



**Frequently asked questions about combined classrooms.** Kasten & Clarke's (1993) wrote a chapter titled *Questions Teachers and Parents Most Frequently Asks*, where the authors addressed six of the most commonly asked questions pertaining combined classrooms. The latter can be resourceful to refer to before parent-teachers' interviews or an informal meeting with parents of children who are enrolled in a combined classroom. Parents, as well as students can feel can apprehensive about this teaching concept. The most important thing parents want to be acquainted with is the benefits their child will gain by being instructed in a combined classroom (Kasten & Clarke, 1993). As teachers, we want to be able to reassure and alleviate the parents' and the students' concerns. Thus, it is our responsibility to familiarize ourselves on this teaching model in order to be confident in answering their questions and concerns about combined classrooms.

***“Question 1: How Do You Deal with Students on so Many Different Levels, Requiring so Many Different Content Areas?” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 54).*** “Good teaching requires that we consider each student as an individual. Multi-age grouping may even make it easier to see our children as individuals, because we are force to assume difference rather than likeness” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 54).

No two students are alike except for their ages. Students, interests, hobbies, motivations, aspirations, and learning styles all differ. A teacher's use of content is a method to teaching students processes. Regardless of the content being taught, the lessons remain the same. Some teachers teach the same content in the first year, different content in the second year and again something new in the third year. This teaching style allows students to see all the content over the span of three years. Other teachers teach the same content year after year starting with broad lessons then going into more detail as the students mature.

Often times, teachers direct their attention and vocabulary to the students whom have the highest level of learning in a group. They would then clarify if need be. This demonstrates why Kasten & Clarke (1993) referred to multi-age learning as family learning (Kadivar, Nejad, & Emamzade, 2005), because often times, by virtue of being exposed to older siblings, the younger ones tend to pick things up that was otherwise a challenge to teach the older siblings first time around.

In same-age classroom settings, the model is one teacher, many students. In multi-age classrooms, there are many learners and many teachers. Such an environment motivates those that are younger to strive to achieve what their older counterparts have already learned. Furthermore, the older, more experienced students are empowered to share their knowledge. This teaches students leadership and allows them to think of what they have learned on a more in-depth level to be able to explain it to others. “Good and challenging teaching is the secret to keeping all children meaningfully engaged, regardless of group or placement within group” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 58).

***“Question 2: In a Multi-Age Classroom Model Won’t There be Gaps in the Curriculum and in the Children’s Learning?” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 56).*** The possibility of continuous curriculum is only possible if there are no variables in students and the world. As aforementioned, students come to classrooms with different needs and learning levels. “The theory of “covering the curriculum” is ludicrous, anyway! We cannot begin to teach students everything we believe today the need to know; even if we could, our views of what they need to know would change by next week” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 56).

The importance of a curriculum is simply to use content to teach students the fundamentals of learning which is, how to learn. Covering a curriculum is too broad and does

not allow critical thinking to occur. It is only when a subject is covered in depth that students begin to think on a higher level. Learning on such a level, “gives us even more security to know that, if there is any subject about which we choose to know more, we are capable of easily acquiring that knowledge” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 56-57). This is the kind of learning that creates a paradigm shift in a student being a learner to becoming a lifelong learner.

***“Question 3: Aren’t the Oldest or Brightest Children Bored or Held Back?” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 57).*** In a multi-age classroom, students’ roles are constantly changing. One year, they may be the youngest in class and the next they may be in the middle or the eldest. Regardless of their position, there are always new lessons being learned. The growth from a student being in a position of seeking guidance to becoming a leader of a pack allows invaluable lessons to occur. These invaluable lessons include leadership and confidence building, as the older students grow to become role models. “Research in the effects of birth order on the academic and social achievement of children confirms that the oldest child is typically a higher achiever, with more self-confidence and social skills (Zajonc & Markus, 1975)” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 57-58).

It is important for teachers understand the concept of individuality in their students. “Good teachers find ways to challenge the brightest students, including letting them explore their own interests” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 58).

***“Question 4: Don’t the Youngest Children in a Multi-Age Classroom Feel Overwhelmed or Inferior?” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 59).*** “It is easier [. . .] for a child to feel secure and comfortable in a family of learners who provide support and nurturing, but whom he can also observe struggling to learn new things” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 59). People are social creatures who learn from their environments and one another. Learning in a classroom not only

occurs academically, but socially as well. These two elements of learning tend to be more organic in multi-age classroom settings due to the family type group learning atmosphere occurring.

To vividly depict this, imagine the younger students being eager to learn from the older more mature students. The more mature students conversely are empowered to bring specific lessons to consciousness in order to be able to explain them. In turn, younger students pose questions to the older ones who are in a leadership position. The exchange occurs naturally and the energy in class makes for a more productive learning environment. Another important benefit to such a learning setting is when older students push younger students to take risks and explore things on levels that they would have never otherwise explored. Younger students as a result, begin to gain confidence in themselves and their ability to learn.

To a certain extent, unit graded classrooms are instilling limiting beliefs in their students. The reason for this is because unit graded students are compared to those that are the same age. In this type of setting, all students are benchmarked and if a student does not live up to this standard, it can put a serious damper on his or her confidence and want to learn. This type of issue is less likely to occur in multi-age classrooms, where student individuality takes reign.

***“Question 5: How do You Accommodate the Successful Social Development/Progress of Children Who Are Mixed in One Class?” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 61).*** Multi-age classrooms force students to learn at their own pace. Students may find certain subjects of interest while others may not be able to sit still during an entire lesson. This is a natural occurrence in all classroom settings yet in a multi-age classroom setting, it is understood that younger students may not have the same maturity levels as the older ones. This promotes a comfortable and personalized learning experience for those that do not feel up to par with the

lessons being learned. Students will not feel pressured to learn things to keep up with standards. Instead they will willingly try to surpass expectations, as they will want to mimic and impress the older students. The older students will be motivated to dig deeper into subject matter, because they want to challenge themselves by teaching the younger ones. Such an environment can prove to be very beneficial to in the social development of a student who is enrolled in a multi-age classroom.

***“Question 6: What Happens When These Children Go on to Other More Traditional Classrooms?” (Kasten & Clarke, 1993, p. 62).*** When a student migrates from a multi-aged classroom to a same-age classroom, the lessons they gained carry on. The multi-age classroom promotes a more independent and open approach to teaching due to its nature. This kind of environment is not as easily replicated in classrooms where students are all the same age. That being said, same-age classrooms are not an exception. Instead, the exceptions are the teachers teaching methods. At the end of the day, it is the teacher that makes the class environment conducive to learning. If a teacher approaches a student individually as opposed to a statistic, they can accomplish the same kind of benefits that multi-age classes accomplish so naturally, because of its structure.

In an increasingly diverse and open society, people of all walks of life have to come together and work in harmony. Multi-age classrooms provide students with the opportunity to cooperate and work together. Students of all ages and learning abilities are forced to learn from each other. This kind of environment allows students to learn lifelong skills such as leadership, helping other people, and being lifelong learners (Kasten & Clarke, 1993). It also teaches children to not be afraid to ask questions and gives them confidence that they can find their own

answers. Most importantly, students are forced to cooperate with each other and learn to be open to others so early on in their lives.

**Challenges of combined classrooms.** There are many challenges with regards to multi-age classrooms. Assigning a child to a combined classroom affects all the stakeholders: students, teachers, principals, parents, and his or her community.

These classroom types pose many challenges for students. They require them to be more disciplined, focused, independent, and resourceful. Students must be able to handle the autonomy that is inherent with this teaching model. Students must be disciplined enough to understand that they cannot consume all the instructors time, but rather share their time. Being part of a multi-age classroom model forces students to raise their consciousness levels and be more thoughtful of how they consume the teacher's time. The older students in these classes must quickly learn to take on leadership roles to be able to guide their new classmates. The communities focus of multi-age class's forces these behaviors to come out of students as a natural adaptation of their new environment. Students who come from same-age classrooms and put into multi-age classes will especially be thrown off at first but will have no choice, but to eventually integrate themselves in to the system.

Teachers have the most pressure and challenging time adapting to multi-age classrooms. It is not that they are under qualified, but rather because they are unprepared due to the lack of time given to prepare for these classes. Multi-age classrooms are not more difficult to teach; they take much more planning and preparation. This means that if a teacher find out at the beginning of the year (which is can be the case) – happened to me this year – that they will be teaching a multi-age class, it will give them very limited time to adapt to the new teaching model, especially if they are new to teaching. Another challenge for teachers is the curriculum.

The curriculum was designed for single-age class settings, yet in multi-age classrooms, teachers must monitor the progress of their students using the same rules and guidelines. Although some publishers (e.g., *Nelson Mathematics*) have started to prepare teaching guides for multi-age classrooms. Lastly, teachers are often the most consistent beings in children's lives. Especially in early childhood development, having consistent figures in their lives is quite important.

Teachers do not often have the experiences of teaching the same group for two or three years in a row. It is already challenging as it is to take a child centric approach to teaching, but adding a time limit to understanding each child and a strict curriculum to follow does not help.

Principals are the school managers and must ensure that their students are well taught and cared for. They are the ones who decide to create combined classes and are often the ones to deliver the news to their appointed teachers who will be teaching them. There are three main challenges for principals with regard to combined classes. Firstly, the lag time between finding out the enrollment numbers, creating the class plans, and assigning teachers to them. This can be very stressful especially when principals are lacking the necessary resources to make the best decisions. The second main challenge for principals is preparing the teachers for such an endeavor. This can be quite difficult to do with all the preparation work that teachers will have at the beginning of a school year. Perhaps conducting workshops that specifically deal with multi-age classroom settings could be a start. The second part of my review addresses this exact issue, by providing a mock workshop for teachers assigned to teach a combined class. Lastly, one of the most challenging aspects for principals is they must deal with the students' parents and justify to them why their children have been placed in multi-age environments.

Parents are the last stakeholders and often the neglected ones in research, as the focus is mainly diverted to teachers and principals. Often times, it is the parents who question these new

practices. They are often concerned with their children's educational development and must be assured that such a classroom model will not slow down their progress. It is especially challenging to parents, because they have most likely never experienced, let alone heard of such a classroom setting before. Teachers and principals must find the best ways to assure parents that these classrooms demonstrate many benefits that traditional class environments do not possess.

## **Part II—Putting Research and Theory into Practice**

**Benefits of combined classrooms.** Same-age classrooms are designed based on standards and benchmarks that a particular child should have attained by a certain age. These types of class settings compare and contrast same-age students to their peers in order to assess a child's competencies. When children are classified by their age, aptitude expectations are based on a single constant rather than the variables that shape their lives (Stone, 2011). All children's upbringings are different and this variable alone has arguably the most important impact on a child's learning curve. Multi-age classrooms are by nature designed to take into account a child's individualism regardless of age. In such a classroom setting, rather than base lessons on benchmarked curriculums, they foster the idea of collaborative learning thus, "offering educators the opportunity to reform our schooling system to *fit the needs of children*, rather than trying to fit our children to graded schools (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Davis, 1992)" (Stone, 1998, p. 15).

***Children's upbringing.*** All children have been brought up in different environments. Some children have been brought up into loving, caring, and nurturing families, and others into broken homes or dysfunctional families. No child is the same. Even when comparing children from the same family, their upbringings are different due to the order of in which, they are born



and the various events that could happen over the course of a life. Often overlooked is the family situation at home as these are the ideologies a student will enter a learning environment with (Goleman, 2005).

Children learn through reference experiences. The experiences they receive at home before entering the classroom are the foundations to how the child will act and behave. According to Goleman (2005), there are three types of common parenting mistakes that negatively affect a child's upbringing: Ignoring a child's feelings, being too lenient and not showing any respect for the child's feelings (Goleman, 2005, p. 190-191). In the first instance, by ignoring the child, the parent is teaching the child that nobody cares about them. When parents are too lenient, children learn to use their emotional upheavals to get what they want. In the last case, the child learns how to suppress what they have to say. Parents are generally the first teachers in a child's life. Whether parents are acting consciously or unconsciously make no difference to the learner, as these lessons will shape their basic outlook on life, "some parents are gifted emotional teachers, others atrocious" (Goleman, 2005, p. 190).

That being said, it is hard to imagine all students having the same competency levels in a classroom. Grouping students by their ages and expecting them to achieve similar aptitude scores is fundamentally flawed and inefficient.

***Embracing individualism.*** In a multi-age classroom, children are relieved of the pressures of test scores and being compared to one another. Instead, they are put in a stress free environment where learning becomes a group activity rather than a chore. In such a setting, children are free to learn at their own pace and at times, there are as much as three years difference in the group. Studies emerging from the US suggested that cross-age learning is most effective when there are larger gaps in the ages for example, two-year differences are better than

one-year differences and three-year differences in ages are better than two-year gaps (Stone, 1998). It is inevitable that in such a classroom environment the teacher acts more as a facilitator of learning, rather than a dictator of learning (Hoffman, 2003). This allows the teacher to put the majority of their focus on the students as individuals. Understanding each one of their students helps the teachers to figure out the student's strengths, weaknesses and passions.

Naturally, this would create for a more engaging, creative, and customized learning environment. With this knowledge, teachers would be able to challenge certain students and clarify important lessons to other students.

***Benefits to the eldest.*** Multi-age classrooms provide children with the opportunity to develop important skill sets so early on in their lives. The eldest children in the classroom become by default mentors and leaders. According to Stone (2001), the presence of younger children forces the older ones to develop their communication, caretaking and intellectual skills. Considering that people are social learners, such a class setting allows the younger ones to learn from their older counterparts and vice versa. Older students are put in a position where they must teach the younger students something they have already learned. This forces the student to learn how to be patient and develop more acute communication skills. When dealing with younger individuals, the older students feel empowered to share their knowledge and are less likely to be shy about sharing their opinions. This also presents them with the opportunity to dig further into a subject and proactively seek answers to questions that arise through this natural learning process (Song, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2009).

***Benefits to the younger children.*** Children tend to learn from those older than them through observation. This type of social learning allows the youngest children in class accelerated learning opportunities, because they will naturally want to imitate and impress their

older colleagues. Being exposed to older mentor type individuals on a regular basis will only accelerate the learning process for younger children. The children who seem to be learning at a more rapid pace may be inspired to take on more challenging subject matter. Those who are slower learners can take their time and feel comfortable learning at their own speed.

***Second family.*** As aforementioned, all children have different upbringings. Some have favorable backgrounds while others have been less fortunate. Multi-age classrooms are designed to allow for a family-type learning environment (Stone, 1998). Although this can never be a replacement for their real families, it does allow all students to feel a sense of community (Leeds & Marshak, 2002). In a multi-age classroom, everyone learns from one another and all students can feel empowered to take on new roles as they progress in this environment.

Through individualism and understanding each child's strengths and weaknesses, trained teachers can offer important feedback to parents. Most teachers have started to take this approach instead of comparing students to the rest of the class and the expectations set by rules and regulations of school boards that preceded them. This approach allows teachers to evaluate each student as an individual rather than a statistic. With such valuable feedback, parents as well can learn important lessons that they can apply and immediately see a positive difference in their interactions with their children (Kappler & Roellke, 2002).

***The impact of self-esteem.*** Almost all researchers agree that multi-age classrooms allow students to develop stronger self-esteem (Butler, 1998; Jensen & Green, 1993; Kadivar, Nejad, & Emamzade, 2005; Kasten, 1998; Kinsey, 2001; Mason & Roland, 2010; McLain, Heaston, & Kitchens, 1995; Song, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2009; Stone, 1997). The reason they gain more confidence is because rather than being compared to one another, students are empowered to learn at their own pace (Song, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2009). As well, students are all at some

point or another put in a leadership role, because they act as role models for their peers. They may be put in a position where they must summon past lessons in order to explain a concept to another student. Younger, less skilled students eventually become older, wiser, and take on the roles of their role models (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). This type of gradual evolution from being the youngest student in class to the eldest, allows children to develop different skill sets year after year. One year they are being taught by an older student and observe their social behaviors (Kadivar, Nejad, & Emamzade, 2005), and the next year they are teaching their younger classmates.

Confidence can influence all aspects of a person's life. Children who are confident have easier time learning, since they are confident in their abilities to learn. Studies suggest that multi-age classrooms boast higher literacy and language skills (Song, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2009). Furthermore, confidence is closely tied to social development and academic performance. Confident individuals will be more open to socializing with their peers, helping those in need, and participate in class activities.

Combined classrooms can also aid in the preservation of self-esteem of students who would otherwise be retained in same age settings. This alternative to retaining children back can aid in their social development rehabilitation (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). These students will potentially want to pick up their act when then see their same-age peers excelling and they are at the same level as the younger students. They may want to model the modelers so to speak, as they see their peers roles maturing, they too will want to mature.

**Consistency.** Multi-age focused classrooms offer consistency and comfort to students. In traditional classroom settings, it is not uncommon for students to encounter multiple teachers each year throughout their elementary tenure. As Kasten (1998) stated, "Why do we play

“musical chairs” with teachers? Would anyone think it was a good idea to change parents every year?” (p. 4). This could be especially stressful on students in the early years of schooling. In theory, research indicates that staying with the same teacher for several years can offer students a much more consistent learning environment (Connor, Cady, & Zweifel, 2006). Furthermore, consistency can create an individualized student-centric approach to teaching. This allows teachers to better know their students and understand each one of their needs, histories, and parents (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). It takes time for a teacher to build this kind of intelligence on their students. With multi-age settings, there is no need for this courtship process to repeat itself, since students already know the routines and what to expect from the teacher and vice versa (Song, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2009).

***Decline in aggressive behavior.*** Multi-age classrooms are designed so that individuals of various ages must interact with one another on many levels. Students must help their peers and guide them, as they have been guided in previous years by their older mentors (Kadivar, Nejad, & Emamzade, 2005). In the presence of younger students, older students gain a sense of pride and maturity and they will want to live up to the expectations that the other students have of them (Kasten, 1998). To illustrate this, the younger children look up to the older ones. In turn, this forces the older students to live up to these expectations and put their best foot forward and guide their new peers. This automatically creates a more peaceful and caring and less competitive environment, where students are working together towards a common goal, learning.

Multigrade classrooms have fewer discipline issues than the same-age classrooms. The lack of competition creates for a more harmonious, less aggressive environment for children to learn (Connor, Cady, & Zweifel, 2006; Kasten, 1998; Kinsey, 2001; Ong, Allison, & Haladyna, 2000). The reason for this decline is because there is a noticeable decline in competition among

students in multi-age class settings; rather, the focus is on personal bests and students work together to achieve these milestones (Jansen & Green, 1993; Kasten, 1998).

Outside of the classroom, in day camps, science clubs, sports and almost any other activity that youth would be enrolled in, they are among individuals of various ages. Society as a whole naturally works in this fashion except in schools (Connor, Cady, & Zweifel, 2006; Kasten, 1998; McLain, Heaston, & Kitchens, 1995). The benefits are numerous as multi-age classrooms offer students an environment, where they can learn from each other, collaborate on projects, and benefit from gaining higher self-esteem. There are many more benefits that are yet to be discovered, thus we should continue to probe and find new ways to teach.

**Disadvantages of combined classrooms.** In theory, the educational system supports multi-age learning. There is a general consensus in favor of the many benefits that multi-age learning has on cognitive development. Such a simplistic approach to teaching, once a standard in the 17th and 18th centuries, is now trying to reinstate itself in the education systems (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). Unfortunately, the adoption rate of this teaching model is very slow. As it stands, there is a status quo to deal with from parents, teachers and even politics. Parents are often hesitant, as they do not fully understand the teaching model (Mason & Roland, 2010; Song, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2009). In order to make this change happen on such a level that it becomes a norm in our present day schools will take many people convinced and potentially upset many more; thus, politicians do not have enough motivation to back such a reform (Connor, Cady, & Zweifel, 2006). Most teachers would agree that multi-age classrooms are a great teaching model. They would even go as far to agree that collaborative learning empowers students to teach and teaching is such a powerful tool to inspire learning to happen (Gerard, 2005; Kasten, 1998). Many teachers would admit that they practice a student-centered approach to teaching,

but student surveys indicate otherwise. The concept of giving up their power and standing on the sidelines acting as a coach is rather difficult to put into practice for most teachers. Standardized tests and benchmarks are still the standards to which teachers will base their evaluations on (Krockover, Pekarek, Riggs, & Shepardson, 2000). Such a concept seems counter-intuitive not to implement until we understand how much effort it will take create an important shift in the education system.

There have been several attempts to try to compare academic performances of multi-age students against students who are in same-age classrooms. Gerard (2005) compared the two class models over three subjects: reading, mathematics, and language. The results showed that reading and mathematic scores were quite similar, but language test results proved to be lower for students of combined classes. Other studies (Kinsey, 2001) suggest that multi-age students fare better in all three academic measures. Comparing students over test scores can be a viable to compare both classroom types; however, most samples are conducted over a short stretch of one to two years, which brings in the question of accuracy from these studies (Ong, Allison, & Haladyna, 2000).

Jensen and Green (2006) cited in their literature review that teachers may not always set proper goals and expectations for their students and that time-on-task notably diminishes in multi-age environments compared to same-age classes. For this reason, teachers must put considerable time and effort planning their lessons (Connor, Cady, & Zweifel, 2006; Jensen & Green, 1993) in order to properly bring out the best from their students. As aforementioned, due to the lack of formal teacher preparation and limited research available, my opinion is that the system has resorted to a “laissez-faire” approach for teachers to learn as they go along.

What really determine the success of multi-age classrooms are the teachers who are teaching these classes. Regardless of class setting, it is the teacher who stands in front of the class and inspires learning from their students (Hoffman, 2003). Combined classrooms emerge through scarcity. Considering this, it is extremely difficult for the system to come together as a whole and understand that some formal training should be required in order to prepare teachers for such a situation if it were to ever happen to them. Teachers are being fed to the lions' so to speak, with no formal training on these class settings and are left to deal with the double curriculum they are responsible of instructing to their students in a set period of time. This is the main reason for so many concerns. If teachers had been trained for this, the environment would be less frightening and people would begin to understand the many benefits that multi-age classrooms have on children. They would begin to see that this natural, family style approach to teaching is perhaps the most effective way to develop and socialize children.

**Popular literature says.** After a general scan online on different websites to see what popular literature has to say on the matter, it is clear that people are still unsure about what are multi-age classrooms. The majority of literature and news articles have stated that multi-age classes are a result of low enrollment and budget constraints. There are no value added reasons for classes becoming multi-age. As a result of necessity, studies have emerged and patterns have begun to be discovered with regards to benefits of combining grade levels into one class. All to say, multigrade classrooms are an alternative to the first option, which is having same-age classrooms as first priority.

At the end of the day, because of the resentment towards these types of classes being a solution to a problem that exists due to lack of enrollment, there are a lot of negative views on them. Individuals seem to be concerned with the already vigorous curriculum that must be



covered on a single grade level. Concerns lie in the teacher's inability to be two places at once and that while one curriculum is going on; the other has taken a back seat. The time teachers spend on any given curriculum cannot be more than half or a third of their time depending on the grades that have been combined. This can severely affect students' progress and from an outsider's point of view, this is a serious issue. Fortunately, throughout this research, we have not found any proof that multi-age classes negatively affect cognitive development of children.

Consistent with our research, teachers employ many teaching strategies when teaching multi-age classes for example, teaching many smaller groups with a multitude of different assignments for each. The teacher would walk around the class and offer guidance where needed. The idea is to empower the students towards independence, cohesive thinking, and problem solving. These are important skills that children tend to learn earlier on when placed in these types of class settings. A benefit that is often times overlooked, because of all the noise affecting other areas of concern.

One thing is sure from the popular literature on the matter: multi-age classrooms are here to stay and only growing in numbers. This is an unfortunate truth and instead of looking at the negative side of things, perhaps we can try to set up better reforms and alter curriculums in order to provide the 20% of children enrolled in these classrooms a fair chance of success. With the money being saved from the cutbacks, perhaps schools can re-invest in offering their teachers workshops and training programs as well, conduct information sessions for parents who account for the bulk of those who are most concerned by these practices.

**Suggested teaching strategies for combined classrooms.** In any classroom setting regardless of age there are two main factors that will influence a child's learning ability. The first factor is out of anyone's control: the child's background and life situation. The second factor can be controlled: the teacher and his or her ability to teach. All teachers are faced with the responsibility to guide and nurture their students. With regards to multi-age environments, teachers are rarely, if at all prepared in university for this kind of situation (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). The following will attempt to shed light on the matter and offer teaching strategies in multi-age classrooms.

***Teacher instruction & independent learning.*** The first teaching strategy is also the most traditional and widely used teaching strategy under the umbrella of constructivism. It involves the teacher being in the spotlight and thoroughly giving a lesson. The teacher uses all the techniques that the students will naturally be using later on to teach the lesson. They introduce the subject, systematically break it down into parts and answer questions. If there is confusion on a certain point, the teacher can rewind the lesson and offer more explicit explanations (Kadivar, Nejad, & Emamzade, 2005).

The next step in this model is to have the students independently perform the task that was demonstrated by the teacher, while the instructor monitors the progress of his or her students. If the student has any issues or is not able to replicate the teachers' demonstration, at this point the teacher can interfere and help out the student. Independent learning is a very important approach to teaching that should never be abandoned.

The last stage of this process is integrating the lesson with other lessons learned. This part attempts to take the conscious acts and render them unconscious and natural. This is the stage of learning where the lesson is solidified in the student's mind. At this point the student

can focus less on learning the application and more on the implementation of it. An example of this could be when teaching children how to add and subtract. Once upon a time, before this lesson, students learned how to count. Now they are learning how to add and subtract and eventually, after they learn the lesson and go through the above process, adding and subtracting will become second nature to them and they will be able to take on more complicated tasks, such as multiplying and dividing (Lataille-Démoré, 2007).

***Multi-age tutoring & cooperative learning.*** Within a group setting, Lataille-Démoré (2007) explained that an effective reward structure requires that the instructor gives all students within a group a task to master. The instructor then leaves things up to the group to make sure that all students master the task. Often times, it is the older students that take lead and naturally model certain behaviors to their younger peers (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). It is important to note that the modeling process can go both ways, because some younger students might grasp the material faster than the older ones, thus can take charge. At the end of the activity, the teacher will ask any one of the students in the group to demonstrate the learned task. This method will force all students within a group to make sure they understand the task clearly and be able to model it. Modeling is an extremely important ability in the cognitive development of children (Stone, 2007). When a child models a task, it solidifies the learning that took place. Modeling in a multi-age class setting is especially effective, as there will be an audience of young achievers eager to learn something new. The presenter, thus gets the necessary validation needed to give them self-esteem and momentum to carry on and learn more things. Skinner would describe this phenomenon as positive reinforcement.

Groups should be heterogeneous and contain children of all ages. In a collaborative setting, students of all ages are mixed together to learn a given task or sets of tasks (Lataille-

Démoré, 2007). Some students naturally take on a leadership role in the group, while others are looking for guidance from their peers. This kind of collaboration is a powerful learning tool, because it benefits both sides of the coin. “The hallmark of collaboration is that thinking is distributed among members of the group. The group shares cognitive responsibility for the task at hand (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 1999, p. 257)” (Hoffman, 2003). Cross-aged tutoring (Mason & Burns, 1995; Ong, Allison, & Haladyna, 2000) benefits all parties involved. Those who take on a more teaching style role in the group benefit from increased self-esteem, since they must live up to the expectations of the less adept group members. As Kasten (1998) described, the act of teaching is a gift, perhaps the most powerful learning tool students can attain and within multi-age classroom settings, a normal occurrence. The social environment of cooperative learning is especially important for social development and in shaping the lives of students (Kasten, 1998).

In such a setting, students are generally more motivated to take on and perform more challenging work. Through the process of demonstration, the more advanced students can model tasks for their classmates (Veenman, 1995). This is beneficial to both parties involved especially the younger students, who gain a lot from the modeling approach (Kappler & Roellke, 2002). Such an approach to teaching is so natural and can be found in households among siblings all over the world. More often than not, there are multiple ways to derive an answer.

It is almost a given that younger students will see many different approaches from their peers. Having such a broad perspective is always a good thing (Kasten, 1998). Students who model an approach can see how others do the same task and perhaps begin to be more critical about the way they have previously modeled the lesson. This type of approach teaches students that there are many different perspectives in life. Socially, this can allow students to be more

open of the way others do things. As well, cooperative work strengthens interpersonal skills, since students will become more comfortable speaking in front of a group.

This teaching method gives teachers insight into the minds of their students by observing how their student models a lesson and perhaps in the future cater to their individual leaning styles. Throughout the collaborative group work, the teacher can closely monitor the students and ensure that they are all cooperating and participating.

***Subject matter & differentiated learning.*** Teachers of multi-age classes must carefully organize their lesson plans. When teaching in these environments, one can imagine how easy it would be to get sidetracked and lose focus on the task at hand. This is why subject matter and integration play a vital role in these class settings (Lataille-Démoré, 2007). Unlike same-age class environments, where teachers generally follow a curriculum and the focus on diversity is less prevalent, multi-age instructors must take more time to carefully plan what they will be teaching. Lataille-Démoré (2007) explained that there are two types of integration, horizontal integration and vertical integration. When choosing lesson plans, it is important that the idea is broad enough that it can cater to all levels of difficulty.

Horizontal integration involves multiple subjects being taught to more than one group of students in a class setting. Generally speaking, this type of teaching strategy can be quite confusing, as it is easier to focus on one subject than to focus on many at one time. Although such a teaching strategy is possible, teachers must very carefully plan their lessons as well as the class layout to make sure that various subjects do not conflict. On an individual basis however, this can prove to be quite beneficial to those who have special interests or if the teacher wants to offer a different project to different groups of students (Connor, Cady, & Zweifel, 2006).

Vertical integration involves teaching the same subject matter across multiple difficulty levels (Lataille-Démoré, 2007). The vertical integration teaching strategy is what makes multi-age classrooms so effective. Again, teachers must carefully plan their lessons. Using mathematics as an example, teachers can teach early concepts to the younger students. While the younger students receive the lesson, older students can benefit from the refresher, which is a precursor to something that the teacher would teach them in just a few moments. While the first phase of the lesson is being worked on by the younger students, the teacher can then move on to teaching the older students more complex mathematics. Younger, more mathematically gifted students can benefit from the more challenging material and the older students who are struggling to keep up can take a step back and refresh their memories. This type of vertical integration approach can do wonders to keeping the various levels of students engaged in the lessons. Everyone can be impacted and depending on the students' competency levels, they can choose to take a step back or move onto more challenging math problems.

*From personal teaching experience.* Please note that this section is based on my personal teaching experience as a French second-language teacher. It is important that teachers cater to each individual and his or her specific needs. If a student's French is more advanced than other student's, as a French teacher teaching a multi-age class, I would offer the more advanced students specific assignments that cater to his or her level of French. The students who are weaker in French will be given much more basic assignments, so they do not lose interest or think that the subject matter is too difficult. Such a teaching approach has benefited me over the past two years of teaching in these class settings. It is also interesting to note that the more advanced students are seen as symbols and mentors in class and the other students often times strive to follow suit. This kind of environment creates more motivation for students to want to

learn and for stronger students to want to continue to excel. As a result, the stronger students have time and time again lived up to the expectations of their peers. The image students have of themselves is very important. It will make the difference between a student wanting to challenge themselves and those who want to achieve the bare minimum. An often time, a student's lack of motivation is directly related to his or her self-esteem. They are less willing to take on challenging tasks as they have a negative past experience with failure. It is not easy to explain to a child that his or her past experiences in life do not define who they are and that they can effectuate change at any moment. Instead, we must find other methods to motivate our students and empower them to want to achieve from within. Multi-class environments aid in this department, as the class is mixed and students are forced to put their best foot forward, especially when faced with the responsibility to tutor and work in groups. It is especially important to have mixed groups because of the natural interaction that can occur as a result. Students enjoy collaborating and both parties involved in the exchange benefit from the group work. In these situations, I clearly notice the motivation to learn increase, as students show the possible to those who deem the lesson as impossible. Once a student begins to get a few things right, they often times want to continue the lesson and take it on with more confidence.

I am by no means an authority in the matter, but sincerely hope that the teaching strategies outlined above will help teachers who are teaching multi-class environments and seeking information on the matter. Unfortunately, throughout my university career as a student, the information learned was limited and designed primarily for teaching same-age groups. Starting my career teaching multi-age groups off the bat has inspired me to learn about multi-class environments.

I am often amazed by my students' hobbies and passions. When some of my students speak about something they are interested in, their eyes light up and I can see changes in the tone of their voice. Their posture changes and they begin to take up space, as they ramble on about the subjects that most interest them. This causes an energy shift in the room, as other students begin to lean in and admire that student's contagious passion. Within minutes, I begin to see other students join in the conversation and offer their own points of view. Other students, those less interested in the subject begin to chime in, because of the social shift that has happened in the room.

This observation carries onto subjects that students are less interested in such as learning French. Over the past couple of years of teaching French to multi-aged groups of students, I noticed that even if students are not interested in the subject matter, they still seem to find a way to become engaged. This is because of the social shift that is created through a cooperative learning experience. I noticed that by offering students the ability to help one another and learn from each other through group work, they are enamored with passion, which becomes contagious. The reason they become passionate about French lessons is not related to the subject matter, but more the cohesive learning experience going on. Some students take on more leadership type roles and challenge themselves to teach while those who are less advanced challenge themselves to bring themselves up to par to the level of their peers. An interactive environment comes to life and my role as a teacher shifts from being a French teacher to being an enabler of learning the French language.

*Taking it a step further.* The rise of technology has created a unique situation for school all across the world. The popularity of social networks has instilled a sense of connectedness and sharing in our culture. Regardless of age, everyone has something to share or say and the



Internet does just that; offer people a voice. This is the reason why social networks have become so popular. Same-age classroom environments are designed in a way, where generally students sit at their own desks and listen to a lecture by their teacher. Obviously, this type of situation does not allow for students to share their opinions and ideas as freely (Stone, 1998). Conversely, multi-age classrooms encourage students to share their ideas and explore their interests. It is not uncommon for students to teach one another things that have no relevance to the subject at hand, yet in its purest of forms that is the beauty of such an environment. It allows students to go off on tangents, learn as well as teach things to other students that are of interest to them. The younger students are especially vulnerable to learning, because they admire and look up to their older peers (Kappler & Roellke, 2002).

Although catered to high school students, the Flat Classroom Project would be a useful starting point for elementary schools, where students get the opportunity to collaborate with other students from around the world. Thousands of teachers around the world are “transforming learning through global collaboration” (Flat Classroom Project, n.d.).

The Flat Classroom® Project is a global collaborative project that joins together middle and senior high school students. This project is part of the emerging trend in internationally-aware schools to embrace a holistic and constructivist educational approach to work collaboratively with others around the world in order to create students who are competitive and globally-minded. The project was co-founded by Vicki Davis (Westwood Schools, USA) and Julie Lindsay (Australia) in 2006 when Julie (then in Bangladesh) and Vicki joined their classrooms together for the first time to study and emulate the emerging flattened learning environment (Flat Classroom Project, n.d.).

Rather than have students be bored listening to someone talk, in an era of fast-paced instant information and sharing of ideas, students should instead learn to utilize the resources (e.g., Netbooks, iPods, iPads) at their disposal to search for the answers.

### **Limitations**

Although there were many commonalities among researchers, such as increases in self-esteem and decline in behavioral problems, the main research flaw was the samples in the research studies. The data collected from the research studies were either too small or too specific (e.g., sample of four teachers or music students). Furthermore, the majority of studies are dated and conducted in the United States. The educational system differs across borders and it would be interesting to see Canadian focused studies on combined classes. Often times, the factors that depicted the studies were exclusive to the study itself and the bias is especially prevalent in Kasten's (1998) and Stone's (1998) work. Both authors make strong points favoring the multi-age classrooms, but fail to bring reality into question with regards to implementation of such a program. There were a couple of selection biases in the research, which begged the question of accuracy in choosing the participants to take part in the study. There were instances where selections of the samples were not random, but rather chosen out of convenience for the sake of the study. These biases were obviously due to resource limitations. Having non-random willful participants take part in a study surely aids in the influence of the research. Often times this bias favors non-random participants for the simple reason that they tend to be more motivated and concerned about the subject matter of the study.

In order to successfully assess the effectiveness of multi-age classes on student achievement, samples would need to be collected from various communities over several years of research and follow-ups. According to Mason & Burns (1995), about 5% of US schools &

17% of schools in Canada are combined. Although this research is relatively dated, the numbers since then are sure to have increased due to the declining birth rates. It would be beneficial for researchers to probe this opportunity and gather more relevant information on multi-age classrooms and their effects on childhood education. This would allow researchers to see how these classes have evolved and potentially introduce new teaching technologies and methods to render these teaching environments even more effective. Often times the data collected from the research is usually a study conducted on top of another larger study conducted previously. Despite this limitation, the convenient samples allowed new eyes and opinions to analyze the previous studies conducted. As researchers, it is our duty to be critical about the methods used to conduct studies. Often times, research is biased due to researchers looking for arguments that support their theories. If researchers already know the answers, they will formulate research studies that will favor their opinions. This is somewhat an oxymoron, since the idea of objective research is to be objective.

With regards to multi-age classrooms, there is a lot more to discover: its long-term effectiveness, new methods of teaching and how it can impact early childhood cognitive development. With an increasingly collaborative world emerging and drastic declines in the birth rate, it is becoming a commonality for principals to see these classes emerge in their schools more frequently than ever before (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). This will give researchers better samples that are more spread out geographically as well, with modern day technologies, the ability to track student's progress over several years. The research conducted so far is only the tip of the iceberg and there is a whole new world of collaborative teaching to discover.

### **Discussion**

Combined classrooms have always been a part of our society. They were once the dominant teaching method until the populations increased and policy makers were forced to change their approach. As a result, the graded classroom was introduced. Today, policy makers are faced with a different problem. They are struggling to fill up schools that were once upon a time full. Unfortunately this time, policy change is not on the horizon.

The reality of the situation is that there is not much research on the topic of combined classrooms. Furthermore, the general guidelines for principals and teachers are to adapt their schools in case they need to combine classrooms. Teachers are forced to bend or fuse curriculums to fit the needs of the various ages. At the same time, they must benchmark students based on standard test scores, which are based on same age classrooms. Lastly, there are not many universities that prepare teachers for such an occurrence, which in turn results in teachers experiencing such a situation for the first time. As with everything in life, there is a learning curve involved especially for new teachers. The lack of structure in the curriculum for these scenarios leaves teachers with double the amount of planning for their classes. It is obvious to see that the quality of teaching suffers at the hands of these unexpected and unprepared for situations involving two different age groups. This can cause a vicious loop that ends in giving combined classrooms a bad reputation.

It is obvious that small changes are easier to make than large ones. A simple first step for policy makers could be to implement combined classrooms into teacher training either by offering workshops or making it a standard class to take in university. This will at least bring the reality of the situation to light. This could also force teachers to think and conduct research on these types of class settings. With enough awareness, the combined classroom will no longer be

the educational systems dark secret, but rather a reality that must be dealt with and most importantly, prepared for.

Combined classrooms offer many benefits to both teachers and students. The most notable benefits include increased self-esteem, decreased discipline problems, and consistency to student's lives. With the way the world is evolving around us it is becoming easier to collaborate. It is becoming a norm that people learn from everything regardless of age. An example of this happened to me a few weeks ago. I had a problem with my phone and decided to do research on the Internet to find a solution to the problem. I landed on a video that helped me solve the problem. The instructor of that video was a 12 year old boy, younger than my current students, and he taught me how to fix the problem with my phone.

Combined classrooms are a fine alternative when principals are struggling to fill their classes. With proper education and research, teachers will become more familiar with this classroom setting and be able to better teach their students. With the rapid changes in technology and cellphones becoming a commodity, the culture of our classrooms and students are very different than they once were. This means, our teaching styles must also change and utilize the new tools at our disposal to best educate students. Perhaps new thought will emerge in the coming years. Perhaps technology will allow for new teaching methods to emerge. Perhaps, one day, every students experience will be student-centric.

### **Recommendations and Implications for further Research**

One last point I would like to share has been my experiences in the last two years of teaching French in multi-age classrooms. Last year, I was teaching at Clearpoint Elementary School grades one and two combined classroom. This year, I am at Springdale Elementary School teaching a grade five and six combined classroom. I noticed that with regards to teaching

French to younger students, it was rather challenging to have children with such drastic differences in the classroom versus those in the older grades. The difference between grade one and two is very noticeable. The first grade students were not at all able to read or write in French, whereas the second grade students were already taught the basics. I was faced with the challenge of teaching the basics to the first grade students, while the second graders were already reading and writing. It was tough to create collaboration, especially in the first half of the school year. Comparatively, the fifth and sixth grade students were already able to read and write. Naturally, there were some more advanced grade fivers and less adept grade sixes. The overall differences in their French abilities were much closer than the students in the early elementary grades. This allowed for an easier formation of groups and for the students to work together. Again, note that these observations are based on teaching French as a second language.

More often than not, combined classrooms emerge due to scarce resources. As a result, students are paired with a teacher who has limited if any experience at all teaching two curriculums at once. It is important that teachers understand this reality and begin to explore the information on the topic. This would allow them to be better prepared for any surprises they may encounter in their careers. From my personal experience, although lack of education on the matter was an issue for me, I still believe that multi-age classrooms are a very effective way of teaching and have provided some recommendations based on my research and experiences below.

The first recommendation is for teachers to stay with the same students over multiple years. At the end of the first year, and am certain other teachers can agree, I had more insight into my students learning abilities, their strengths, weaknesses, and relationships with their parents. I had a strong connection with my students and as the year progressed, my ability to

cater my teaching style to each student evolved over time. Rather than try to change the entire system altogether, perhaps school principals can loop teachers for two or three years (Gerard, 2009). This solution is easier said than done for many obvious reasons, but there are already many teachers that loop. Interestingly, researchers did not mention physical education teachers, seeing as they are generally the most recurring teachers in elementary students' lives. Often times, there is only one physical education teacher in a school and most physical education teachers would agree that their teaching method is highly collaborative.

The second recommendation is to plan which years should be combined. This can of course be debated, but Kasten (1998) seemed to favor larger age gaps in multi-age classes. She was referring to having teachers have longer lasting relationships with their students over several years. Another important thing to note is that she is referring to English speaking schools outside of Quebec. With regard to Quebec's language laws and its diverse population, I would recommend more research to be done in this area. Perhaps combined the first three grades to give the younger children time before transition to a new group.

My last recommendation is to continuously try to push the boundaries of educational research further and keep evolving the methods of teaching. There are standards and reforms that are hard to change and rather than calling for change, we should strive to evolve. With all the technology at our disposal, there are always new opportunities to push the boundaries of education to new heights, such as The Flat Classroom Project as mentioned previously. Collaboration is becoming a standard in our society and everyone is constantly sharing information. Imagine a world where group collaboration can go as far as to collaborate with classes in Japan, India, and even Qatar (Flat Classroom Project, n.d.). It is happening at this very moment. The Flat Classroom (n.d.) is designed to support collaborative projects, debates,

teaching and so much more. It takes a simple idea and one teacher to implement it. Moreover, now with a simple Skype call, we can take the pen-pal idea to new limits.

Teaching happens everywhere and in this digital age, children are being raised with the ability to absorb large amounts of information, as it is everywhere. Less than six years ago, the only way of accessing the Internet was through a computer or laptop. Today, I can browse the Internet waiting for a bus on my Smartphone. As the world evolves, so should the way we teach. Long gone are the days of dated newspapers and magazines; today we are in an era of real time information. Already tablets have become an affordable and accessible tool to learning. Tablets have already proven to be a powerful tool that allows for interactive collaboration and hands on learning.

In today's modern society, whether teachers like it or not, there are students in their classrooms collaborating on their Smartphones playing videogames, sending pictures or sharing their interests. It is becoming increasingly difficult to hold the attention of students, because they are so distracted by their gadgets. In a new era where technology is literally becoming a commodity, we cannot help, but notice how close the world is becoming. The multi-age environment may not be the educational system's saving grace, but by studying such a methodology, we as teachers can learn from them and apply them, as we see fit to our classes. As the educational system is refining its current situation, we must maintain a positive outlook on the future and not shy away from exploring new alternative teaching methods.

From the very beginning, implementing such a teaching model is a Band-Aid solution to a greater problem, which we are facing today, the birth rate. Over the past fifty years, the birth rate has steadily declined drastically ("Canada-Birth Rate", 2013) and as a result the school system's design must adapt. A mere few years ago, students were visiting libraries six stories



high to seek information on subjects that they were studying. Today, with the click of a button, students can access vast libraries of information from the comfort of their own home. Schools were once filled beyond capacity to meet the needs of the ever-growing population.

Today, it is not uncommon to see classrooms downgraded to storage rooms, as there are not enough students to fill the infrastructure that was designed for so many more students.

Perhaps a redesign of classrooms would be an effective first start as principals can expand the surface area of their classrooms to meet the needs of such diversity in them. There are a multitude of different options we can select to take a first step in the acceptance of the lack in enrollment and better plan for future situations where we must combine our classrooms. The idea is to take one step at a time and over time, we will become as effective at teaching these types of classes as we are at filling them.

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WORKSHOP  
for New Teachers  
Lester B. Pearson School Board  
Monday, April 29, 2013

Speaker: Netty Yen, Elementary School  
Teacher, BEd, MEd, McGill University

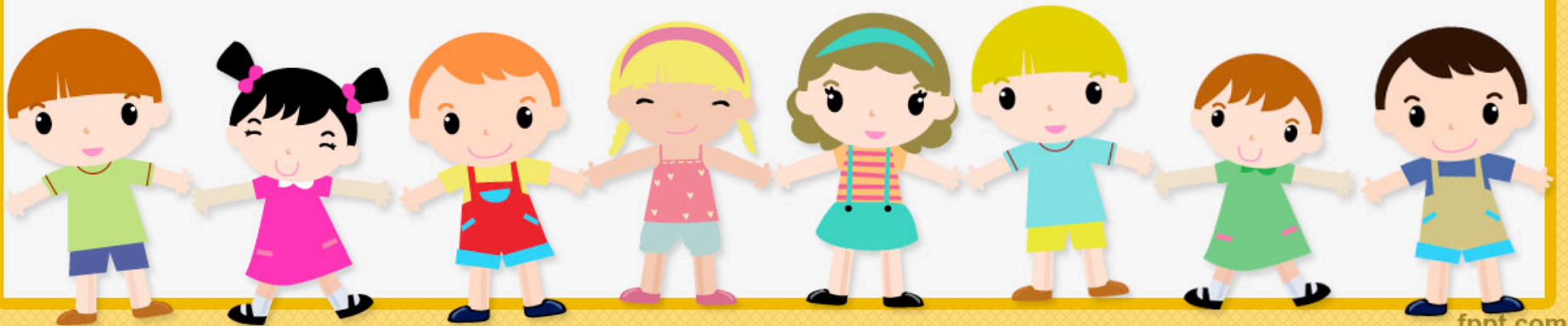


Successful Teaching in  
Combined Classrooms



# A Little Bit About Myself...

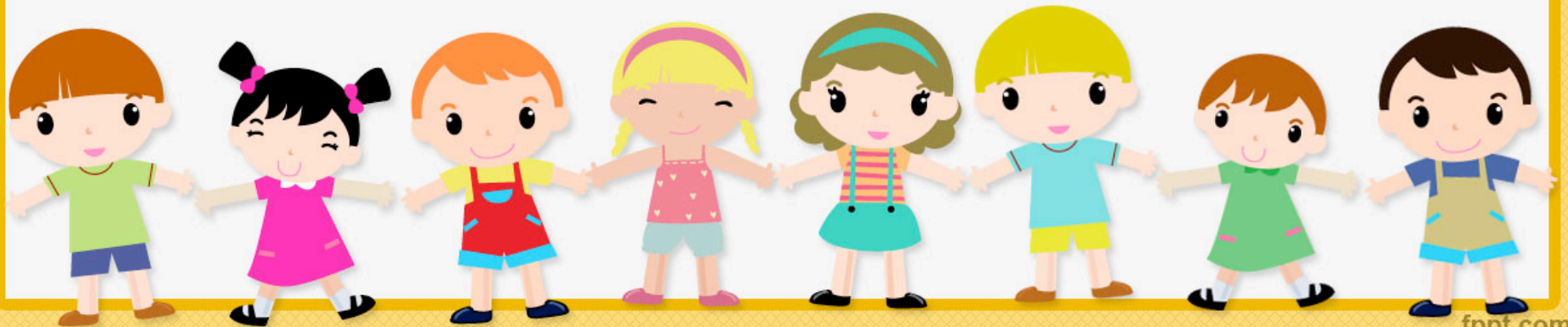
- Bachelor of Education – McGill University
- Master of Education in Educational Psychology (Inclusive Education Concentration) – McGill University





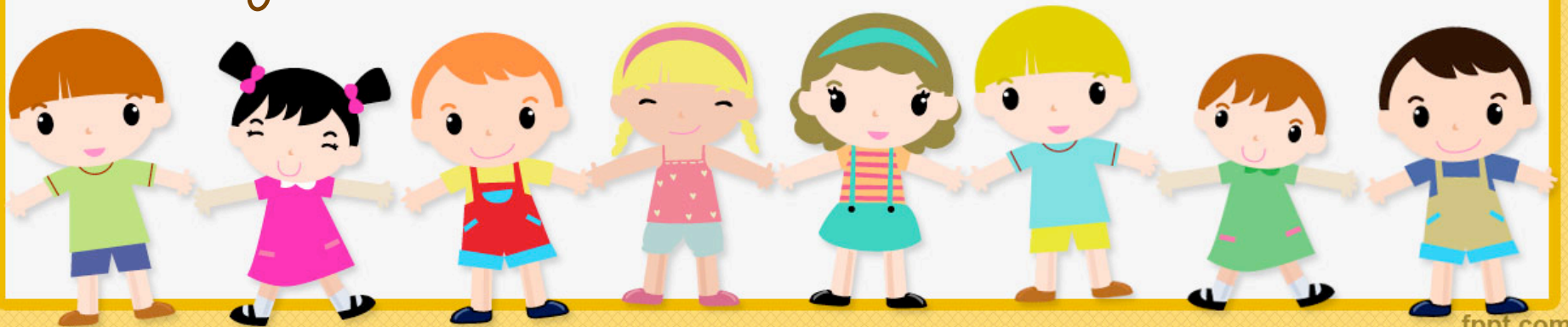
# My Journey to Becoming a Teacher

“For some, it may have been a life long dream, and for others like me, it may have very well just been a twist of fate...”



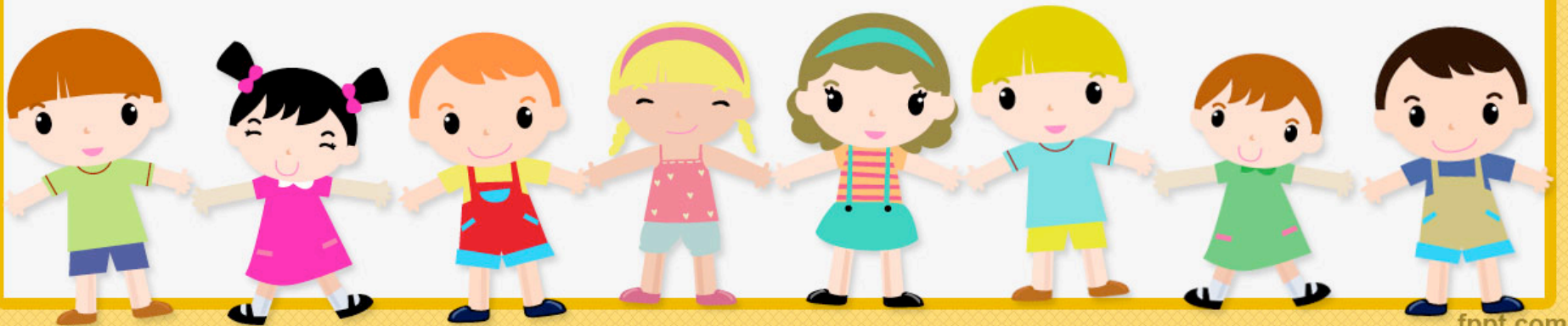
# A Little Insight Into My Teaching

- Private Tutoring
- Taught Francization
- Taught After-School Mandarin Program (Pilot Project for IB School)
- Taught Grade 1/2 French
- Taught Grade 5/6 French



# What Led Me to This Research?

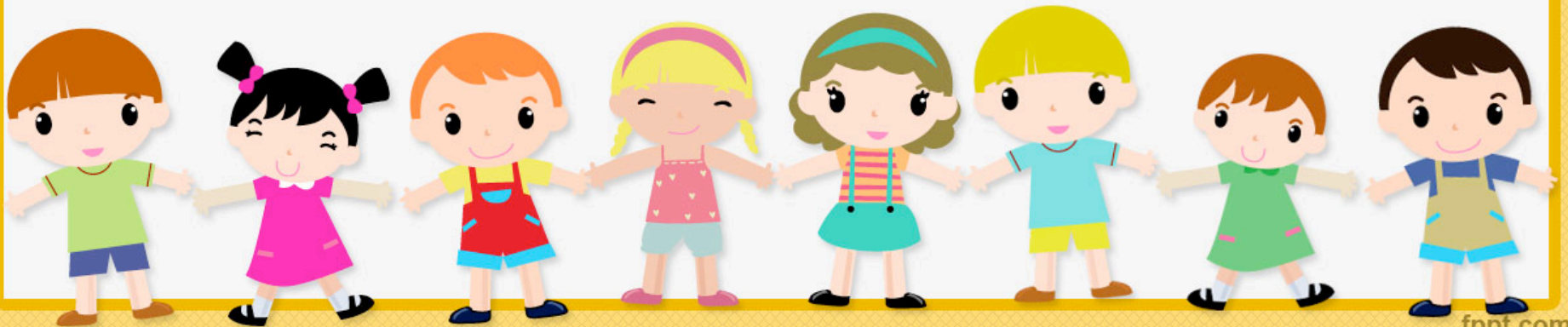
- Personal teaching experiences in combined classrooms
- Personal development
- Find the most relevant information on the topic
- Explore the various benefits and effective teaching strategies





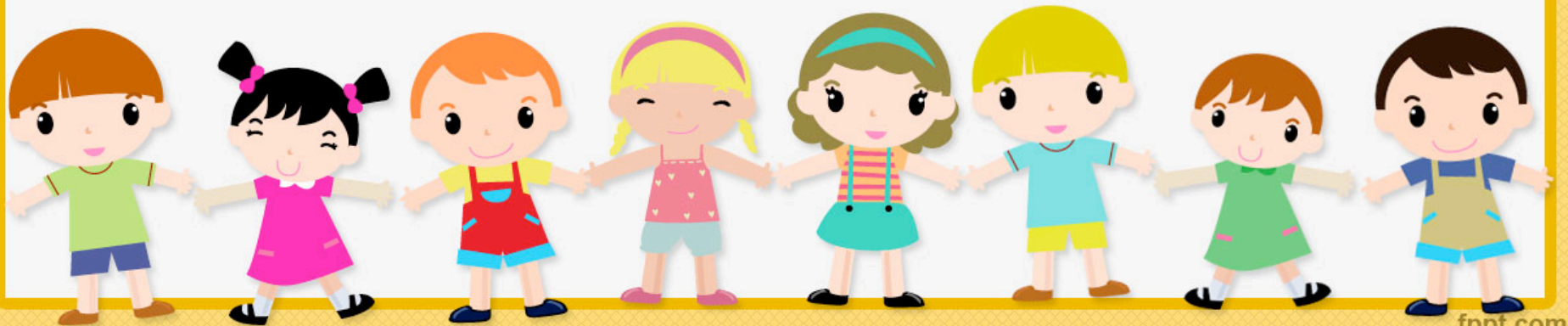
# Agenda

- Definition of combined classrooms
- Understanding where it comes from
- New Teachers' & Parents' Concerns'
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Challenges
- Benefits
- Drawbacks
- Suggested Teaching Strategies
- My Personal Experience



# What is a Combined Classroom?

- A classroom, in which, a teacher simultaneously instruct students from two or more consecutive grades in the same classroom.



# Various Terms...

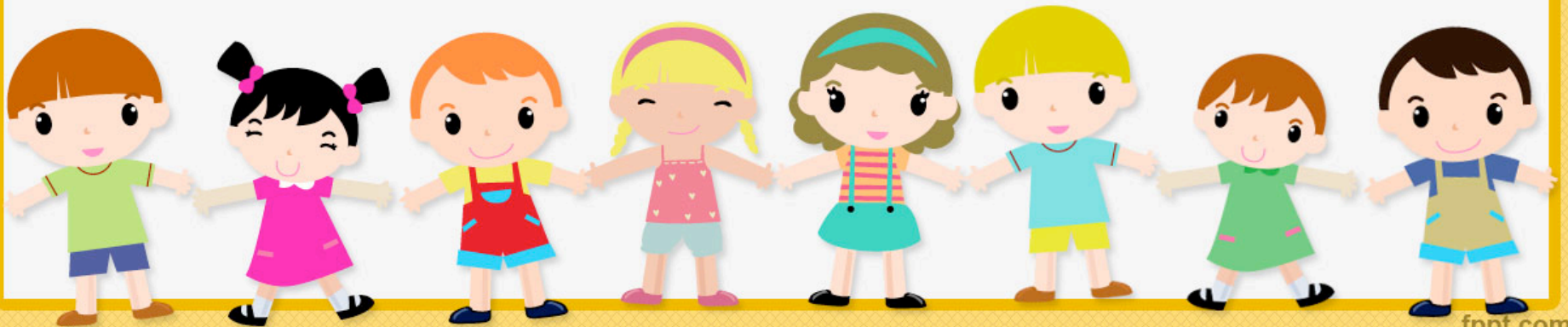
Multigrade  
classroom

Nongraded  
classroom

Mixed age  
classroom

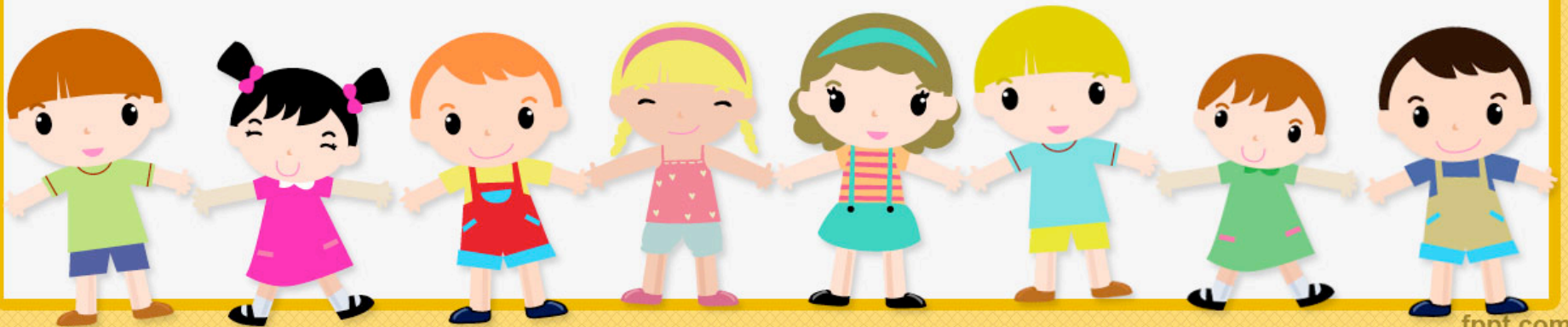
Multi-age  
classroom

"Split"  
classroom



# A New Concept?

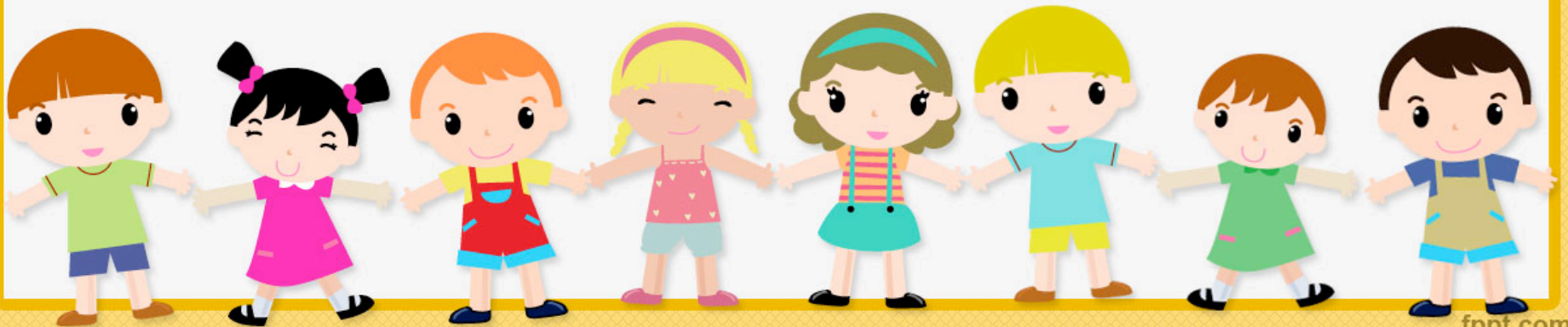
- Not a new concept!
- Old teaching method used in the 19th century one-room schools
- Grades were created due to waves of immigration → more children than a one-room model could sustain





# Why Resurface Now?

- Combined classrooms are created intentionally for the reason of:
  - Uneven enrolment number
- AND/OR
- Declining/low registration number

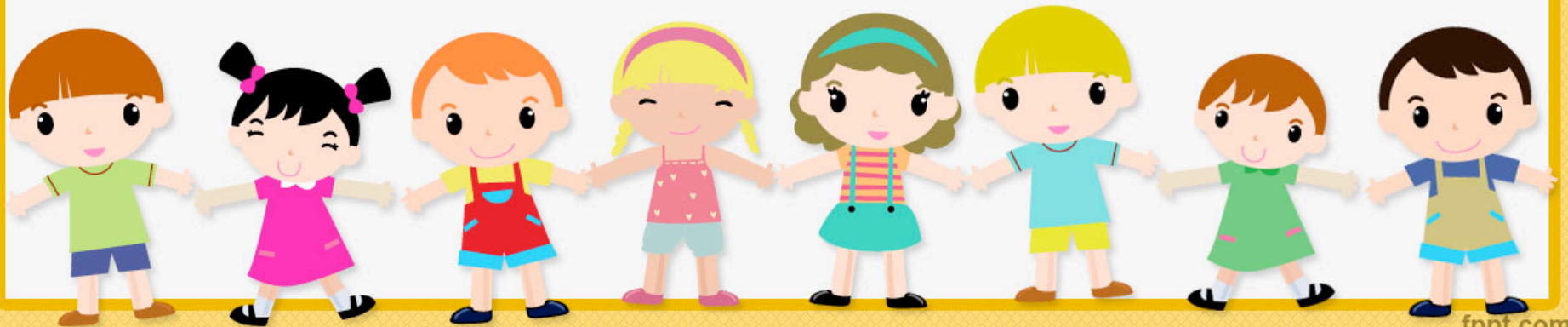




# What Research Tells Us...

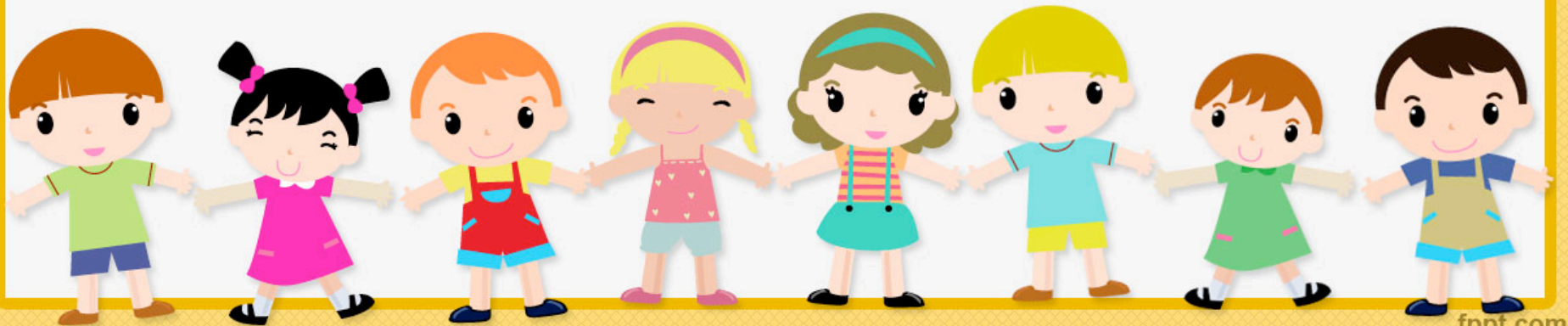
“Students in multi-grade classrooms achieve as well academically as those in single grade classrooms.”

- Veenman (1995)



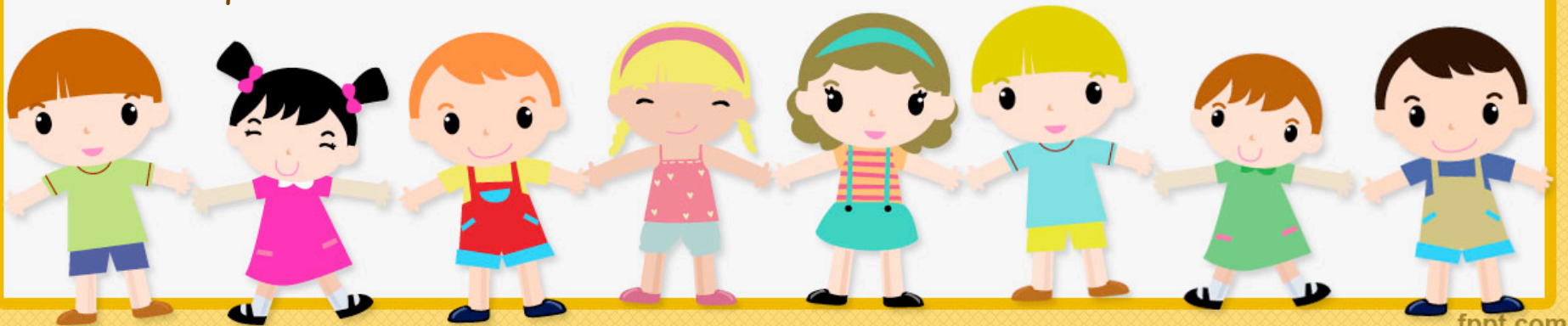
# New Teachers' Concerns

Question: What are some of your concerns being a newly assigned combined classroom teacher?



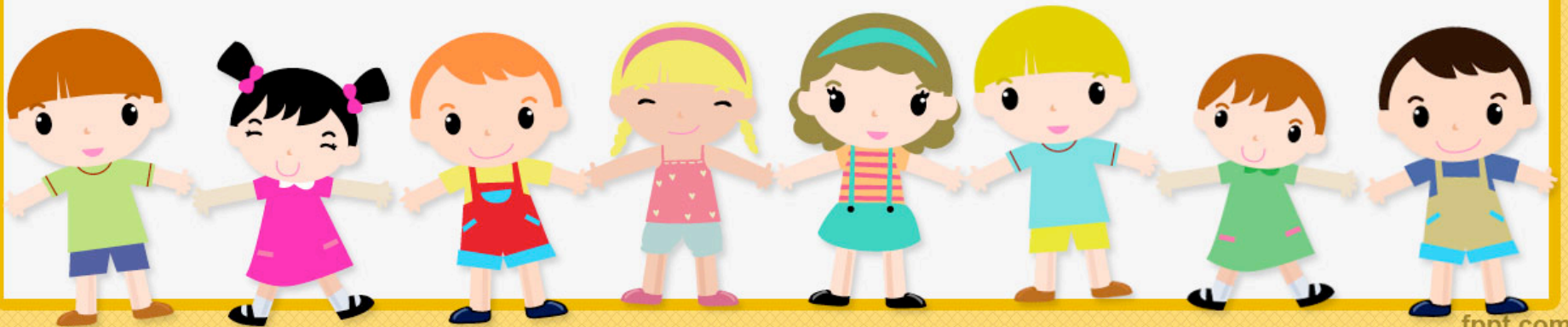
# New Teachers' Concerns

- Lack of training:
  - How to teach it?
  - What are the available resources?
  - Which are the appropriate teaching strategies?
- Lack of teaching materials
- Classroom management
- Preparation time



# Parents' Concerns'

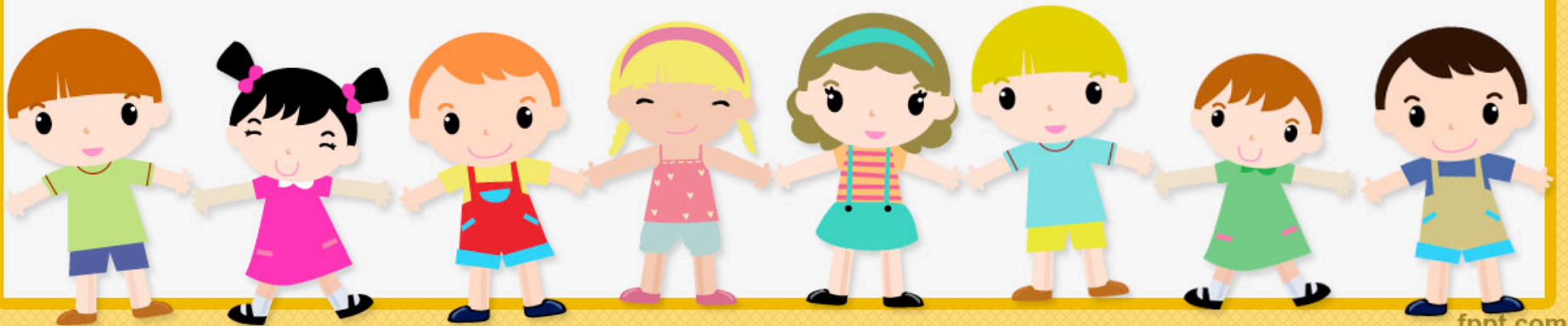
- Benefits
- Achievement
- Social issues
- Quality of teaching
- Effectiveness/Success





# Most Parents...

- Do not understand how combined classrooms operate
- Need clarifications and reassurance
- Need to understand it is the quality of the teaching that is much more significant than the kind of classroom organization

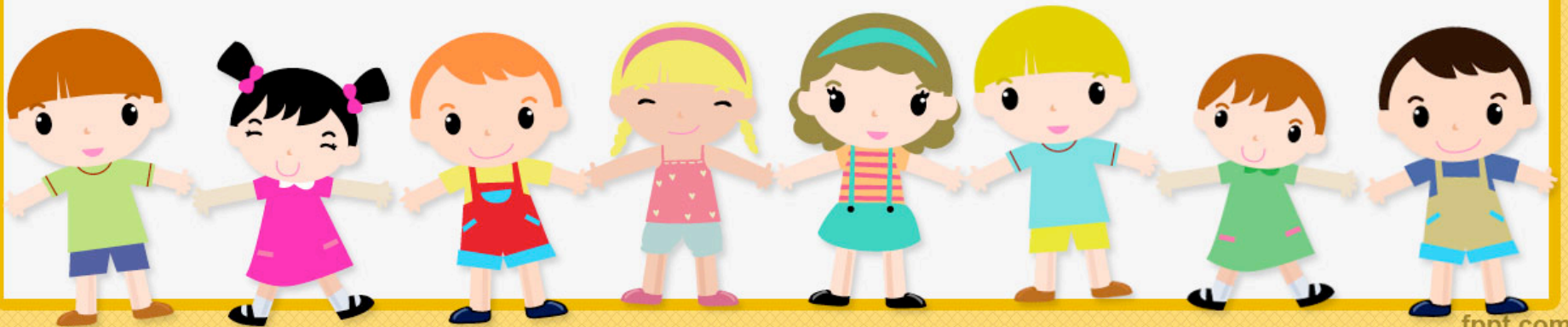


# Activity

Situation: A parent finds out the first day of school that her child is no longer in a grade 4 class, but now in a grade 3/4.

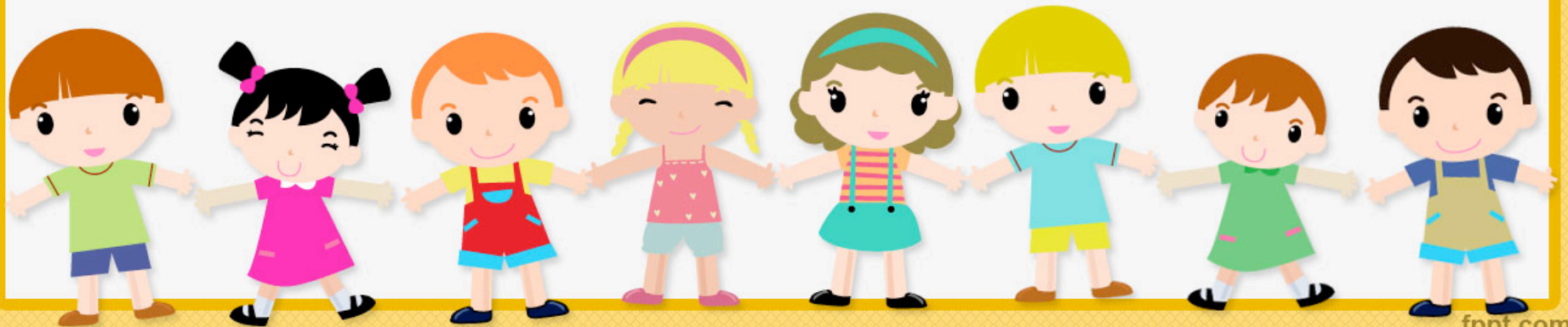
She is unhappy and makes a clear statement that she wants her child put back in the straight grade 4 class.

As the teacher of the grade 3/4 class, how do you deal with this situation? How can you alleviate her anger?



# Frequently Asked Questions...

- Our responsibility as educators is to familiarize ourselves with this teaching model, in order to:
  - answer parents' questions and concerns during parent-teachers' interviews or informal one-on-one meetings



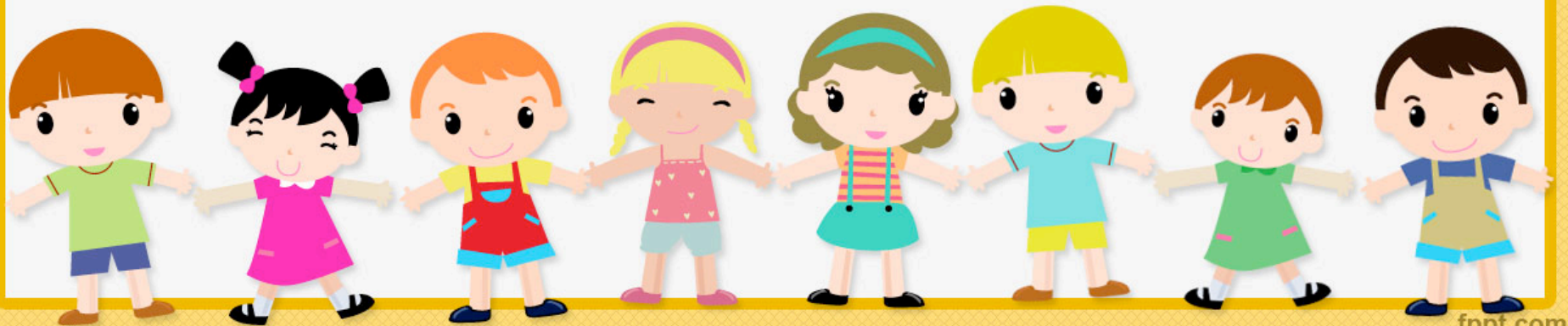


# Question 1: How Do You Deal with Students on so Many Different Levels, Requiring so Many Different Content Areas?

“Good teaching requires that we consider each student as an individual because we are forced to assume difference rather than likeness.”

- Kasten & Clarke (1993)

- Remember: No two students are alike!



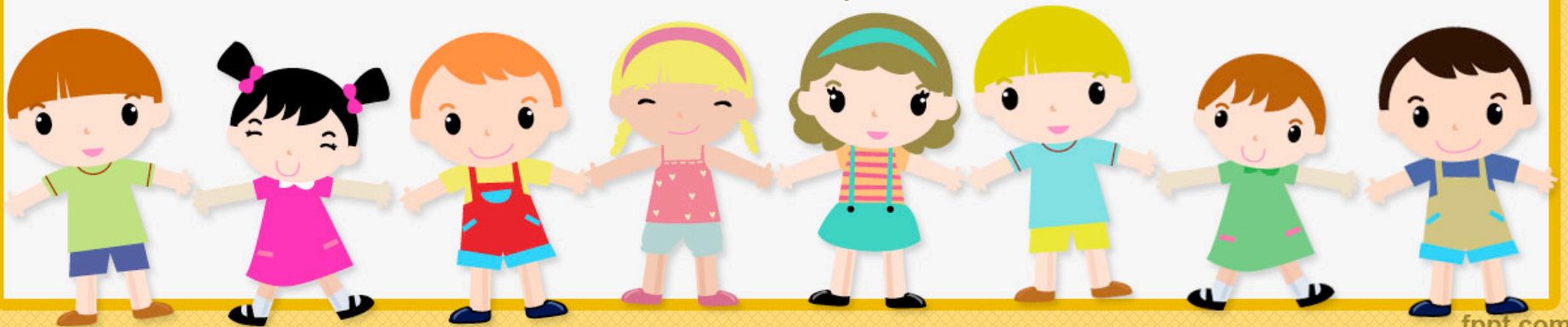


## Question 2: In a Multi-Age Classroom Model Won't There Be Gaps in the Curriculum and in the Children's Learning?

"The theory of covering the curriculum is ludicrous, anyways! We cannot begin to teach students everything we believe today they need to know; even if we could, our views of what they need to know would change by next week."

- Kasten & Clarke (1993)

- Students come to classrooms with different needs and learning levels
- Teach the fundamentals of learning: how to learn

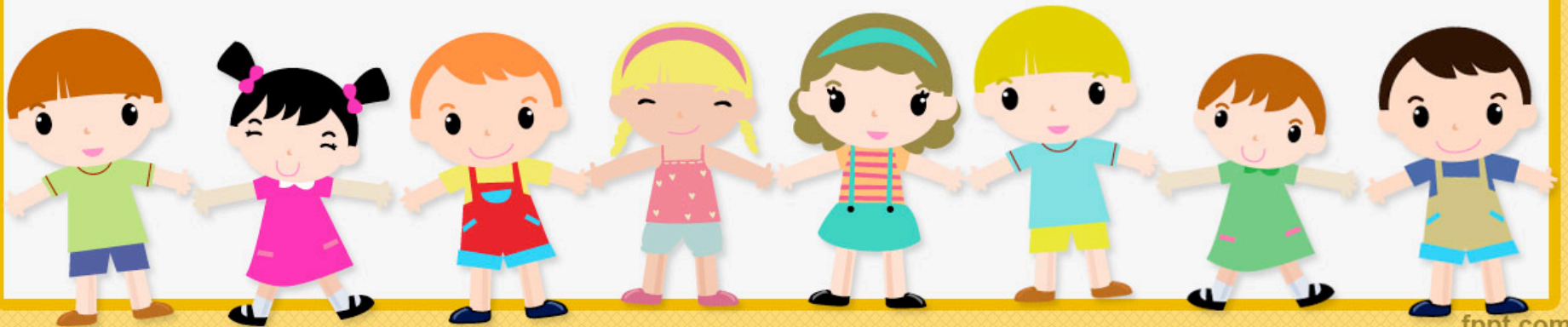


### Question 3: Aren't the Oldest and Brightest Children Bored or Held Back?

- In a combined classroom, students' roles are constantly changing
- They are always new lessons to be learned

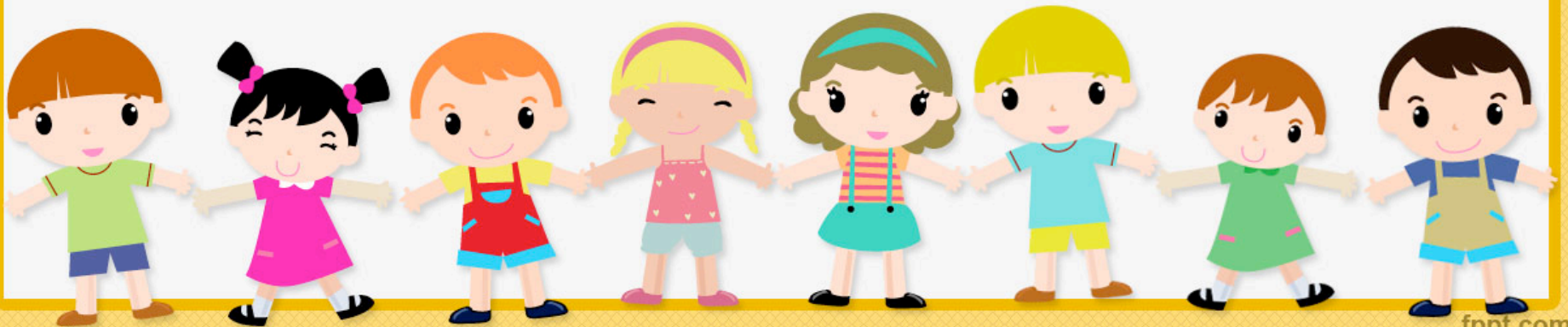
“Good teacher find ways to challenge the brightest students, including letting them explore their own interests.”

-Kasten & Clarke (1993)



## Question 4: Don't the Youngest Children in a Multi-Age Classroom Feel Overwhelmed or Inferior?

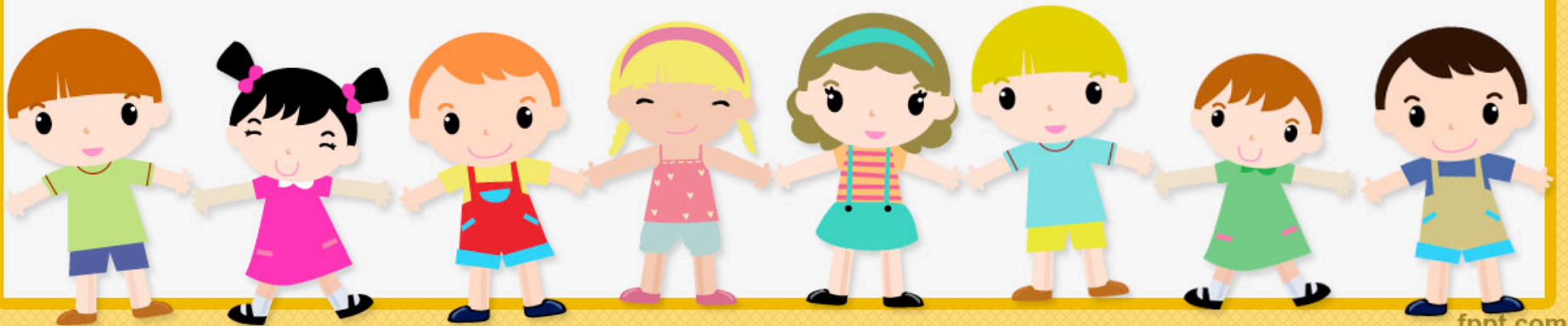
- People are social creatures who learn from their environments and one another
- Learning in the classroom not only occurs academically, but socially as well
- In such environment, younger students begin to gain confidence in themselves and their ability to learn





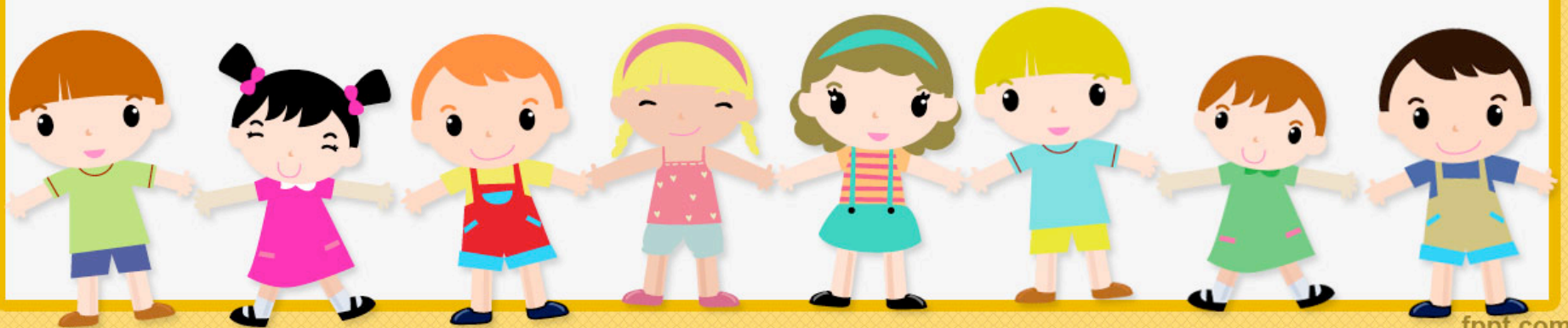
## Question 5: How Do You Accommodate the Successful Social Development/Progress of Children Who Are Mixed in One Class?

- In a combined classroom, students learn at their own pace
- This setting promotes personalized learning experiences
  - Students do not feel pressured
- Older students feel motivated and challenged to assist the younger ones
- Younger one will try to surpass expectations and mimic the older students



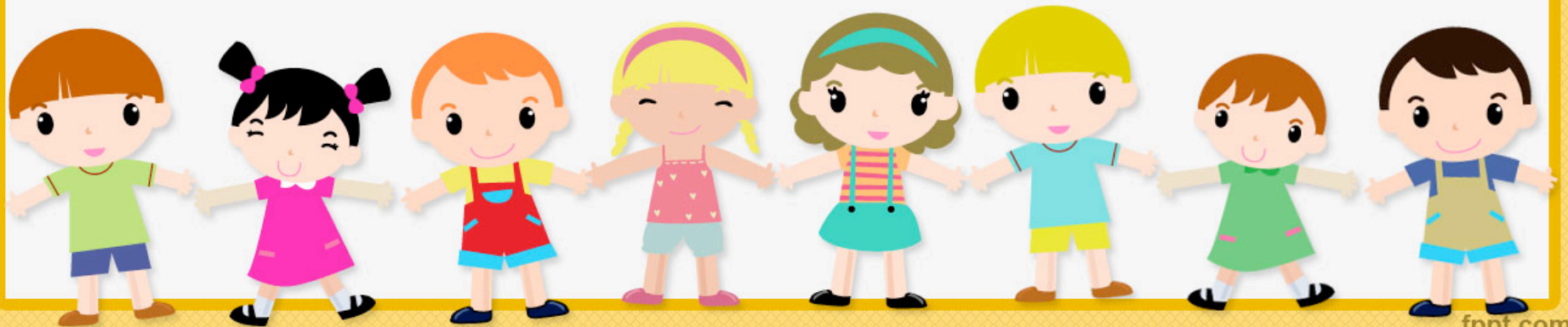
## Question 6: What Happens When These Children Go on to Other More Traditional Classrooms?

- The lessons students' learned in a combined classroom carry on
- Provide students' the opportunity to show others how cooperate and work together
- Allow students to develop lifelong skills such as leadership, helping other people, and being lifelong learners



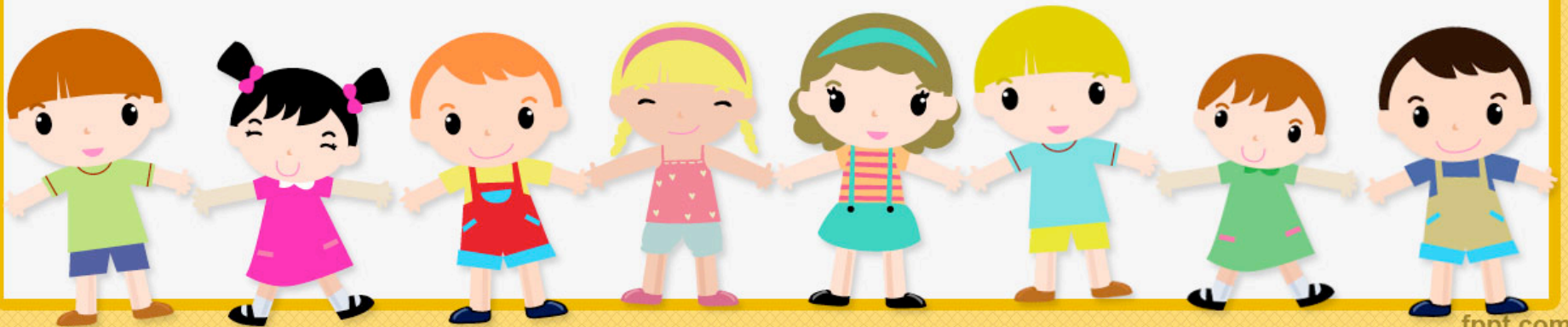
# Challenges

- The combined classroom can generate a few barriers to the people involved:
  - Learner
  - Teacher
  - Community & School



# Challenges for the Learner

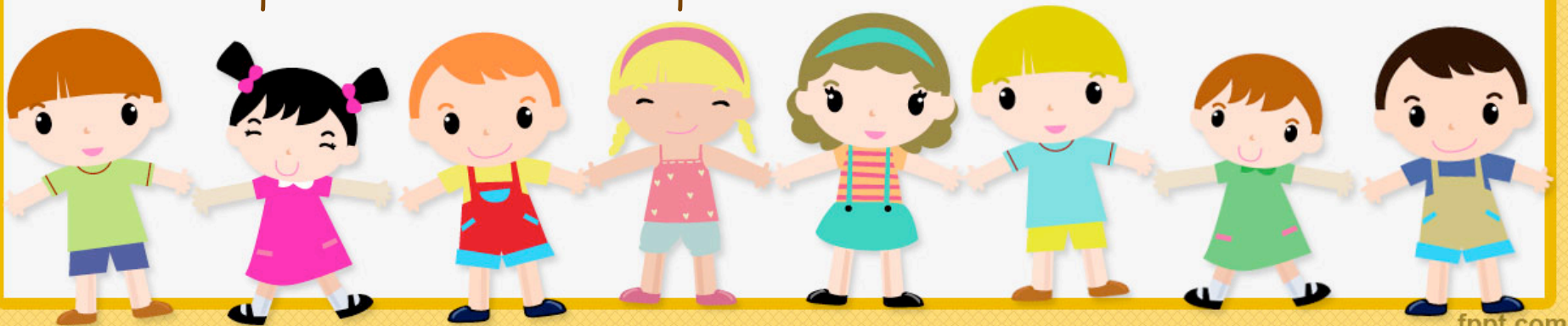
- Need to be more:
  - Disciplined
  - Focused
  - Independent
  - Resourceful
- Take on a leadership role





# Challenges for the Teacher

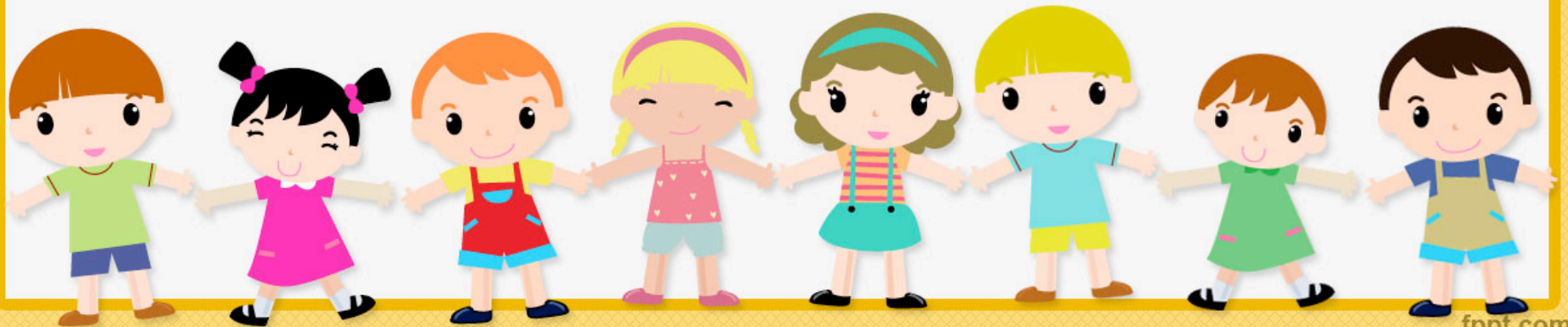
- Unprepared/lack of planning time
- More planning and preparation
- More difficult to teach
- Curriculum designed for single grade class settings
- Complaints from parents





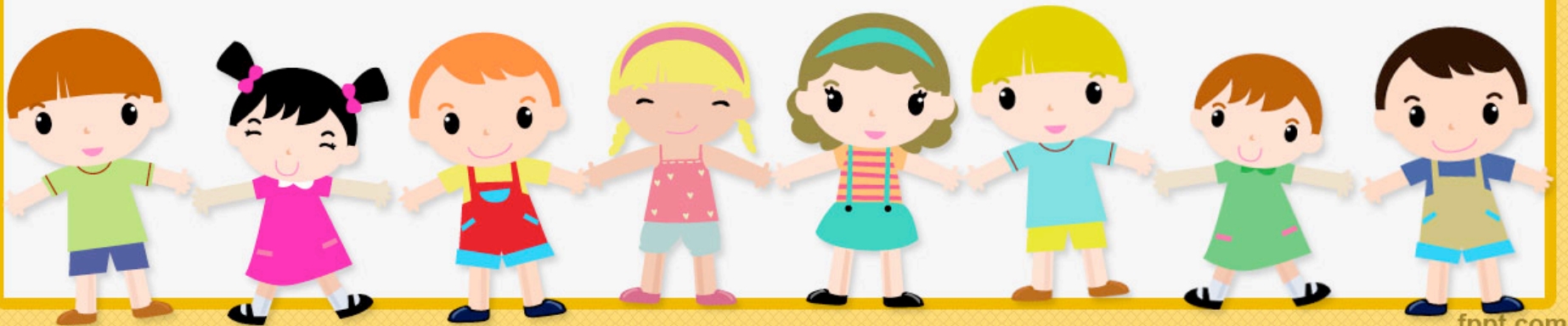
# Challenges for the Community & School

- Administration lack necessary resources and funds to prepare staff for the demands of combined classroom settings
- Poor student achievement if:
  - Teachers are not properly trained
  - Programs do not have required resources
- No workshops for teachers and parents on how effectively to deal with combined classrooms



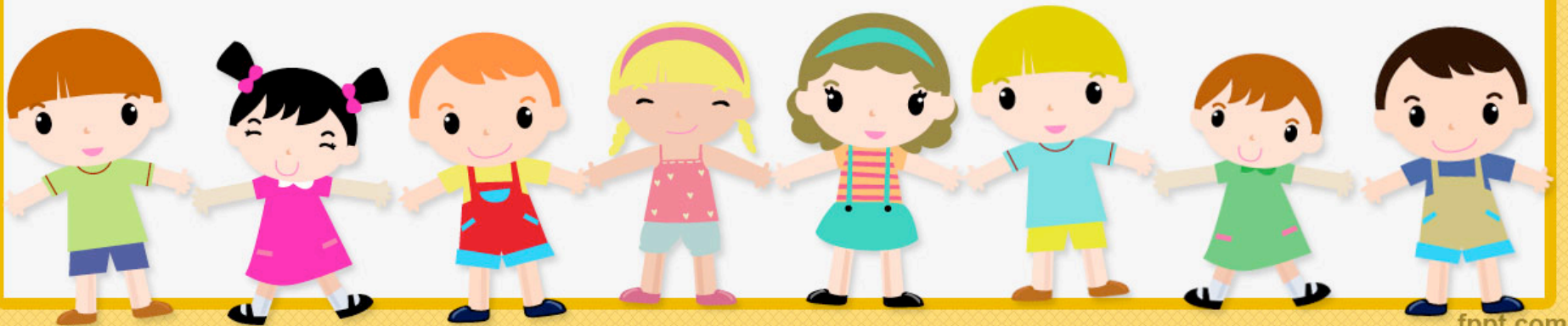
# Benefits

- Embracing Individualism
  - Allowed to work at own pace and level, not forced to be at a certain level
  - Safe, accepting, diverse environment with less competition
  - Students feel they can take risks



# Benefits (cont'd)

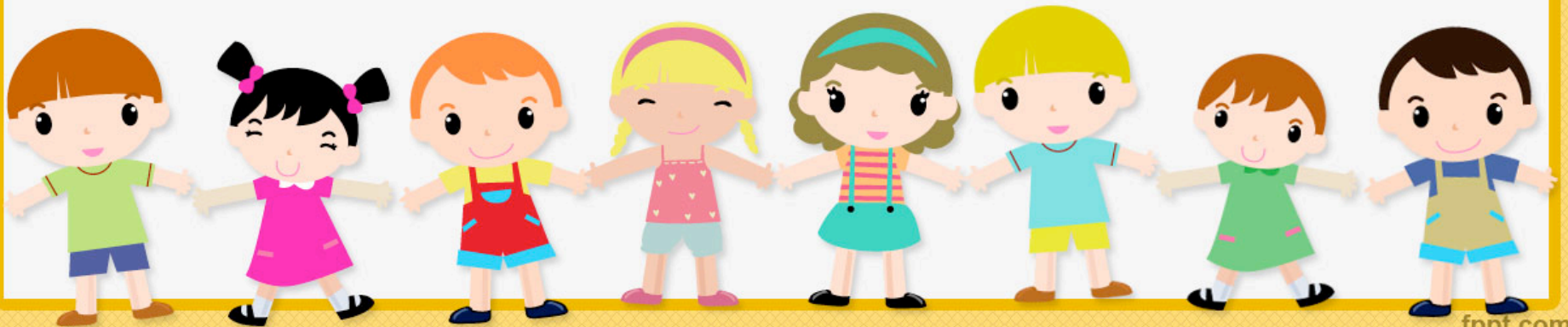
- Collaborative Learning
  - Students learn to work with others and independently
  - Older students are guides and mentors, which requires higher levels of thinking
  - More responsibility given to students



# Benefits (cont'd)

- Academic Performance

- Enrichment: Younger students exposed to older students' material
- Mixed ability grouping
- Focuses on strengths, not weaknesses
- Equal or better performance!

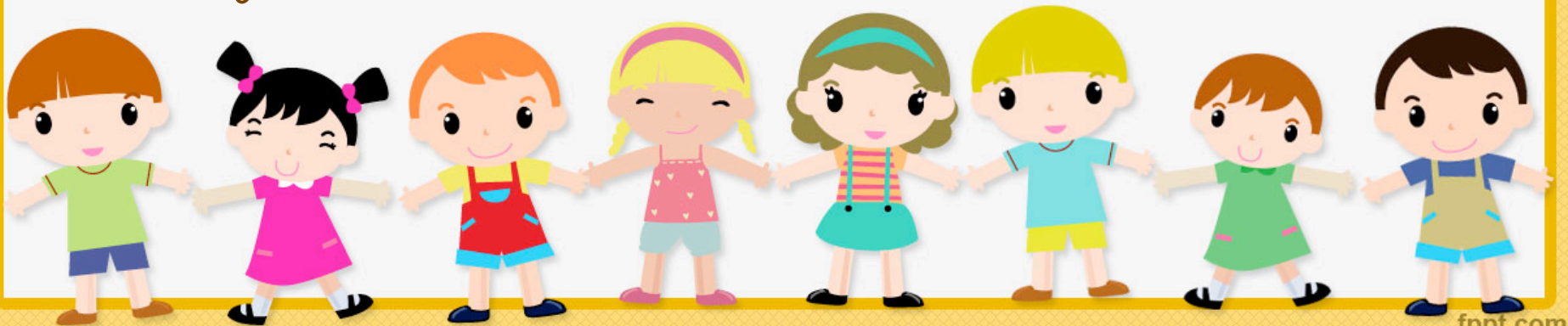




# Benefits (cont'd)

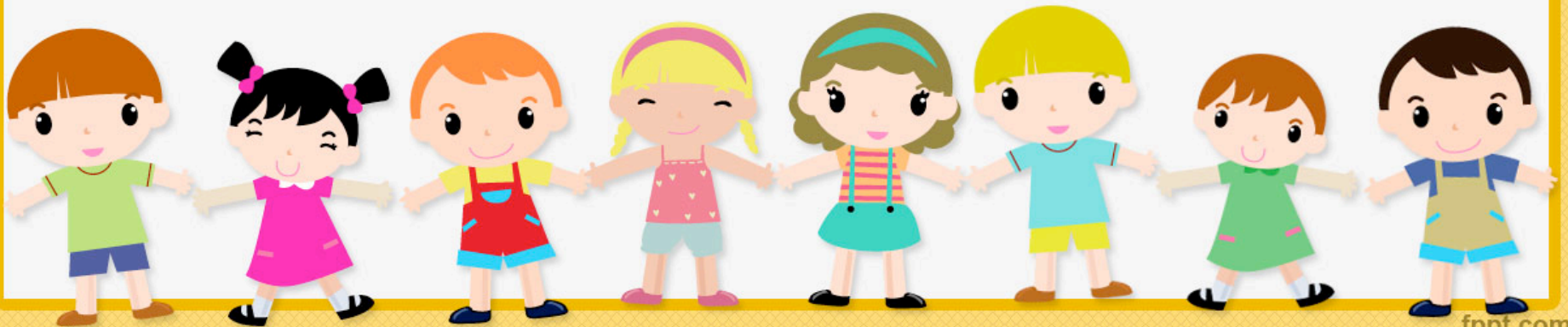
- Social Benefits

- One group motivates the other
- Fewer anxieties may develop because educational atmosphere is conducive not only to academic growth, but also to social growth
- More like the “real world”
- Students make friends with children of variety of ages



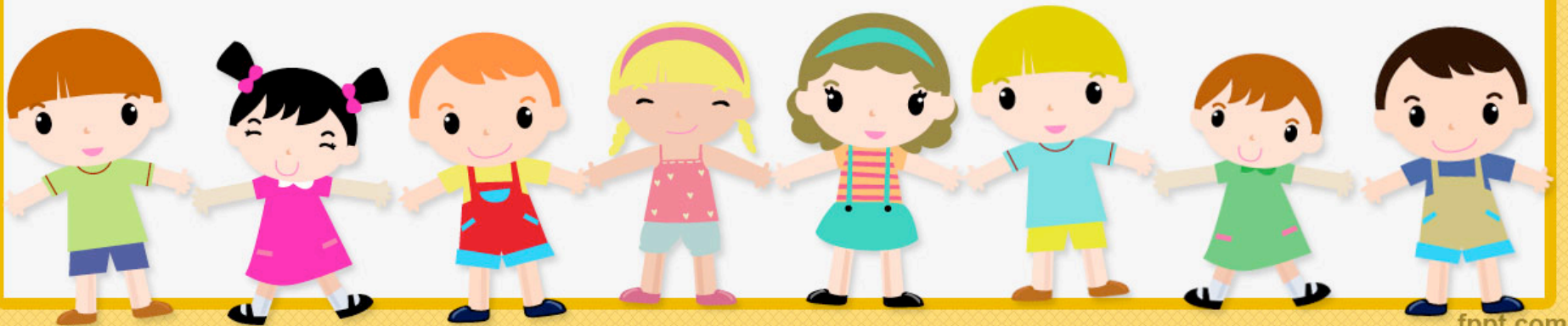
# Benefits (cont'd)

- Impact on Self-Esteem
  - More focus on student strengths
  - Students are peer tutors, which can boost their self-esteem
  - Student's success increases their self-esteem and confidence
  - Develop leadership skills



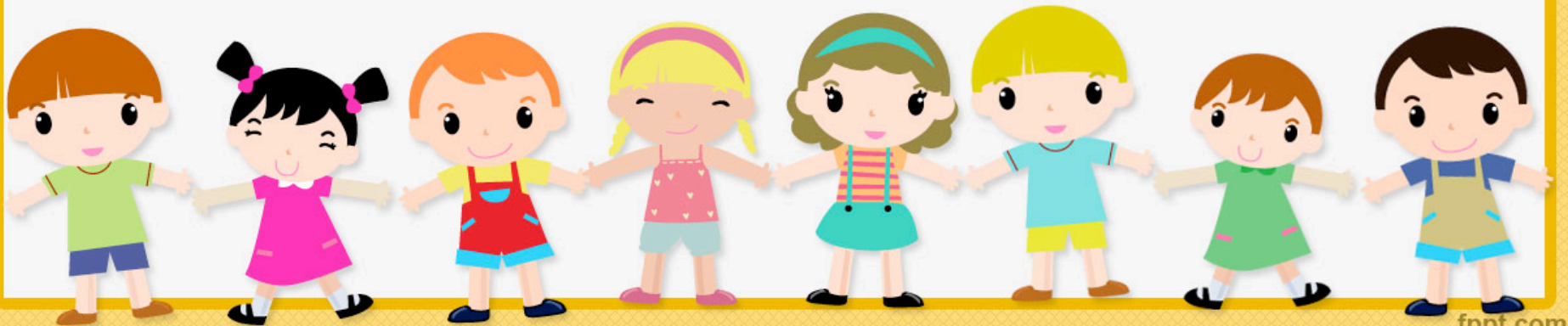
# Drawbacks

- Adoption rate of this classroom model is very slow
- Hesitant parents
- Teachers giving up power
- Still using standardized tests and benchmarks



# Drawbacks

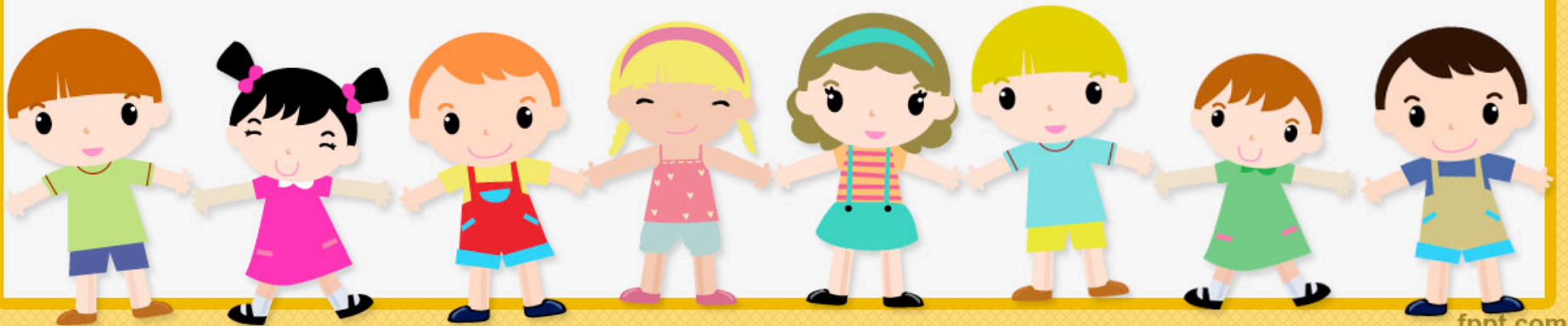
- Studies showed that language test results proved to be lower in combined classrooms
- Lack of formal teacher preparation = system resorts to “laissez-faire” approach → teachers learn as they go





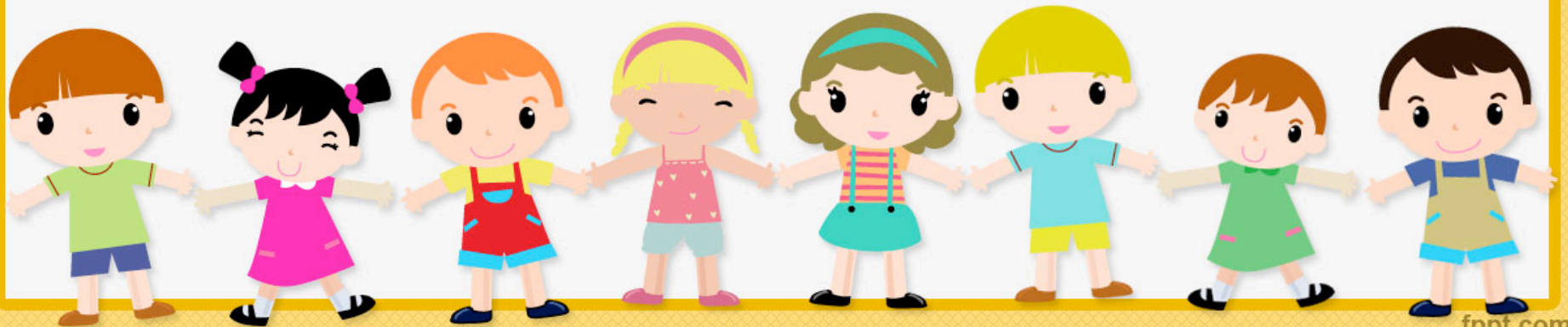
# Suggested Teaching Strategies

- Teacher Instruction & Independent Learning
- Peer Tutoring & Cooperative Learning
- Subject Matter & Differentiated Learning



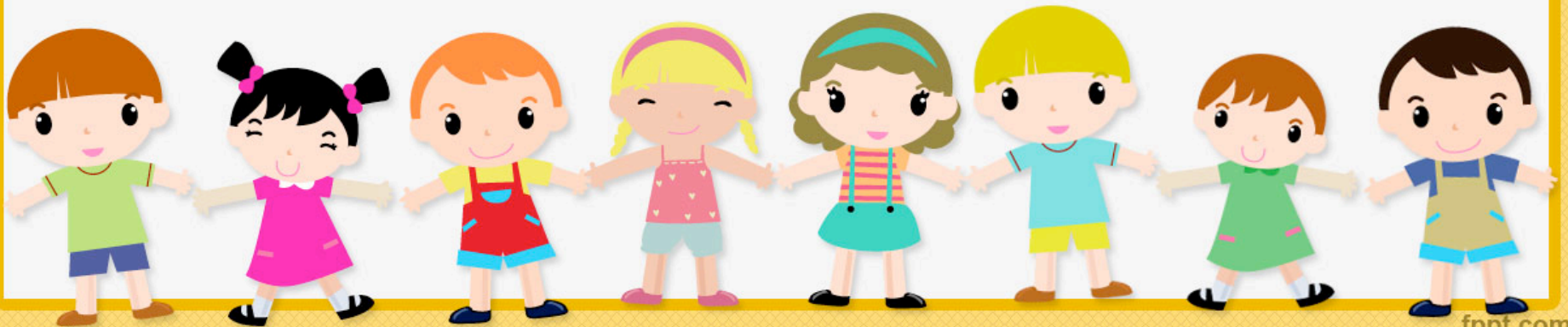
# Teacher Instruction & Independent Learning

- Teacher introduce the lesson
  - Break down parts and answers questions
- Student perform tasks independently
  - Replicate task demonstrate by teacher
- Teacher monitor students' progress
  - Teacher can interfere to help students



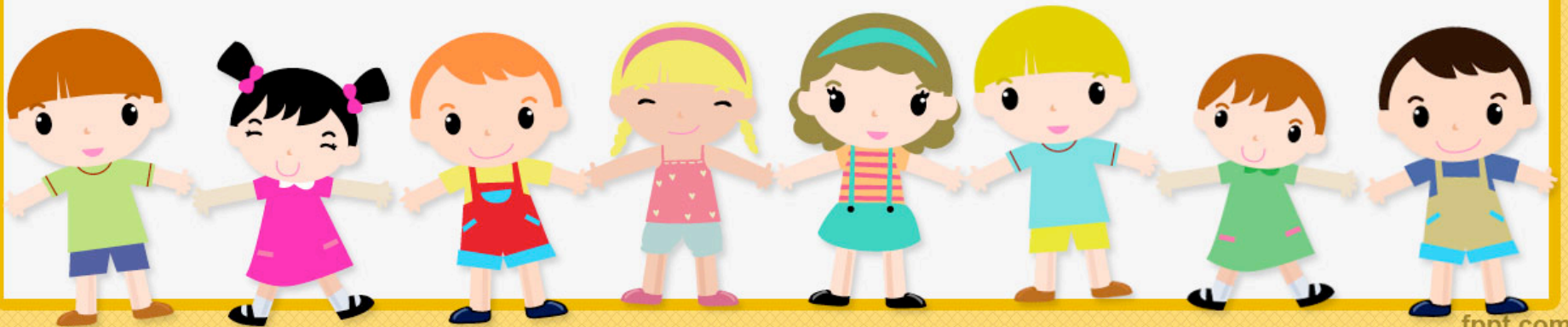
# Peer Tutoring & Cooperative Learning

- Teacher gives all students a task to do
  - Leaves things up to the group to figure out
- Students are put in a collaborative setting
  - Older students take the lead (leadership)
  - Younger students model task (modeling)
  - Tutoring/Shared responsibility
- Teacher ask one of the students in the group to demonstrate the learned task
  - Validation & self-esteem → positive reinforcement



# Subject Matter & Differentiated Learning

- Horizontal Integration
  - Multiple subjects being taught to more than one group in a class setting
- Vertical Integration
  - Same subject matter being taught across multiple difficulty levels

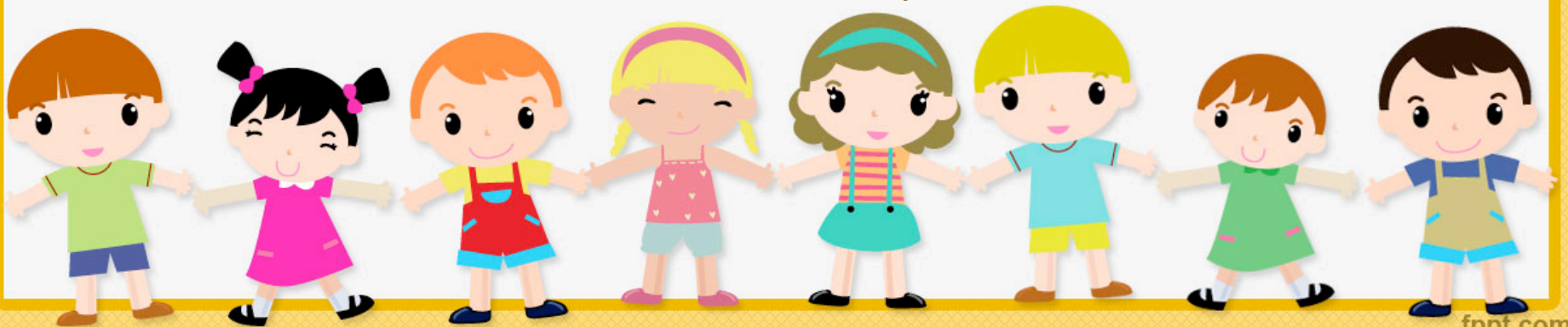
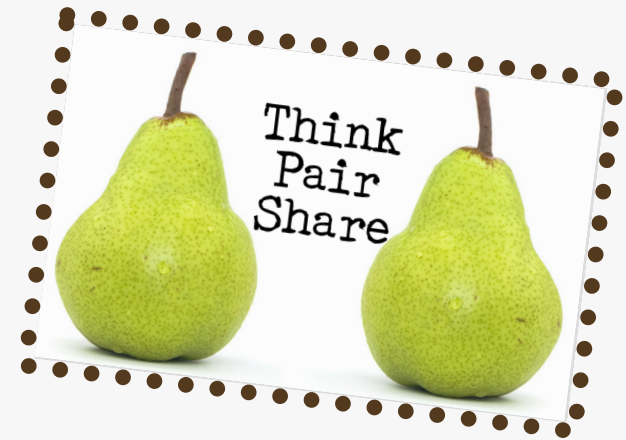




# Activity

With the assigned combined grades and subject area at your table, you and your team are to create a brief lesson activity using one of the three teaching strategies discussed.

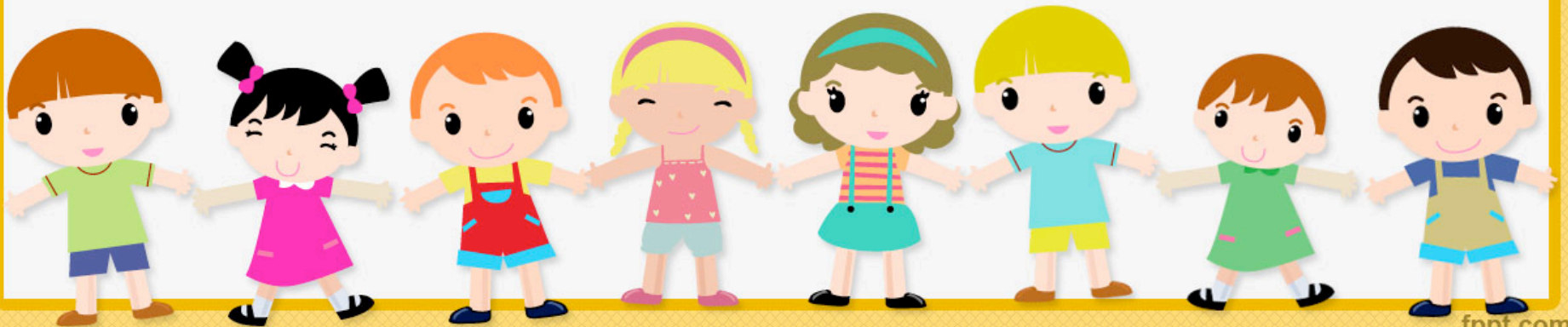
What kind of preparation will you need to do in order to implement the chosen teaching model in your sample lesson? Discuss how you will assess each grade based on the chosen teaching strategy.



# My Personal Experience

- Grade 1/2 French (Younger Grade)
  - Challenging
  - Noticeable learning gap
- Grade 5/6 French (Older Grade)
  - Collaboration
  - Flexibility

Absolutely love it!

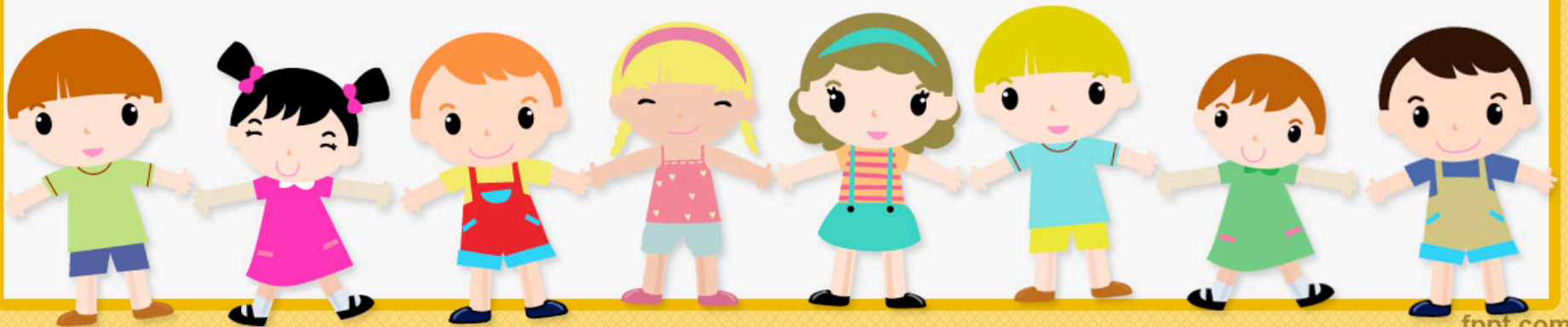


# Resources

- Books
- Magazines
- Articles
- Internet
- Most importantly... NETWORKING!



Talk to other teachers.





# Questions?

Comments & Suggestions are most welcomed ☺.

Or, if you would like more research information on the topic, please contact me:

@ Email: [nyen@lbpearson.qc.ca](mailto:nyen@lbpearson.qc.ca)



# Thank You!

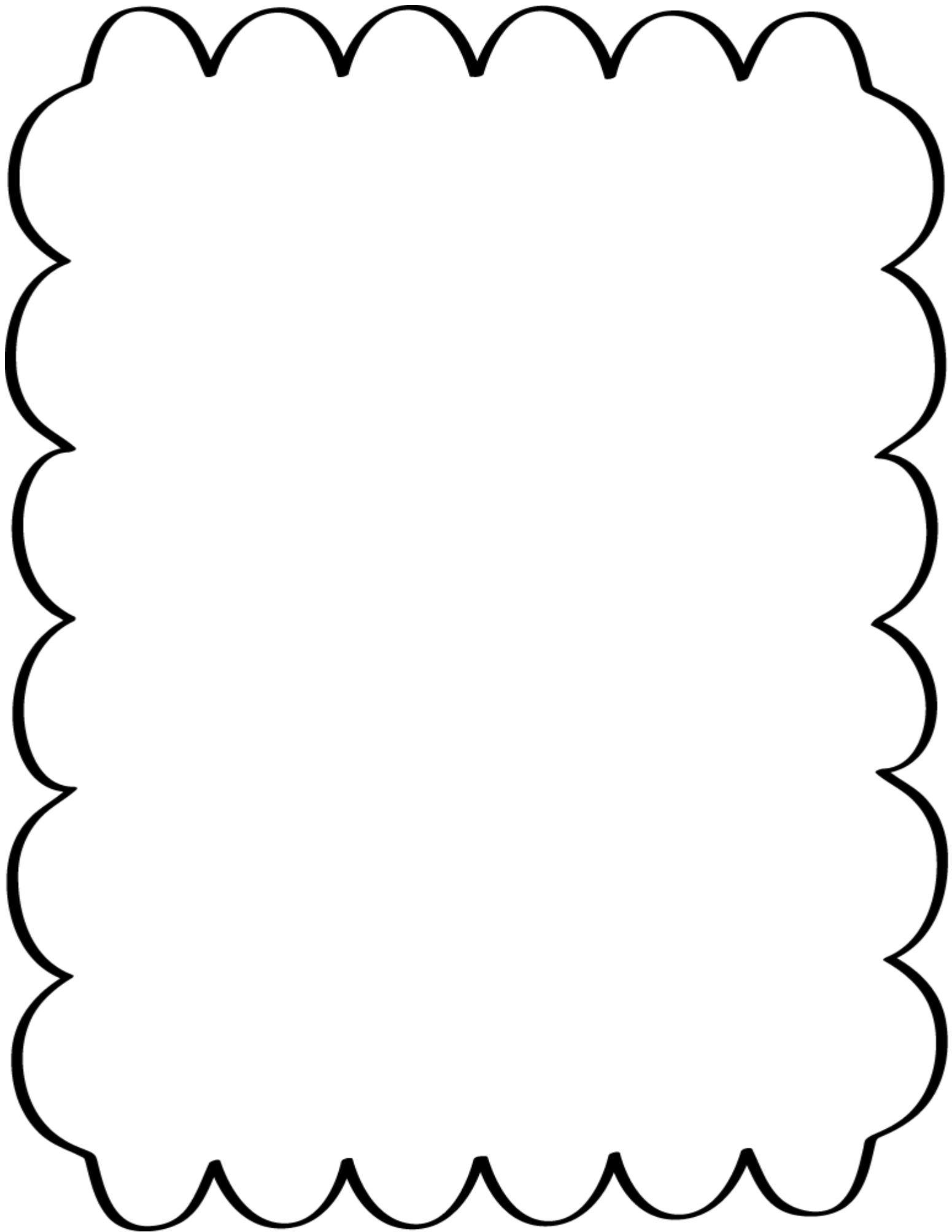


The  
Everything  
Book

for Combined  
Classroom Teachers



By  
Netty Yen  
Workshop for New Teachers  
Lester B. Pearson School Board  
Monday, April 22, 2013



# Acknowledgements

Over the past eight years, I have been involved in education in so many ways, which allowed me the opportunity to experience teaching in various contexts in and out of the classroom that put me in different teaching roles. Those roles led me to realize that I would be a great innovative educator. Along the road, I have encountered three amazing educational leaders that became the most influential people in my journey to becoming a teacher.

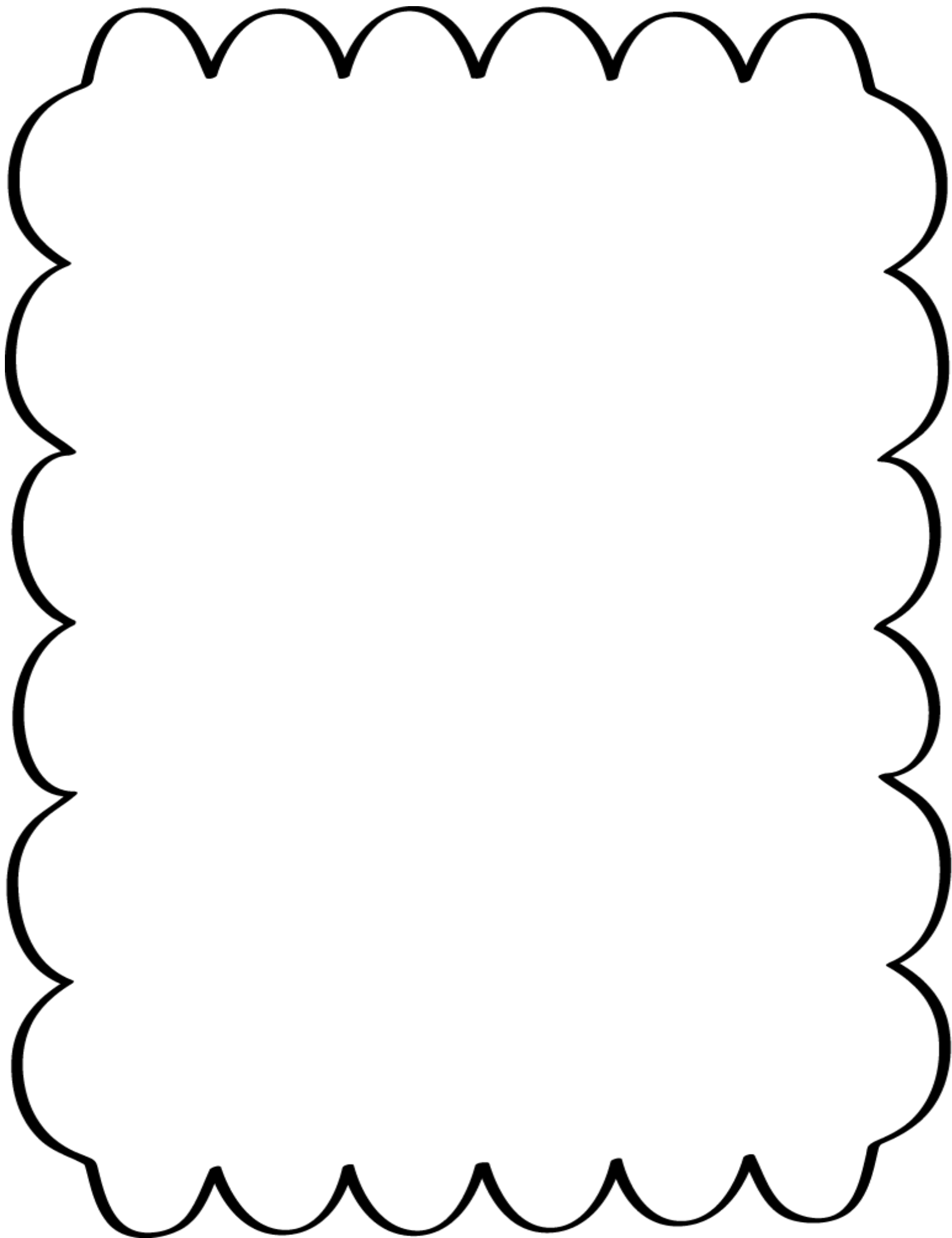
I want to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Patrick Baker, Mr. David Dillon, and last but not least, Mr. Sam Bruzzese. I want to thank them for their guidance, encouragement and support during my process of becoming a teacher. They were most helpful with their advices and inspiring discussions. They have provided, with kindness, their insight and suggestions, which are precious to me.

My most sincere thanks goes to my project supervisor, but also, mentor, Mr. Sam Bruzzese for believing in me and giving me the opportunity to start my teaching career at his school. He is a very wise but also, a calm, happy, and easy-going man. By working for him, I learned to not sweat the small stuff, and to loosen up. He also taught me to look at life from a different angle. Sometimes things do not have to be perfect, they are perfect just the way there are.

And of course, I would like to express my eternal gratitude to my parents for their everlasting love and support. Not to forget, Peanut, for being the most loving and loyal friend by keeping me company during long correction nights, assignments, projects, and so much more!

Netty Yen

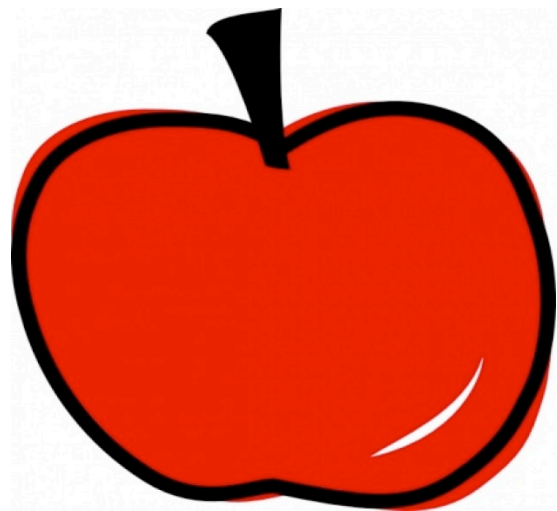




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Change is the end result  
of all true learning.  
- Leo Buscaglia





# Preface

The study of combined classroom environments emerged from my personal experiences as an elementary school teacher and as a means of personal development. I have been teaching combined classrooms for two years and the purpose of my study was to explore the various benefits of a combined classroom structure, its teaching strategies and challenges. The end result provided me with new insights and challenged the status quo that teaching is at its best in single-aged classrooms settings.

Teachers have the most pressure and challenging time adapting to combined classrooms. It is not that they are under qualified, but rather because they are unprepared due to the lack of time given to prepare for these classes. Combined classrooms are not more difficult to teach; they take much more planning and preparation. This means that if a teacher finds out at the beginning of the year (which is often the case – like myself) that they will be teaching a combined class – it will give them very limited time to adapt to the new teaching model, especially if they are new to teaching.

After having a tumultuous and challenging start to my teaching career that involved teaching combined classrooms with little knowledge of this instruction model and the lack of appropriate resources, I decided to take charge and do research, as well as create a handbook to help educators. This little handbook I put together is intended for new teachers of a combined classroom. It is a comprehensive and detailed summary on everything you need to know about a combined classroom, structured for a quick reference use. Everything from the teaching strategies, classroom management, challenges to how to deal with difficult parents, is included in this little booklet. Hope it will come in handy to you!



# The Combined Classroom

## WHAT IS A COMBINED CLASSROOM?

What is a combined classroom? A combined classroom, also known as a multigrade classroom or a split classroom, is a classroom model in which, the teacher instructs students from two or more adjacent grade levels simultaneously.



## WHY DO COMBINED CLASSROOMS EXIST?

Combined classes are created intentionally because of uneven enrolment. A lot of schools do not have enough students to make full classes of two different grade levels. As a result, two grades are combined into one classroom.

## WHAT IS THE CURRENT PROBLEM IN EDUCATION?

Currently, combined classrooms are ever growing in schools around the world. Novice teachers are expected to exit Teacher College with all the skills necessary to perform in a classroom. Unfortunately, most programs do not prepare future teachers on how to teach in different classroom models. The combined classroom... How to teach it?

KEEP ON READING!





## Know the Challenges

There are many challenges with regards to a combined classroom. Assigning a child to a combined classroom affects all the stakeholders: students, teachers, principals, parents and their communities. Knowing the challenges it poses can help alleviate your anxiety and you can better prepare for an effective classroom practice. Once you are aware of what to expect from a combined classroom, you can adjust your teaching style accordingly. On the next few pages are some pointers.

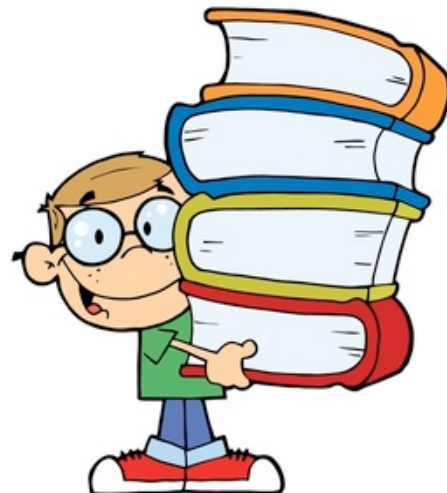
# CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS

These classroom types pose many challenges for students. They require them to be more disciplined, focused, independent and resourceful. Students must be able to handle the autonomy that is inherent with this teaching model. Students must be disciplined enough to understand that they cannot consume all the instructor's time, but rather share their time. Being part of a combined classroom model forces students to raise their consciousness levels and be more thoughtful of how they consume the teacher's time.

The older students in these classes must quickly learn to take on leadership roles to be able to guide their new classmates. The communities' focus of combined class force these behaviors to come out of students as a natural adaptation of their new environment. Students who come from same-age classrooms and put into combined classes will especially be thrown off at first, but will have no choice, but to eventually integrate themselves into the system.

## STUDENT:

- Needs to be more:
  - Disciplined
  - Focused
  - Independent
  - Resourceful
- Takes on a leadership role

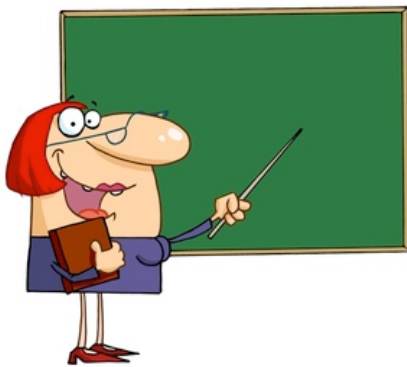


# CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS

Teachers have the most pressure and challenging time adapting to combined classrooms. It is not that they are under qualified, but rather because they are unprepared due to the lack of time given to prepare for these classes. Combined classrooms are not more difficult to teach; they take much more planning and preparation. This means that if a teacher find out at the beginning of the year (which is often the case) that they will be teaching combined classes, it will give them very limited time to adapt to the new teaching model, especially if they are new to teaching.

Another challenge for teachers is the curriculum. The curriculum was designed for single age class settings yet in combined classrooms, teachers must monitor the progress of their students using the same rules and guidelines. Lastly, teachers are often the most consistent beings in children's lives. Especially in early childhood development, having consistent figures in their lives is quite important. Teachers do not often have the experiences of teaching the same group for two or three years in a row. It is already challenging as it is to take a child centric approach to teaching, but adding a time limit to understanding each child and a strict curriculum to follow does not help.

## TEACHER



- Unprepared/lack of planning time
- More planning and preparation
- More difficult to teach
- More organization required
- More meticulous record keeping to track students' progress
- Curriculum designed for single grade class settings
- Complaints from parents

# CHALLENGES FOR PRINCIPALS

Principals are the school managers and must ensure that their students are well taught and cared for. They are the ones who decide to create combined classes and are often the ones to deliver the news to their appointed teachers who will be teaching them. Below are three main challenges for principals with regard to combined classes.

Firstly, the lag time between finding out the enrollment numbers, creating the class plans and assigning teachers to them. This can be very stressful especially when principals are lacking the necessary resources to make the best decisions. The second main challenge for principals is preparing the teachers for such an endeavor. This can be quite difficult to do with all the preparation work that teachers will have at the beginning of a school year. Perhaps conducting workshops that specifically deal with combined classroom settings could be a start. Lastly, the most challenging aspect for principals is they must deal with the students' parents and justify to them why their children have been placed in combined classroom environments.

## PRINCIPAL

- Administration lack necessary resources and funds to prepare staff for the demands of combined classroom settings



- Poor student achievement if:
  - Teachers are not properly trained
  - Programs do not have required resources
- No workshops for teachers and parents on how effectively to deal with combined classrooms



## CHALLENGES FOR PARENTS

Parents are the last stakeholders and often the neglected ones. Often times, it is the parents who question these new practices. They are often concerned with their children's educational development and must be assured that such a classroom model will not slow down their progress. It is especially challenging to parents because they have most likely never experienced, let alone heard of such a classroom setting before. Teachers and principals must find the best ways to assure parents that these classrooms demonstrate many benefits that traditional class environments do not possess.

Help parents better understand combined classrooms. Here are a few things parents can do to help their child succeed in a combined classroom:

### Be active and involved in your child's school life

- Create a strong relationship with the teacher
- Communicate regularly with your child's teacher about your child's progress and ask about strategies that are implemented to cover the curriculum

### Stay connected with the school

- Ask your child questions about schoolwork brought home
- Talk with your child about her school experience
- Attend curriculum nights & parent-teacher meetings, as well as other school events
- Be part of governing board
- Find out how you can volunteer

### Become familiar with the combined classroom teaching model

- Read information about combined classrooms online or at the library
- Learn about the curriculum for your child's grade





## Know the Benefits

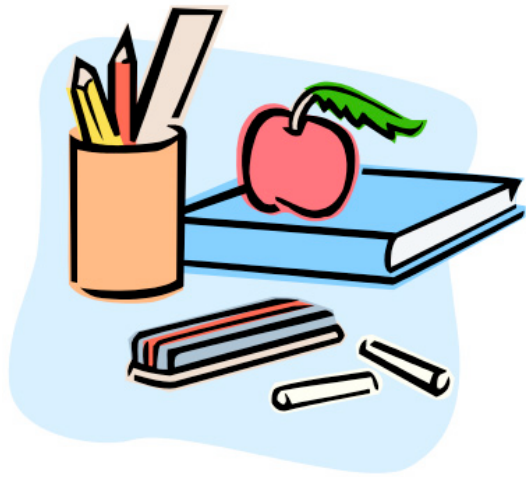
Same age classrooms are designed based on standards and benchmarks that a particular child should have attained by a certain age. These types of class settings compare and contrast same age students to their peers in order to assess a child's competencies. When children are classified by their age, aptitude expectations are based on a single constant rather than the variables that shape their lives (Stone, 2011). All children's upbringings are different and this variable alone has arguably the most significant impact on a child's learning curve.

Combined classrooms are by nature designed to take into account a child's individualism regardless of age. In such a classroom setting, rather than base lessons on benchmarked curriculums, they foster the idea of collaborative learning thus, "offering educators the opportunity to reform our schooling system to *fit the needs of children*, rather than trying to fit our children to graded schools (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Davis, 1992)" (Stone, 1998, p. 15).

# Here are some Benefits...

- Embracing Individualism
  - Allowed to work at own pace and level, not forced to be at a certain level
  - Safe, accepting, diverse environment with less competition
  - Students feel they can take risks
- Collaborative Learning
  - Students learn to work with others and independently
  - Older students are guides and mentors, which requires higher levels of thinking
  - More responsibility given to students
- Academic Performance
  - Enrichment: Younger students exposed to older students' material
  - Mixed ability grouping
  - Focuses on strengths, not weaknesses
  - Equal or better performance!
- Social Benefits
  - One group motivates the other
  - Fewer anxieties may develop because educational atmosphere is conducive not only to academic growth, but also to social growth
  - More like the "real world"
  - Students make friends with children of variety of ages
- Impact on Self-Esteem
  - More focus on student strengths
  - Students are peer-tutors, which can boost their self-esteem
  - Student's success increases their self-esteem and confidence
  - Develop leadership skills





# Effective Combined Classroom Teaching

1. Well-organized and planned lessons and activities
2. A well-managed classroom that is conducive to learning – have all the necessary resources available, so that students can focus on the learning process
3. A cooperative and inviting learning environment where independent learning is balanced with teacher's directed activities, peer tutoring, as well as group work
4. A well-prepared teacher makes use of a variety of teaching strategies to suit the needs of all learners in the classroom. She usually acts as a FACILITATOR in the learning process of their students, rather than as the only source of knowledge in the classroom
5. A well-designed merge of both grades' curriculum, where students are exposed to various subject matters and a variety of activities suitable for each student's academic level

# Basic Principles of Combined Classroom Teaching



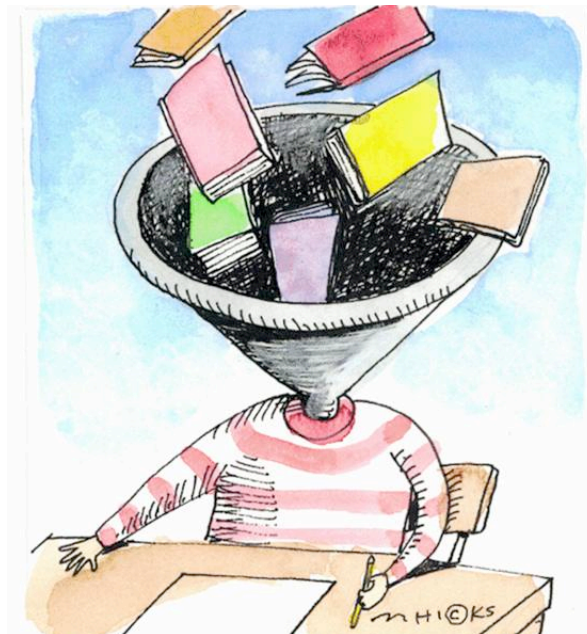
1. Every child is unique
2. Children learn best from hands-on experience
3. Children do and will learn from each other
4. Role of teacher in a classroom: create and manage a learning environment that will be conducive to learning and teaching
5. Implementation of the curriculum must take into account the varied abilities, levels, learning styles and interests of each student
6. The value of any educational program will be judged according to the quality of the teaching, which means whether the children actually learn what they are expected to learn and how well they have learned, than the kind of classroom organization
7. The combined classroom model is more considerate and realistic of the needs of learners and reflects real life

# Components of a Combined Classroom

1. Learner – the core of the learning process
2. Teachers – an essential figure in the learning of the child –  
Can also be referred to as facilitators, as they lead the class in such a way that allow students to apply the information to their own situations, making their own learning more meaningful
3. Parents and other adults involved with the child

Children are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge.

- Jean Piaget



# Teaching Strategies

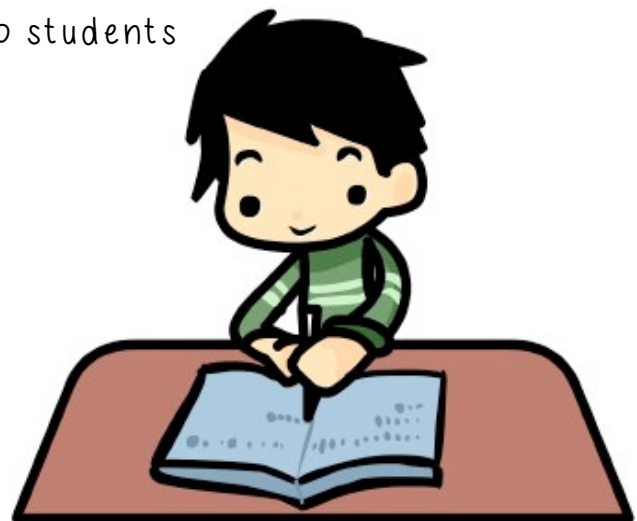
In any classroom setting regardless of age, there are two main factors that will influence a child's learning ability. The first factor is not controllable; the child's background and life situation. The second factor can be controlled; the teacher and his or her ability to teach. All teachers are faced with the responsibility to guide and nurture their students. With regards to combined classrooms environments, teachers are rarely, if at all prepared in university for this kind of situation (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). The following will attempt to shed light on the matter and offer three suggested teaching strategies for combined classrooms.



# Teacher Instruction & Independent Learning

The first teaching strategy is also the most traditional and widely used teaching strategy under the umbrella of constructivism. It involves the teacher being in the spotlight and thoroughly giving a lesson. The next step in this model is to have the students independently perform the task that was demonstrated by the teacher, while the instructor monitors the progress of his or her students. The last stage of this process is integrating the lesson with other lessons learned. This part attempts to take the conscious acts and render them unconscious and natural. This is the stage of learning where the lesson is solidified in the student's mind. At this point the student can focus less on learning the application and more on the implementation of it.

- Teacher introduce the lesson
  - Break down parts and answers questions
- Student perform tasks independently
  - Replicate task demonstrate by teacher
- Teacher monitor students' progress
  - Teacher can interfere to help students





# Peer Tutoring & Cooperative Learning

In this teaching strategy, the instructor gives all students within a group a task to master. The instructor then leaves things up to the group to make sure that all students master the task. This method will force all students within a group to make sure they understand the task clearly and be able to model it. Modeling is an extremely important ability in the cognitive development of children (Stone, 2007). Students who model an approach can see how others do the same task and perhaps begin to be more critical about the way they have previously modeled the lesson. This type of approach teaches students that there are many different perspectives in life. Socially, this can allow students to be more open of the way others do things. As well, cooperative work strengthens interpersonal skills, as students will become more comfortable speaking in front of a group. This teaching method gives teachers insight into the minds of their students, by observing how each student models a lesson and perhaps in the future, cater to his or her individual learning styles. Throughout the collaborative group work, the teacher can closely monitor the students and ensure that they are all cooperating and participating.

- Teacher gives all students a task to do
  - Leaves things up to the group to figure out
- Students are put in a collaborative setting
  - Older students take the lead (leadership)
  - Younger students model task (modeling)
  - Tutoring/Shared responsibility
- Teacher ask one of the students in the group to demonstrate the learned task
  - Validation & self-esteem → positive reinforcement



# Subject Matter & Differentiated Learning

Teachers of multi-age classes must carefully organize their lesson plans. Unlike same-age class environments, where teachers generally follow a curriculum and the focus on diversity is less prevalent, multi-age instructors must take more time to carefully plan what they will be teaching. There are two types of integration, horizontal integration and vertical integration. When choosing lesson plans, it is important that the idea is broad enough that it can cater to all levels of difficulty.

Horizontal integration involves multiple subjects being taught to more than one group of students in a class setting. Generally speaking, this type of teaching strategy can be quite confusing, as it is easier to focus on one subject than to focus on many at one time. Vertical integration involves teaching the same subject matter across multiple difficulty levels. The vertical integration teaching strategy is what makes multi-age classrooms so effective. Again, teachers must carefully plan their lessons.

- Horizontal Integration
  - Multiple subjects being taught to more than one group in a class setting
- Vertical Integration
  - Same subject matter being taught across multiple difficulty levels





# Classroom Management

## Instructions

1. Make sure to have different lessons in every subject for the two grade level
2. Create lessons and activities that cater to students' ability and interest
3. Prepare lessons and activities that require group and individual work throughout the day
4. Alternate whole group activities with small group activities and individual work throughout the day
5. Prepare two different sets of tests – one for each grade level
6. Provide students with necessary instructions and materials to work as a whole group, small group or independently
7. Allow students of both grades to work with each other
8. Treat students from both grade level as one in the classroom with diverse activities appropriate to their levels



## Students Management

1. Assign seats for different types of activities (e.g. whole group, small group & individual)
2. Have daily classroom schedule in a visible place to all students
3. Have weekly/monthly job chart for the students
4. Have clear classroom routines when doing each type of activity (e.g. whole group, small group & individual)
5. Make sure your desk is accessible to all students
6. When doing the seating arrangements, have students from both grade levels sit with one another



## Discipline

1. Set classroom rules at the beginning of the school year with the students
2. Talk to disruptive students privately
3. Treat all students equality and fairly
4. Have a system in place to monitor class behavior
5. Make sure students line up before entering and leaving the classroom
6. Have checklists to monitor accomplishments of daily activities



## Classroom Atmosphere

1. If possible, have a designated blackboard for each grade level
2. Classroom layout is flexible for change
3. Learning materials, as well as students materials are properly arranged and easily accessible to students
4. Constantly change the seating arrangements throughout the year to assure that all students get a chance to interact with everyone in the classroom
5. Label all materials and bins for the children to easily recognize its function
6. Clean and decorate the classroom in a neat, but attractive manner before the beginning of the school year
7. Establish some classroom rules to ensure students maintain cleanliness and orderliness in the classroom







## Frequently Asked Questions

This section can be resourceful to refer to before parent-teacher interviews or an informal meeting with parents of children who are enrolled in a combined classroom. Parents, as well as students can feel apprehensive about this teaching concept. The most important thing parents want to be acquainted with is the benefits their child will gain by being instructed in a combined classroom (Kasten & Clarke, 1993). As teachers, we want to be able to reassure and alleviate the parents' and the students' concerns. Thus, it is our responsibility to familiarize ourselves on this teaching model in order to be confident in answering their questions and concerns about combined classrooms.

### Question 1: How Do You Deal with Students on so Many Different Levels, Requiring so Many Different Content Areas?

"Good teaching requires that we consider each student as an individual because we are forced to assume difference rather than likeness."

- Kasten & Clarke (1993)

Remember: No two students are alike!

### Question 2: In a Multi-Age Classroom Model Won't There Be Gaps in the Curriculum and in the Children's Learning?

"The theory of covering the curriculum is ludicrous, anyways! We cannot begin to teach students everything we believe today they need to know; even if we could, our views of what they need to know would change by next week."

- Kasten & Clarke (1993)

- Students come to classrooms with different needs and learning levels
- Teach the fundamentals of learning: how to learn

### Question 3: Aren't the Oldest and Brightest Children Bored or Held Back?

- In a combined classroom, students' roles are constantly changing

- They are always new lessons to be learned

"Good teacher find ways to challenge the brightest students, including letting them explore their own interests."

-Kasten & Clarke (1993)





#### Question 4: Don't the Youngest Children in a Multi-Age Classroom Feel Overwhelmed or Inferior?

- People are social creatures who learn from their environments and one another
- Learning in the classroom not only occurs academically, but socially as well
- In such environment, younger students begin to gain confidence in themselves and their ability to learn

#### Question 5: How Do You Accommodate the Successful Social Development/Progress of Children Who Are Mixed in One Class?

- In a combined classroom, students learn at their own pace
- This setting promotes personalized learning experiences
  - Students do not feel pressured
- Older students feel motivated and challenged to assist the younger ones.
- Younger one will try to surpass expectations and mimic the older students

#### Question 6: What Happens When These Children Go on to Other More Traditional Classrooms?

- The lessons students' learned in a combined classroom carry on
- Provide students' the opportunity to show others how cooperate and work together
- Allow students to develop lifelong skills such as leadership, helping other people, and being lifelong learners.



## Helpful Tips


1. Get familiar with curriculum of both grade levels and combine them whenever possible. Compare the standards between both grades so that you can teach similar competencies in one whole group lesson. Students from both grades can benefit from various learning skills (e.g. independence, modeling, leadership, etc.) if the lesson is carefully planned.

2. Use differentiated instruction to its full potential. Have students in younger grades try work from the older grade's activities. Challenge them. On the other hand, if you have an older student who could use some extra practice, have him/ her try to explain the material being taught to a student from a younger grade. Create projects in science or social studies that students from both grades can work together. Choose interesting and important topics to be covered, in order to create deeper and more meaningful lessons.

3. When arranging your seating chart, mix students, so both grades are sitting together. Doing so will create a sense of community in the classroom, which can help management issues. Any activities that require group work will be much smoother by having both grades sit together. You want to avoid the grade division at all cost, as it creates a competitive atmosphere that is uncalled for.

4. Use novels to teach reading instead of textbooks. Novels allow you to be much more flexible with your lessons. For instance, you can tailor the questions and activities to suit the needs of both grade levels. You can have small reading circles, where members are from both grade levels. So much you can do with novels in a combined classroom... Be creative!

5. Make sure to create activities that every student in the classroom can participate at his or her own pace or academic level, without feeling rushed. Remember that not activities are going to work for both grades simultaneously, so you will have to incorporate in your daily teaching, work that students can complete individually, so that you can teach the other grade.



Helpful  
Tips

# Stay Connected

The importance of professional development is imperative for all teachers. An inspiring and well informed teacher is sure to have a positive influence of students' academic achievements, as well as personal growth. As the realm of academia is ever changing, professional development is key to a successful classroom.

Why go to teacher workshops? Because your students deserve the best you can offer them. It is essential for new, as well as veteran teachers to have constant opportunities to learn, as ongoing teacher development keeps teachers up-to-date on new research on how children learn, emerging technology tools for the classroom, new curriculum resources, and much more. Moreover, workshops provide teachers with the opportunity to learn from other.

## BENEFITS OF WORKSHOPS

- Provide both the area and tools



- Exposure from people who are experts and knowledgeable about teaching combined classrooms
  - Gain knowledge – learn something valuable from the speaker(s)
  - Get new ideas to implement in your own classroom
  - Be informed about many subjects on the field of education and its latest developments
- Networking – share ideas and references

# Useful Research References

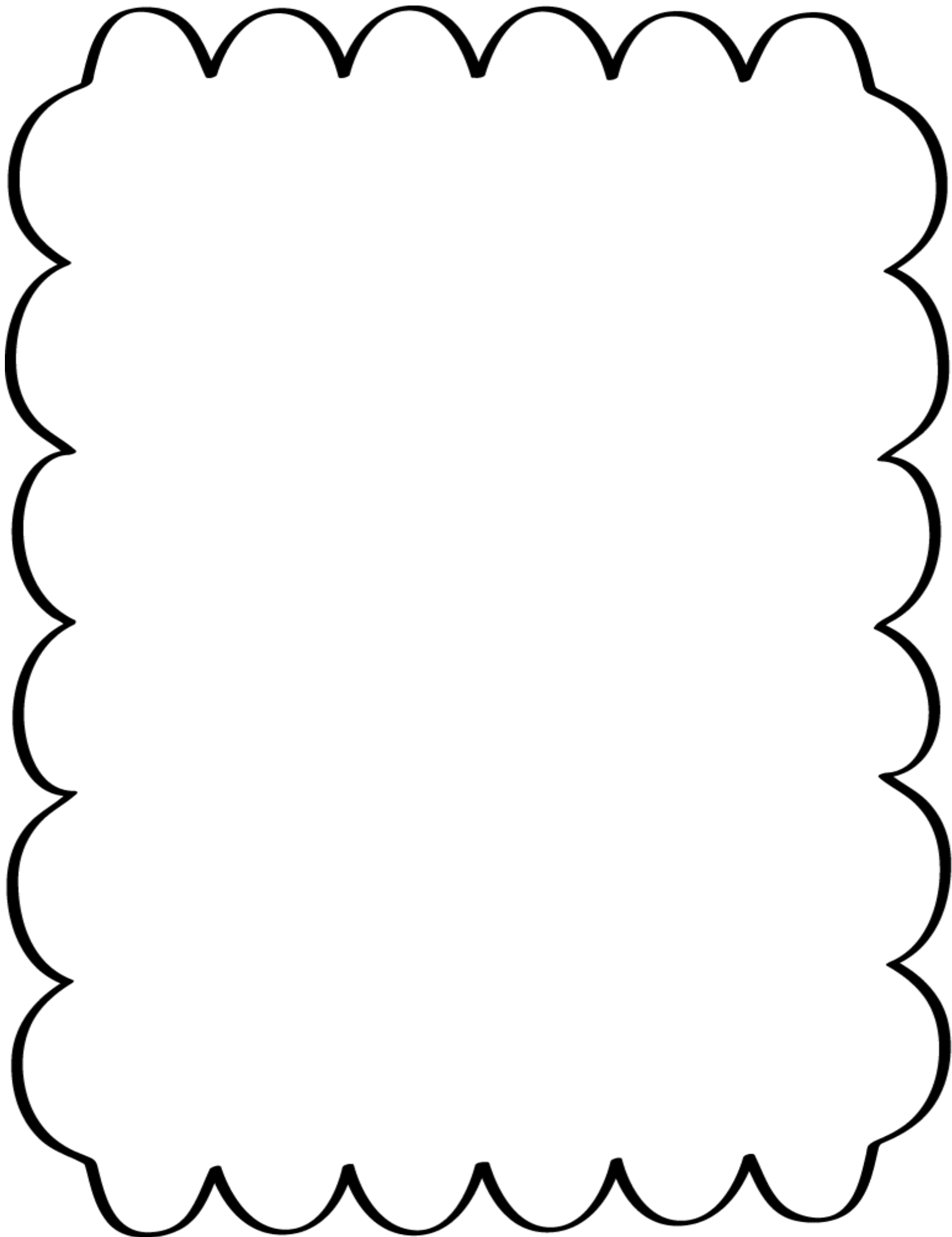


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## Notes

[illegible]







In learning  
you will teach,  
and in teaching  
you will learn.

– Phil Collins

Netty Yen©

## What?

What is a combined classroom? A combined classroom, also known as a multigrade classroom or a split classroom, is a classroom model in which, the teacher instructs students from two or more adjacent grade levels simultaneously.

## Why?

Combined classes are created intentionally because of uneven enrolment. A lot of schools do not have enough students to make full classes of two different grade levels. As a result, two grades are combined into one classroom.

## How?

In all classrooms, whether single grade or combined, encompass students performing at different achievement levels. Every classroom is unique and it is the schools' responsibility to create a classroom environment that will support the needs of all students. The combined classroom offers a nurturing atmosphere that takes into account different learning styles, social skills, as well as academic needs. It includes each student in the process.

## Get more Information



- Talk to your child's teacher or principal
- Visit the Ministry of Education website at [www.mels.qc.ca](http://www.mels.qc.ca)
- Call the Educational Services Department of Lester B. Pearson School Board at (514) 422-3000
- Visit the Lester B. Pearson School Board at [www.lbpsb.qc.ca](http://www.lbpsb.qc.ca)
- If you would like more research information of the topic, please contact me at [nyen@lbpearson.qc.ca](mailto:nyen@lbpearson.qc.ca)

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## Demystifying



## Combined Classrooms



## Research Shows...

- Students enrolled in combined classrooms learn as well as students in single-graded classrooms
- Students in combined classrooms achieve as well academically as students in single-graded classrooms - some students actually do better in language and reading
- Students in combined classrooms do better emotionally and socially given the diverse learning environment



## Benefits of Combined Classrooms

### Embracing Individualism

- Learner-centered
- Individual pace for learning

### Collaborative Learning

- Peer support & mentoring
- More responsibility given to students

### Academic Performance

- Enrichment & Reinforcement
- Focuses on strengths, not weaknesses

### Social & Emotional Benefits

- Peer motivation
- Positive & nurturing environment
- Less anxiety = more social growth

### Impact on Self-Esteem

- Increased self-esteem & confidence
- Opportunities for leadership

## Help Your Child Succeed in a Combined Classroom

### Be active and involved in your child's school life

- Create a strong relationship with the teacher
- Communicate regularly with your child's teacher about your child's progress and ask about strategies that are implemented to cover the curriculum

### Stay connected with the school

- Ask your child questions about schoolwork brought home
- Talk with your child about his/her school experience
- Attend curriculum nights & parent-teacher meetings, as well as other school events
- Be part of governing board
- Find out how you can volunteer

### Become familiar with the combined classroom teaching model

- Read information about combined classrooms online or at the library
- Learn about the curriculum for your child's grade

