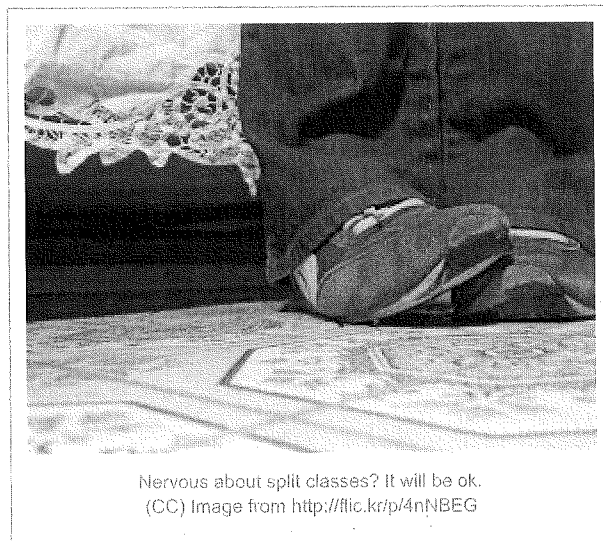


Will My Child Be OK In A Split Class?

 chriswejr.com/2012/09/09/will-my-child-be-ok-in-a-split-class/

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September 9,
2012



Each year, we set up classes and find that due to the way our enrolment numbers fall into place, we must create some split (or multigrade, combined) classes. Each year, we also have a high number of parents who are concerned about their child's placement in a split class... particularly the upper grade of a split.

I truly appreciate the concerns that parents have as they often bring up very valid questions such as:

- Why has my child been placed in a split class?
- Will my child get challenged if they are the older grade in the split?
- Will my child get the required support if they are the younger grader in the split (or the other side in which parents believe their child will get challenged more and develop faster if placed in this type of split)?
- Will students in a straight grade class gain more learning than my child?
- Will my child get bullied more in a split?
- Will my child feel they have failed because they are back with the younger grade?
- Will my child be provided with the same opportunities (field trips, projects, etc) in the split that are provided in the straight grade class?

As splits are inevitable every year (this year 60% of our classes are split classes), I feel it is important to share some key thoughts around this issue to ease some concerns of the parents.

There is much thought (and hours) put into the placement of students in classes. At the schools in which I have worked, the teachers start this process in the last term of the year as they separate their students into two-three balanced groups (based on gender, present ability, needs, required support, etc). Following this, the administration creates the first draft of classes and then presents this to the staff for feedback. By the end of the year, students are placed in classes on a temporary basis as they will need to be switched based on enrolment in September (students and families are not notified of the placement as it is likely to change). In the fall, the students and classes are shifted to make room for new students (and gaps left by students who have moved over the summer). Teachers are again given the classes to provide feedback on class composition. After all this, the classes are finalized and

students are led into their classes. **Present academic ability is only one factor and students are NOT placed in a split based solely on this (ex. students with higher academic assessments are placed as the younger grade in a split).** The Richmond School District writes:

Parents often ask how students are assigned to combined classes and what reasoning goes into deciding whether a student should be placed with older or younger students. It is often assumed that the "brighter" students are placed with older children and those who are less able are placed with younger children. This is not an effective way to compose classes and should not occur.

As you can see, placing students in classes to provide them with the best support is not an easy process nor is it an exact science but educators put in many hours to try to put students in the most appropriate learning environment.

The biggest and most valid parent concern is often about having a child's needs met. This SHOULD be the number one concern for parents regardless of whether their child is in a split or straight grade class. The key is to meet with the teacher and discuss your concerns and then stay in contact with your child's progress throughout the year. As for not being challenged as an older child in a split, any teacher will tell you that within EVERY class, there is a span of 3+ years of development and teachers put in most of their effort planning and assessing at the students' current levels. John Goodlad's research estimated that the typical straight grade class has a development span of 5 years and a combined class can have up to 6 years. Research by John Hattie also states that the effect of multi-grade classrooms is almost zero (0.04). Effective teachers always have a number of different lessons going on at the same time as they must differentiate to their students' abilities and interests. As Rob Taylor writes in the BCTF magazine:

"Teaching the splits is different and no easy task, but the wide range of student abilities is really no different from any other classroom. Keep that in mind. Remember that your main focus is teaching students, not grades or outcomes..."

Students need to be supported in ANY class they are in and with this support, they will learn at the same rate regardless of being in a split or straight grade class. As for research in this area, both the Vancouver School Board and the Richmond School District cite the work of Dr. Joel Gajadharsingh from the Department of Curriculum Studies from the University of Saskatchewan as he

"...completed a Canadian study on the effects of multi-age grouping or combined classes on student learning in 1991. He found, using standardized tests, that students in combined classrooms did as well or better in the following academic areas: Math, Language, Science, Social Studies. Using teacher-made tests or teacher-determined assessment strategies, he verified that B.C. students did as well or better in the above mentioned areas. He also found that students in combined classes performed better than students in single grade classrooms in the following areas: independence, responsibility, study habits, and attitude toward school." (click here to access more work from Dr. Gajadharsingh in the book "The Multi-Grade Classroom: Myth and Reality – A Canadian Study").

As in any classroom and/or learning environment, through the efforts of the teacher and the support of the school and parents, the students should get the support and challenge they need to grow as educational learners.

Another thing to think about is that we are in a system that, as Sir Ken Robinson states, separates students based on their date of manufacture and often nothing to do with their strengths and interests. Some schools and parents

are choosing to create more multi-grade classrooms (ex. some public/private schools as well as schools like Montessori and Waldorf – for a list of schools in Atlantic Canada encouraging multi-age classrooms, [click here](#)) based on the idea that students can benefit from being placed based on their strengths and interests as well as getting the chance to experience potential benefits of peer mentoring, leadership, and the further development in skills of independent learning and responsibility.

Unfortunate social/emotional challenges like bullying and anxiety are present in many straight and split classes and these need to be dealt with immediately so students, families and schools can work together to develop skills to help lessen the impact on students. In addition, we now work (thanks to parent feedback) to ensure that grade-peers often remain together for important events. If there is a majority of students in a straight grade, then those students in the split need to have opportunities to attend field trips, participate in leadership opportunities, etc with the other class (ex. all grade 3's go participate in a trip to the outdoor pool and staff makes efforts to work together to make this happen).

Students are required to receive instruction based on the BC curriculum in any class they are placed. Therefore, many teachers will use groups and theme-based approaches to teach the concepts of two different curricula to students in a split class. In the areas of numeracy and literacy, teachers will differentiate the instruction to the developmental levels in the class.

The most important thing to remember is that **relationships and communication** are key. If your child has an effective relationship with his/her teacher and there is effective (2-way) communication between the school and the home, your child should have a great year at school.

Remember, there are stories of successes and struggles of students in every type of class. You will meet parents and students who struggled in combined and straight-grade class as well as those who experienced success. *Regardless of which class your child is in, as a parent or family member, your concerns need to be heard.* I encourage you to meet with your child's teacher to voice your concerns; the teacher and school staff can then work with you to move past these and ease any stress you may have over the placement of your child in a split class.

If you have any other ideas or comments on how to ease the concern for families of students in split classes, please leave it below.

More resources:

- Split Classes: Myths and Realities – from Ecole W.L. McLeod
- Informed Parent Guide: Split Classes
- Split Classes Don't Always Make the Grade – Globe and Mail
- Split Classes: How Well Do They Work? – People For Education
- Combined Classes – Langley Schools

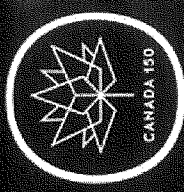
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