

Blended Classes

As the school year begins, some parents may find that their child is placed in a "mixed-age classroom, split or blended" classroom. There is a great deal of research showing both pros and cons, but the reality is, blended classes are in every school and at every grade level across Canada.

Here are some considerations of blended classes:

- Achievement is the same as, or better than, the academic achievement of children in same-grade classrooms. Mixed-age classrooms do not negatively affect student achievement, and students in these classrooms have significantly more positive attitudes toward school, themselves, and others (Stone, 1998; Veenman, 1996).
- There is a wide range of academic, social and emotional abilities within any grade grouping. Currently, students are assigned to a classroom based on their age and not based on academic achievement, ability, or social/emotional factors. In every classroom, there are students who may be reading at one, two, even three grade levels higher or lower than the grade they are assigned. Blended classes can often have less of a range of abilities because students are sometimes grouped homogeneously.

If you were to ask any Primary teacher in a straight classroom with one grade level, how many reading levels they

have in the classroom at any given time during the year, they will probably say they have at least 3-4 different reading levels. This is why all Primary classrooms have leveled reading resources from levels 4 – 17. This allows teachers to match each student's needs to an appropriate level.

If you were to ask so ask a teacher in a 'split' or 'blended' class the same question, they will probably say they have a smaller range of reading levels because students are grouped more closely together when building classes so that it is easier to facilitate both grades. In a typical classroom of grade two students, all we really have is a group of seven year olds with varying skill sets as opposed to a group of grade 2 students.

- The Provincial curriculum for each grade is vast and it is simply not possible to effectively teach all learning outcomes at a grade level in a single year. Right now, there are too many learning outcomes to cover and teachers are struggling to keep up. This is why the BC Curriculum is being revised. The government is removing up to 30% of the outcomes and making the curriculum more flexible. Instead of teachers having to just touch on the outcomes, they will have the ability to choose which outcomes are essential and which ones make the most sense for each student and their class as a whole. Engaging students in personalized, deep learning is our goal and blended classes lend themselves to this approach.

- There is considerable overlap in learning outcomes (curriculum) in the Primary (K-3) program as well as the Intermediate program (defined by the Ministry as grades 4-7). Because of this, when it comes to assessing what learning outcomes are covered, it is better to consider the whole program (K-3 or 4-7) as opposed to each individual year. Also, with a move to a 'skills' based curriculum vs. a 'content' based curriculum, blended classrooms are structured to allow a greater degree of flexibility for planning.
- In a blended classroom, teachers teach to the child as opposed to the class. Children are viewed as unique individuals. The teacher focuses on teaching each child according to his or her own strengths and needs, unlike in some same-grade classrooms where all children are expected to be at the same place at the same time in the curriculum. Today, teachers are trained at differentiating instruction.
- Learning Resources - Don't let a textbook or workbook labeled with your child's current grade mislead you into thinking that the resource is matched to where that student is or aligned perfectly with the Provincial curriculum. In fact, most textbook based programs are aligned with a broader range of outcomes across the country, and in some cases from the U.S. For example, there are many learning outcomes from the Grade 7 Math curriculum that are covered in the Math Makes Sense grade 6 textbook and there are outcomes in the Grade 7 Math Makes Sense

textbook that can be and are taught in grade 6. This is true for both the Primary and Intermediate programs. A 'textbook' does not form the basis of the 'program' in each subject area. The 'essence' of the program in each subject area is more about the teaching strategies used to present the concepts through daily lessons.

- Children develop a sense of family with their classmates. They become a "family of learners" who support and care for each other. Older children have the opportunity to serve as mentors and to take leadership roles.
- Children are more likely to cooperate than compete. The spirit of cooperation and caring makes it possible for children to help each other as individuals, not see each other as competitors.
- Older children model more sophisticated approaches to problem solving, and younger children are able to accomplish tasks they could not do without the assistance of older children. This dynamic increases the older child's level of independence and competence.
- Children are invited to take charge of their learning, by making choices at centers and with project work. This sense of "ownership" and self-direction is the foundation for lifelong learning.
- Blended classrooms promote a positive school culture because the older students have learned the

routines of the school and they are in a position, through daily classroom experiences, to model, mentor and help support the younger students. They "show them the ropes" so to speak (very powerful influence, more so than adults).

- Another benefit of blended classes is that they create more options for teachers and administrators when it comes to student placement. For example, this year we had only two grade four classrooms to place 60 students. This year, we will have three classes to place the students making the classes more balanced and therefore more educationally sound.

Student Placement and Class Composition

The development of class lists is given a great deal of time, careful thought and understanding with the knowledge teachers have of each student and what will be in the child's best interest. Schools also have to ensure classes are balanced and educationally sound. The following factors are considered when trying to ensure a balanced classroom:

- academic achievement
- teacher and School Based Team recommendations
- class size, composition and balance between boys and girls
- Student special needs
- learning and teaching styles
- social groupings
- instructional groupings

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What Parents Need to Know

