

Composite (Split) Classes

Every year in schools, we group our students as well as we can to match their needs with staff expertise. Some classes are straight classes; others are multi-age or composite classes. While most parents accept this as a reality, many need to be made aware of the research behind composite classes.

We construct composite classes due to the restrictions of class sizes and available buildings. While we know some parents prefer straight classes, there is no recent, relevant research that clearly demonstrates any disadvantage to students in composite classes. However, there is general agreement that composite classes can have social and emotional benefits for students. Recent research by Nadeem Saqlain (2015, A Comprehensive Look at Multi-Age Education) states that '...students in multi-grade schooling learned social skills better than their counterparts in mono-grade schooling.' (Saqlain, 2015)

Isn't every class a composite class?

Although schools group children of similar ages into one class, there will always be a range of age, size and maturity in any classroomⁱ. Students who are the same age will have different educational needs, physical ability or emotional maturity. This is the case across all classes, whether they are a composite or not.

What does the research say?

The biggest impact on overall student achievement is the child – what the individual child brings in terms of natural ability. A student's innate ability accounts for approximately 50% of the variation in student performance. Clearly, schools can't do much to influence a student's natural ability. However, there are other factors where we can, and do, make an enormous difference.

John Hattie is a leading Australian education researcher. Hattie (2003, Teachers Make a Differenceⁱⁱ) reviewed and synthesised over 500,000 different studies to determine the influence of various factors on overall student achievement. His research showed that the way students are grouped is less important than the quality of the teaching and the overall school approach to improving outcomes for students.

Hattie updated his research in 2011, 2015 and 2017. He studied what it was that effective schools and teachers do to make an impact on student learning. Hattie now provides a list of factors within the school that influence student outcomes.

A brief outline of some of Hattie's research is supplied below, with an explanation of the approximate effect size in brackets.

Does the Principal make a difference?

Hattie's (2017) analysis found that Principals who create a school with high student responsiveness make a difference. School leaders who create a climate of psychological safety to learn do influence student learning, but that is a moderate effect (approx. 0.32 Effect Size).ⁱⁱⁱ When principals actively engage in instructional leadership, including leading a focus on quality teaching and analysis of student data, the effect size increases to 0.42.

What about other school factors?

Technology (0.44), school climate/culture (0.32), Mindfulness (0.29) and small class sizes in early childhood (0.21) are all operational approaches to improving learning. While these are all important to our program, they are, once again, moderate factors.

It is the people - the expectations of our teaching staff, the quality of our support staff and the whole school programs our expert staff offer that makes the difference.

So, what does the research say about the teacher?

Hattie found that what teachers believe, expect, and then do is very powerful in overall student achievement. Collective staff efficacy can make a vast difference (1.57) in student achievement.

Effect Size Key	
Effect Size	What that Means*
0.2	Small Effect
0.5	Medium Effect
0.8	Large Effect
<i>*Ref: Simply Psychology</i>	

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How do I know that the staff at this school have that collective efficacy?

Collective efficacy can be defined as the shared belief and expectation that through their collective action, educators can increase achievement for all students.

Hattie's research identified many strategies that our staff use that have been proven to make a significant difference in student progress. Our collective belief in those strategies and the high expectations we have of student performance while using those strategies drive our collective efficacy. For example, Repeated Reading (0.75) is a strategy that is used across our Early Childhood classrooms with big books with the expectation that this strategy will drive progress.

We expect that all students can make strong progress. Therefore, we intervene as and when necessary. Our Response to Intervention Programs (1.29) includes tailored teaching for those who need the extra support of an IEP or MiniLit tutoring right through to those who excel and fit into our Student Extension Education Classes (SEEC). Those programs, again, are accessible to all who need them.

It is the combined effect of the collective expectation and belief that we can achieve higher standards and the implementation of these programs at our school, along with many others, that support our staff to achieve such good results.

Summary

Teachers know that a vast range of knowledge (and ability) is held by the students in every classroom. The increase in this range in multi-age classes is small, and much less than might be expected at first glance. John Hattie estimates that this difference is almost zero (0.04).

Students in every classroom come with a 'variation in ages, behaviours and competencies' (Bates, 2023) Just because a child is in Year Five doesn't mean that the child needs the Year Five curriculum or will have the same needs as other 10-year-olds.

The evidence at this school, supported by our recent NAPLAN results, is that students who attend regularly will outperform peers from statistically similar schools. Independent standings have our school ranked 19th in WA.^{iv} Given that there are more than 800 primary schools in WA, that is a very high level of achievement and validates the program we offer irrespective of class groupings.

ⁱ <https://theconversation.com/my-child-is-in-a-composite-class-this-year-is-this-a-good-thing-199676>

ⁱⁱ https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=research_conference_2003

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

^{iv} https://bettereducation.com.au/school/Primary/wa/wa_top_primary_schools.aspx

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