

## PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC ISSUES IN COMPOSITE CLASSES

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### Abstract

In a mixed-methods study, parents of children in a large regional Australian primary school were surveyed to ascertain their perceptions of and concerns about composite classes. Factor analysis revealed five factors perceived as relevant by the parents: *Knowledge-experience* of composite classes, their child's holistic *Development* (academic and social), grade *Identity*, and being in either the *Younger* or *Older* grade of the class. Path analysis identified three significant relationships between the factors. Descriptive and qualitative analyses shed light on how and why parents perceived these relationships as significant. In this article, I concentrate primarily on one conclusion from the literature review: Parents have a holistic concern for their child's development in a composite class; that is, they have both academic and social concerns which are at least in part related to age and grade. Specifically, I discuss parents' perceptions and concerns related to academic progress in a composite class. While they were not directly asked about the suitability of such classes for gifted students, in their written comments parents expressed definite views about composite classes, appropriate curriculum and the effect on academic progress of being in the younger or older grade of a composite class.

### Introduction: Composite classes

A composite class is a temporary class containing students from two, sometimes more, different grades or years. An example is a Year 1/2 class or a Year 4/5 class. Schools form these classes when there is no other option and generally dismantle them as soon as possible in favour of traditional year-based classes. A composite class is thus different from a multi-grade class in a rural school, where classes containing students from several different grades are likely to be permanent because the school enrolment is always small. They are also different from multi-age classes which are formed by choice because of a belief in the educational merits of such

classes and which are therefore likely to be permanent rather than coming and going on an annual basis depending on the school's enrolment pattern.

A composite class is also different from a stage class. When, as in New South Wales, syllabus documents are written for stages of schooling, with a stage commonly representing two years or grades, a 'composite' class can simply be a stage class. A Year 1/2 class, for example, can be a Stage 1 class where the teacher uses one set of syllabus documents. A Year 4/5 class, however, is a cross-stage class covering Stage 2 (Year 4) and Stage 3 (Year 5) and the teacher needs to use both the Stage 2 and Stage 3 syllabus documents. If the students are taught separately according to their stage-related syllabus, then the class operates as a composite class.

While in theory all teachers plan for their students' learning needs by matching them to appropriate syllabus outcomes, in practice many teachers still use the syllabus that matches their students' ages and in turn, their year/grade. Even when a school has 'stage' classes, the students in Stage 1 classes, say, are often separated into different classes of younger (Year 1) and older (Year 2) students. When younger and older students are put in the same class, the Stage 1 class is still often taught as a composite class, with younger students learning one part of the syllabus and older students learning a different part.

The important defining characteristics of a composite class are that it is temporary, it usually co-exists with a much larger number of single-grade or perhaps single-stage classes in the school, and the students in the class are divided for at least some of their learning into 'younger' and 'older' grades. For much of their school day, the students learn with their age/grade peers rather than in a whole-class context.

The distinctions between the different types of mixed-grade class are important (Cornish, 2009, 2010, 2006; Lloyd, 1997) because they affect the likely approach of a teacher and therefore the likely student outcomes. Because composite classes are usually temporary, a teacher needs to ensure that the students' learning matches that of their age peers in other (usually single-grade) classes with whom they are likely to be placed the following year. To some extent, then, the

teacher is constrained by the temporary nature of the composite class to teach two 'classes within a class'.

### **The study**

A mixed-methods study was carried out with parents of children in a large regional primary school (Kindergarten to Grade 6) in Australia. Because of particular contextual factors in the school during the study, there were 15 single-grade classes and (unusually) 8 composite classes, seven of which were two-grade classes while one was a three-grade class. Parents were surveyed at the end of Term 3 in a 4-term year. Some questionnaire items asked for beginning-of-year opinions, thus allowing a comparison of any changes in perceptions and concerns. The literature contains many examples of parents' reactions to composite classes but almost all the reports come from teachers and principals rather than from parents themselves. One aim of the study was to validate (or not) these reported perceptions and concerns of parents.

A total of 285 questionnaires was analysed, representing the responses of 167 single-grade parents (59% of sample) and 118 composite-class parents (41%). The proportions completed by single-grade and composite-class parents matched fairly closely the proportions of single-grade (65%) and composite classes (35%) in the school, with fractionally more composite-class parents participating. Parents completed separate questionnaires for each of their children. Questionnaires were coded by parent and child; thus [872] is the response of Parent 87 for Child 2. Not surprisingly given the more prominent role played by mothers in their children's schooling, most parents/caregivers who participated were female (85%); 9% were male and 5% of surveys were completed by both parents/caregivers. A small number of respondents left this item blank. (Because most respondents were female, a 'parent' will be referred to hereafter as 'she'.)

A number of conclusions from the literature review guided the research. In this article, I concentrate primarily on one: Parents have a holistic concern for their child's development in composite classes, that is, they have both academic and social concerns which are at least in part related to age and grade.

### **Literature related to academic achievement in composite classes**

Very few studies have been reported of academic achievement in a composite class, especially for gifted or talented students. In a review of the literatures relating to mixed-grade classes and to high-ability students (Lloyd, 1999), I found that nongraded and multi-age (by choice) classes can be suitable for gifted students because of the focus on individual learning needs and appropriate, differentiated curriculum. In a composite class, however, the teacher's approach will determine whether any student's learning is based on his or her grade curriculum or on what is actually appropriate for the student's ability, for example, whether any cross-grade grouping allows younger students to work with the higher-grade students. The constraints of a composite class, such as the students' likely return to a single-grade class the following year, make it less likely that significant cross-grading and ability grouping will occur in a composite class.

A best-evidence synthesis by Veenman (1995) reported results for multi-grade classes, which include but are not restricted to composite classes. From 38 studies comparing achievement in multi-grade/composite and single-grade classes, he found a zero effect size for the 34 studies which allowed such estimation. In other words, 'one may conclude that students in multigrade classes learn as much as their counterparts in single-grade classes' (Veenman, 1995, p. 350).

Veenman's findings have been contested, however. In a response to Veenman's review, Mason and Burns (1996) suggested that the result of 'no achievement difference' between multi-grade and single-grade classes is a zero sum result which occurs because positive and negative factors balance each other out. The positive factors relate to selection bias, that is, deliberately selecting the best available teacher plus students of above-average ability who are independent workers and exhibit good behaviour. Negative factors relate to the specific difficulties of teaching a composite class, including reduced teacher time for each grade and consequent lower quality of instruction.

No meta-analyses have been carried out since 1996, when a result of 'no disadvantage' from being in a mixed-grade class was again reported

by Veenman in a reanalysis of his data (Veenman, 1996). While this finding is contested for composite classes (Mason & Burns, 1996; 1997b; Sims, 2008), there are conflicting results from individual studies since the late 1990s (e.g., Wilkinson & Hamilton, 2003). There is therefore no indisputable evidence to counter parents' perceptions and concerns related to their child's academic progress in a composite class.

### **Quantitative analysis**

The quantitative analyses in this study confirmed the literature reports of principals and teachers that parents do not like composite classes. Most parents (73%) who were satisfied with their child's class placement at the beginning of the year were those who had a child in a single-grade class. By contrast, a large majority of parents who were not satisfied with (88%) or uncertain about (75%) their child's class placement were those who had a child in a composite class.

A Principal Components Analysis identified five constructs/factors: parents' Knowledge-experience of composite classes, parents' perceptions and concerns related to their child's holistic Development (academic and social) in a composite class, parents' perceptions and concerns related to grade Identity in a composite class, and parents' perceptions and concerns related to position in the class, that is, being in the Younger or Older grade. The five factors were confirmed via Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Path analysis of a conceptual model linking these variables revealed three significant relationships:

- between Knowledge-experience and Development ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ )
- between Identity and Older ( $\beta = .17, p < .01$ )
- between Younger and Older ( $\beta = .39, p < .01$ ).

These relationships were explored through descriptive and qualitative analyses, as described below, in order to elucidate how and why parents saw these relationships as important.

### **Descriptive and qualitative analyses**

Parents' negative reactions to composite classes were clear and definite. The total number of parents who had a positive reaction and whose child was in a composite class was only 27% of the total positive responses ( $N = 176$ ). Given that

the proportion of classes in the school was 59% single-grade to 41% composite and that the categorisation of responding parents closely matched these proportions, this analysis of positive reactions shows that parents with a child in a single-grade class were much more likely to have a positive reaction than parents with a child in a composite class.

Parents who were not pleased with their child's class placement ( $N = 91$ ) were categorised as 'not satisfied' or 'uncertain', and the great majority of these parents had children in a composite class (88% of 'not satisfied' and 75% of 'uncertain' respondents).

In order to find out why parents reacted negatively to their child being placed in a composite class, I explored their written questionnaire responses using SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys v2.1. I coded responses into categories matching the variables in the conceptual model as well as into categories suggested by the software. In order to separate a parent's holistic concern into its constituents, I also separated Development into two categories: Results (academic progress) and Social. Further, I set up another category for Friends, in order to analyse this social issue separately from others. The division into separate categories allowed particular issues to be investigated as well as a combined analysis of the holistic concept of Development.

Many questionnaire responses were coded into several categories. Parents' concerns about their child's academic progress and social development were coded in the category Development but they might also have been coded into the categories Identity, Younger or Older. For example, a parent might have commented that she was worried about her child's academic progress in the older grade of a composite class because of re-exposure to younger-grade curriculum and consequent loss of grade identity. In their written responses, parents linked the two categories constituting Development — Results (academic progress) and Social (social development) — to all other categories. In other words, they associated concerns about academic progress and also about social development with Knowledge-experience, the Teacher, Friends, Identity, Younger/Older and each other. Consideration of their child's academic progress was high with

these parents, with recognition of the possible impact on such progress of all other variables.

Some parents had misconceptions about the nature of a composite class and these misconceptions usually related to their child's academic progress: 'At the beginning of the year I thought my son was put in a composite class because he was having trouble with his work' [1531] and '... when we are not [sure of] the performance level of a child then we can go for composite class but once we achieve it then no need of placing him/her into composite class' [1721].

Some responses expressed parents' generalised fears that their child would not achieve in a composite class. Such fears can be long-lasting, as evident from these parents' responses:

Still guarded but child appears to be achieving [11]

I am happy with my child's teacher and I feel he is doing well. But I would still be happiest with single year classes and no composites at all. [171]

I feel that my son may have performed better in a straight Year 5 class. [1241]

No my opinion has or will not change as I believe all children should be in their own class level to be given a better chance at learning. [71]

Specific reasons for concerns about achievement often related to the nature of a composite class, namely:

1. the problems for a teacher having to cope with different grades (especially in the three-grade class): 'I like to avoid composite classes as much as possible because I think trying to teach a class as a whole is hard enough without further complications and this added difficulty must detract from the teacher's ability to give the whole class his/her best teaching possible.' [601]
2. the resultant stress that is passed on to the students: 'Children miss out on full teaching methods in a composite class, the teacher has to divide time and learning material between two levels. The teacher is under more stress and this is filtered through to children.' [1661]

3. the distraction and confusion for students of hearing the instructions given to different grades: 'She felt out of her depth and insecure, and had to concentrate on which direction was given for Year 4 and which for Year 5 — the strain was too much for her.' [541]
4. the possibility that students would suffer from lack of teacher attention: 'I wondered if he would get overlooked.' [1731]
5. the loss of confidence through misconceptions of a composite class: 'My daughter has very little self-confidence. Putting her in [the older grade of] a composite made her feel as if she was not as "bright" as her previous classmates.' [1121]

Apart from these generalised concerns related to academic progress in a composite class, parents expressed specific and contrasting opinions related to position in the class, that is, to being in either the younger or older grade. One commonly mentioned reason why parents thought a composite class was good for their child's academic progress was the possibility for extension or 'cognitive stretching' (Berry & Little, 2007) when they are in the younger grade:

Brighter children can probably cope with the higher grade's work [861]

I have found my child very motivated and excited by having older children in the class. She works fast and well with motivation of having work a grade higher to attempt after completing her own work. ... Had she been in the higher grade of the composite, my answers could have been different, as excitement and motivation of older children wouldn't have been provided. [1011]

It suits the younger ones in the composite. It provides a stimulus. But it is a killer for the older ones. [1081]

The last two comments above mention negative views about academic progress in the older grade of a composite class. Other parents shared these views:

Being in [the upper grade] — very little seems to have been learnt this year, especially in areas of maths and spelling. [1161]

I feel she would have benefited more academically with being in a straight [Yr 6] class. [1861]

However a small number of parents who had concerns at the beginning of the year because their child was in the older grade of a composite class described how being in the older grade did not turn out to be problematic:

I was very unhappy about it, because [my son] was in [the older grade] and although I felt composite classes are great for the younger children, I had reservations about how good the class would be for older children. ... Any fears I had of older children not being encouraged to extend themselves have completely disappeared. [1221]

We thought that the younger students may hold our son's learning back but this was not so. [1111]

Many parents expressed a view that the disadvantages of a composite class can be overcome by a good teacher:

We now know that with the right teacher this type of class can work. [1111]

The structure of the class was fine but I feel they have to have a teacher who is capable of handling a class of that structure. [31]

Because Mrs X is such a fantastic teacher, [my fears] have completely disappeared. [1221]

Child has been very happy in his class mainly because of the teacher. The classroom has a very positive learning atmosphere. [1622]

Other parents were prosaic about the relationship between type of class and their child's achievement, as exemplified by the quotes below:

My child has not done as well this year but I can't say if it is because of the class or other reasons. My child has enjoyed this year. [1891]

For me the question of composite classes has always been an individual matter taking all factors into account, e.g. teacher, age and stage of student in all areas of development. [491]

Most parents, however, did see the type of class as influencing their child's academic progress. Their views (both positive and negative) about their child's academic progress were directly related to their understanding of the structure of a composite class and its presumed impact on the students within it. They worried in general about

composite classes because of their structure — two (or three) grades having to share the teacher's time — and in particular about position in the class, that is, being in either the younger or older grade. Comparison of the frequency distributions for items relating to benefits of being in the younger/older grade of a composite class showed that perceptions were skewed in the direction of 'agree' responses for the younger grade but 'disagree' responses for the older grade. For these items, there was no difference in the views of single-grade and composite-class parents — they all preferred the younger grade of a composite class.

## **Discussion**

While the major focus in this article is on Development, and in particular the academic aspect, it is in practice impossible to separate completely concerns about academic progress from concerns about social development, identity and position in the class. The three significant pathways revealed by the quantitative path analysis highlight these factors and their inter-relationships. Grade identity, for example, was shown to be a significant concern of parents when their child was in the older grade of a composite class, while parents' knowledge and experience of composite classes was strongly related to their concerns about their child's development, including both academic and social aspects. As Russell, Rowe and Hill (1998) attest, for parents 'the critical issue is whether the [composite] classroom will provide the kind of positive, satisfying and productive social and learning experience they want for their child in school' (p. 1). To some extent, therefore, my discussion of academic progress involves these other variables as well.

The strongest relationship confirmed in the study was between the variables Younger and Older. The relationship is an inverse one since, as reported above, the frequency distributions relating to positive perceptions of the older grade of a composite class were skewed towards 'disagree' responses while the opposite was true for items related to perceptions of the younger grade. This result reflects widespread reported findings that parents are more concerned when their child is in the older grade of a composite class (Gayfer, 1991; Hohl, 1991; Hughes, 2008; Metlikovec, 2006; Pratt & Treacy, 1986; Russell, et al., 1998; Veenman, 1997; Watson, Phillips, &

Wille, 1995). Worries about doing younger-grade work, about their child being branded as 'stupid', about 'wasting time' by peer tutoring, and about losing out on the teacher's attention have all been identified as reasons why parents would prefer their child to be in the younger grade of a composite class (e.g., Hughes, 2008; Walsh, 1989; Wilkinson & Hamilton, 2003). In this study, then, parental disagreement about being happy for their child to be in the older grade of a composite class is in keeping with worldwide reported parental dislike of the older grade. A large-scale study in England in 1978 (Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, 1978) implicitly supports such dislike with the finding that 'match assessments' (matching curriculum to ability) for 7-year-old and 11-year-old students, who are always in the older grade of a composite class, were significantly worse than for their single-grade peers.

An exception to this general dislike relates to a perception that students with the ability to work independently are suited to being in the older grade of a composite class. As parent 1221 expressed it, the right decision was made to put her son in the older grade of a composite class because 'he's an independent worker and he is quite happy to help other children who are younger or slower'. Similarly, parent 1261 agreed that her daughter's placement in the older grade was correct because she was an 'independent worker, an older child' [1261]. One parent specifically commented that learning to work independently was a particular advantage for students in the older grade: 'I have the perception that if my children were to be in a composite class, I would prefer them to be in the older group as I know they could adapt to working more independently or in small groups without constant supervision. I feel this is good training for secondary/tertiary education' [1001]. These comments are among the relatively few positive comments relating to a child being in the older grade of a composite class.

Positive views about the benefits of being in the older grade of a composite class do exist, as reported in the literature. These benefits include:

1. peer tutoring the younger students ("The split-grade classroom", 1995; Berry & Little, 2007; Doherty, 2003; Mequon-Thiensville School District, 2004)

2. learning to interact with students with widely varying characteristics (Berry & Little, 2007; Fortescue, 1994b)
3. learning to accept individual strengths and weaknesses and recognise that they are not always 'better than' the younger students (Freeman, 1984)
4. being able to act as a role model for younger students ("The split-grade classroom", 1995; Berry & Little, 2007; Pratt & Treacy, 1986)
5. the chance to consolidate learning or receive remediation within the class (Pratt & Treacy, 1986; Snyder, 2005)
6. leadership opportunities (Pratt & Treacy, 1986).

As can be seen, most of these benefits relate to social development rather than academic progress except for the fifth point, and this point is less likely to be relevant to gifted students. Parents in this study also saw the advantages of peer tutoring (point 1 above) as social rather than academic. They recognised that peer tutoring (or 'helping') occurred but they did not express any advantage in terms of the older child's learning. In other words, they sometimes saw a social and leadership benefit for their child but perceived that any academic benefit was for the younger student: 'Older children can be a big help to the younger ones' [1071]. They did not perceive academic benefits for the peer tutor as reported in the literature (Berry & Little, 2007; Ching & Kafai, 2008; Russell, et al., 1998; Topping, Peter, Stephen, & Whale, 2004; Veenman, 1995), either through reinforcement of earlier learning or opportunities to learn through the process of peer tutoring itself. Thus they did not perceive the veracity of 'the old adage that one never really learns something as fully as when one has to teach it' (Ching & Kafai, 2008, p. 15).

In fact, parents whose comments did refer to peer tutoring by the older-grade students were more likely to express a negative view:

[My daughter] enjoyed her composite year but at times felt she and peers were called upon too much to help [the younger students] with their work and felt she was marking time as far as learning goes. [881]

Quite a lot of my child's time seemed to be spent 'helping the littlies'. In short I felt my

child was 'marking time' for the entire year. [1541]

There is also a temptation to use older, more emotionally mature children to nurture younger ones academically and socially. This is unfair to the older child. [401]

In terms of perceptions of and concerns about the older grade of a composite class, the consensus in this study was succinctly expressed by parent 1291: 'I do not think that composite classes benefit the older children academically, although they may help slightly in improving socialisation.' Even though some parents specifically mentioned that their child had had a positive experience in the older grade of a composite class, the overwhelming preference of parents at the time of the survey was for the younger grade. For parents of 'bright' children, this preference was particularly pronounced:

For gifted children a composite with older grades could be a big encouragement. [211]

After starting this year in a composite class [at another school] and doing very well, I think it is a bit limiting for her being in a single-year class. [1331]

I think [my son] would have benefited from a Year 1/2 composite providing he was allowed to work at year 2 level if he was capable of it, which in some areas he is. [882]

## **Conclusion**

Issues of identity were statistically confirmed as significant for parents when their child was in the older grade of a composite class. By contrast, parents did not see loss of grade identity as an issue for the younger-grade students, presumably because of the perception of potential academic advantage from exposure to older-grade curriculum and 'cognitive stretching' (Berry & Little, 2007). Exposure to younger-grade curriculum was more likely to be perceived as 'wasting time' and detrimental to academic progress, with consequent ramifications the following year on return to a single-grade class. In other words, grade identity was not perceived as an issue if academic progress was stimulated but parents only perceived this situation occurring for the younger-grade students. For

parents who believed their children were 'bright', this stimulation was perceived as particularly important: 'Child seems to be coping well. In fact, because she is above average, academically, she has done some [upper-grade] work' [861].

Parents perceive that composite classes can benefit 'above average' students in the younger grade of the class both incidentally (through informal exposure to the older-grade curriculum) and deliberately (by working with the older-grade students on higher-grade curriculum). However academic benefits are not perceived for the older-grade students in a composite class. The claims by Mason and Burns (1996, 1997a, 1997b) and Sims (2008) that there is a negative effect on achievement in composite classes should perhaps be investigated separately for the different grades in the class in order to ascertain whether there are, in fact, any differential effects from being in the younger or older part of a composite class.

The findings of this study are important because they provide empirical evidence of parents' perceptions of and concerns about composite classes, evidence that has to date been almost completely missing from the literature except for second-hand claims by principals and teachers. In addition, the findings are relevant because the worldwide expansion of primary schooling in pursuit of the second Millennium Development Goal of Education for All has largely taken place through provision of multi-grade schooling. In practice, the 'multi-grade' classes in these developing countries resemble composite classes in developed countries, being full-sized classes with teachers using different syllabus documents for the different grades in the class and maintaining distinctions between the grades. Further, the imminent introduction in Australia of a national curriculum firmly based on grades, linked to national testing of particular grades and national reporting of the results, means that composite-class teachers will be constrained to separate the different grades in their class in order to ensure that the quite rigid grade requirements are met and that students are not disadvantaged by the national testing regime. Under such conditions, parents' perceptions of composite classes will have increased importance, requiring principals and teachers to be proactive in addressing parental concerns. This study highlights those particular concerns, thus allowing for targeted and relevant public relations exercises, parent education programmes

and additions to teacher education courses. What parents think matters because it affects their approach to and support for their children's schooling.

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