

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ISSUES IN COMPOSITE CLASSES

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Abstract

This article is a companion article to Cornish (2011), reporting the results of a mixed-methods study in a large regional Australian primary school. Parents were surveyed to ascertain their perceptions of and concerns about composite classes in general, and about their own children being in such classes. Factor analysis revealed five factors perceived as relevant to 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. Three significant relationships were identified by path analysis and subsequently explored by means of descriptive and qualitative analyses. In this article, I concentrate again 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. This time, I discuss parents' perceptions and concerns related to social and emotional development/issues in a composite class. In their written comments parents expressed definite views about composite classes and the effect on social-emotional development of being in the younger or older grade of a composite class. Specific concerns related to confidence, restricted friendship choice, loss of grade identity, exposure to inappropriate social behaviours (for younger-grade students), and engagement of older-grade students in nurturing younger-grade students.

Introduction

Gifted and talented students have high intellectual ability but are often believed to be socially immature by those who compare their behaviours with those of their age peers rather than their intellectual peers. Many social-emotional issues stem from such students being surrounded by classmates with whom they are a

'bad fit' intellectually. The positive research results related to acceleration and grade-skipping (Merrotsy, 2009; Robinson, 2004) show that fears about acceleration based on perceived social-emotional development are generally unfounded. Students of high ability are often selected to be in a composite class, and usually in the younger part of the class. Perceptions of and concerns about social-emotional development/issues in a composite class are therefore of relevance to all teachers, including teachers of high-ability students.

Composite and other mixed-grade classes

All mixed-grade classes are not *composite* classes, in spite of the almost universal description of them in this way. Some teachers believe students learn better in a class that reflects 'real life', with interactions and learning opportunities among a range of other people — older, younger, and the same age. They therefore deliberately form *multi-age* classes to encourage such interactions. Such classes are generally permanent, with two or three school grades in the same class, e.g., a Year 4/5/6 class. *Multi-grade* classes in rural schools also have several grades (up to seven) in the same class and are also permanent, but not by choice. These classes are formed by necessity, owing to small enrolments. Because both multi-age and multi-grade classes are permanent, a teacher has considerable flexibility to group students, where numbers allow, by learning need rather than by age/grade. The ongoing mixed-grade class structure enables a focus on individual needs and continuous progress helped by, usually, having the same teacher for several years.

A *composite class*, on the other hand, is a temporary class containing students from two, sometimes more, different grades or years, such as 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. Students in a composite class usually rejoin their age peers in a single-grade class the following year. The composite-class teacher therefore usually closely follows the same syllabus as the concurrent single-grade teachers. 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.

A mixed-grade class can also be a *stage class*. When, as in New South Wales, syllabus documents are written for stages of schooling, with a stage 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.

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. While in theory all teachers plan for their students' learning needs by matching them to appropriate syllabus outcomes, in whatever document is deemed 'appropriate', in practice many teachers still use the syllabus that matches their students' ages and in turn, their year/grade. In a temporary (one-year) composite class, this age–grade–syllabus nexus has traditionally been very strong.

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.

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. Specifically, my focus here is on the social concerns.

Literature related to social-emotional issues and development in composite classes

Principals believe that composite classes lead to 'parent and teacher concerns' (Mason & Doepner, 1998, p. 160). As a result, they often take special care when forming a composite class (e.g., Burns & Mason, 1995; Pratt & Treacy, 1986). In New South Wales, Roseth (1981, summary point 5) wrote that 'schools forming composite classes do so in a very considered way, taking account of the age and ability of students, class groupings and the experience of teachers'. In a report on the different types of mixed-age classes in New South Wales, the (then) Department of Education and Training (NSW DET, 1997, p. 16) reported 'special selection of students to facilitate the successful operation and to minimise the concerns of parents and teachers'.

This 'selection bias' emphasises 'favourable compositions' (Burns & Mason, 1998, p. 754) with attempts to reduce the range of student ability, to select students who are able to work independently, and to reduce the number of students with language or behaviour problems. More recently, principals have reported selecting students who are mature (Tritto, 2003), are independent workers (Hughes, 2008; Klampe & Parsavand, 2008; Snyder, 2005; Thissen, 2009), can work 'independently and collaboratively' ("Parents angry", 2008), and are 'chronologically not more than one year apart' ("Mixing it up",

2007). Parents from many different places have also reported, in an online forum, different experiences of selection bias for composite classes in their schools (MotheringDotCommunityForum, 2009).

Teachers usually agree with selection bias in favour of particular types of student, as a way of making the composite class easier to teach. A teacher in *Today's Parent* ("The split-grade classroom", 1995) identified desirable student characteristics in these classes as being a cooperative learner, an independent achiever, self-motivated, and able to defer the need for assistance and go on to other work.

Social-emotional development is therefore seen as very influential in the successful functioning of a composite class. Some reasons for its influence are related to the way the class functions. Students get less 'teacher time' owing to the teacher's need to split her/his time between the grades. While differences in interaction patterns in single-grade and composite classes are 'slight across the board' (Galton, Simon, & Croll, 1980, p. 104), composite-class students have a slightly lower time on task and spend more time in routine interactions and waiting for the teacher. Pratt and Treacy (1986) also found that the total percentage of interaction that was either whole-class or involved one or other grade was less than in single-grade classes, at 76.9% compared with 82.4%. By contrast, students in composite classes are grouped more often in small groups, though they tend to work individually rather than cooperatively (Hopkins & Ellis, 1991; Mason & Good, 1996; Pratt & Treacy, 1986). Being placed together in small groups, however, certainly allows for greater student-student interaction.

Perceptions of social benefits resulting from being in a mixed-grade class are widely reported in the literature, such as 'multiage grouping is an excellent means to develop students' social competence' (Chen, 2006, p. 146), and the multi-grade organisation 'fosters socialization' (Buchinger, 1988, p. 155). Whereas conclusions about achievement in a mixed-grade class compared with achievement in a single-grade class are usually circumspect, claims about improved social-emotional development in mixed-grade classes are much more definite and positive or, as Wilson (2003, p. 17) phrases it, 'far less cautious'. However the confusion in the literature between the different types of mixed-grade class suggests that conclusions need to be interpreted with care. Positive results are

common in relation to non-cognitive benefits in non-graded or multi-age (by choice) classes (e.g., Anderson & Pavan, 1993). For multi-grade (including composite) classes, Veenman (1995) found a small positive result for non-cognitive (social-emotional) factors.

The last study considered by Veenman (i.e., Walsh, 1989) sought student views of the advantages of a composite class and identified 'the chance to make new friends' (p. 65). James (cited in Campbell, 1993) found that teachers in Canada claimed students learn to respect each other's abilities in multi-grade classes. In England, Berry and Little (2007) reported composite-class teachers' identification of 'behavioural stretching' or 'the opportunity to learn appropriate social behaviours' from the older students as a benefit of the class structure (p.80).

In Australia, de Lemos (1999) found that in the case of social development, relative age in grade is a more important factor affecting social behaviour than classroom organisation, with a 'tendency for the younger children within a class group to score at a lower level than older children, regardless of whether the class was a single-grade or a multiage group' (p. 4). Also in Australia, a study of a 'split level' (mixed-grade) class for gifted students in a boys' school (Henderson, 2007) identified some results which are of interest. The 'most frequently mentioned' disadvantages perceived by parents were isolation of the selected boys from their age peers, and difficulties faced by the single-grade boys in maintaining friendships with the separated boys. Some teachers agreed with the parents' concerns but teachers' most commonly identified disadvantages of setting up a special class related to effects on the single-grade classes, specifically, the reduced self-esteem of those boys not selected and the loss of academic role models for the less able students (p. 64). All these issues were also identified in my study.

Most studies of non-cognitive or affective factors use some sort of teacher rating. There are almost no studies where students were asked their opinions in relation to factors such as their liking for school. However as part of their study of single-grade Year 1 and composite Year 1/2 classes in Western Australia, Pratt and Treacy (1986) asked the students a number of questions related to their attitude towards school, using a 'How you feel about school' inventory. They found 'no significant main effects or interaction effects' (p. 48). Students were generally positive

or neutral in their responses. The researchers concluded that they did not find any concerns that stemmed from composite classes, or any indication that students' academic progress or social development were affected by this type of class grouping.

Quantitative analysis

As reported previously (Cornish, 2011), the quantitative analyses in this study confirmed the literature reports of principals and teachers that parents do not like composite classes. The analyses identified five relevant constructs related to parents' perceptions and concerns: *Knowledge-experience* of composite classes, and issues related to their child's holistic *Development* (academic and social), *grade Identity*, and position in the class, that is, being in the *Younger* or *Older* grade. Three significant relationships were identified:

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

Descriptive and qualitative analyses

The relationships listed above were explored through descriptive and qualitative analyses using SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys v2.1 in order to elucidate how and why parents saw these relationships as important. In their written responses, parents mentioned social issues more often than academic progress when expressing concerns about Identity. The categories Social and Friends yielded fruitful information about parents' perceptions and concerns. The Social category included any statement referring to: social development; conflict with peers; behaviour; confidence, self-esteem and other aspects of a child's non-cognitive wellbeing; liking or not liking school; and generally being happy or unhappy. However, parents also associated concerns about social development with Knowledge-experience, the Teacher, Friends, Identity, Younger/Older and Results and therefore all categories revealed relevant information. Although the quantitative analysis revealed a significant pathway between Identity and Older, there were clear perceptions of a relationship between social-emotional development/issues and both grades (younger and older) of the composite class. In the following reporting of results, I have separated

the analyses into different sections but the separation is to some extent a false one because of the complex interplay of parents' perceptions.

Findings related to composite classes in general

Some parent comments supported the general literature finding that social-emotional development is encouraged in a composite class:

Socially it has been OK. ... It may have helped him develop some greater maturity and self-confidence. [1622]

I believe that we must foster our children's ability to cope with change by building their self esteem. In most cases I would think the decision [to put my child in a composite class] was a good one, and would encourage my child's natural ability to adapt. [681]

I do not think that composite classes benefit the older children academically, although they may help slightly in improving socialisation. [1291]

Specific comments related to confidence as an aspect of social development (though the confidence sometimes had an academic source):

It's built his confidence. [1871]

She remained with her close group of friends which makes her feel secure. [991]

Motivation and attempting work at a higher grade has proved stimulating and built confidence. [1011]

In addition, many parents recognised the extra benefit of having friends from different age groups in the class. In fact, the most common specific reason given for a child's happiness and liking for school was the ability to mix with younger or older students:

The second composite class [after class was changed] was much better suited to my child. He was unhappy with older children and is better now he is in the older grade. [171]

He can mix with children who are younger than himself and help them if possible. [1531]

Child enjoys helping the younger pupils.
[791]

I feel mixing with the older children has been beneficial. [511]

He is fairly mature so I think it suited him being with older children. [231]

Findings related to the younger grade

Some single-grade parents also commented on the advantages (for social/behaviour reasons) of being in the younger grade of a composite class:

Sometimes I think it would be nice to have my child in a class with older children, since his [single-grade] class has a few children who disrupt the teaching quite frequently. [141]

This comment is particularly relevant to gifted and talented students. Being in the younger grade has obvious academic advantages for these students but also social ones, since their 'peers' are more likely to be older than to be the same age. Much behaviour that is described as 'immature' disappears when the student is placed with older classmates: 'Resistance to academic acceleration, especially through concerns for the social and emotional development of the accelerated student, is not grounded in research' (Merrotsy, 2009, p. 71). Rather, 'acceleration is usually effective in terms of affective adjustment' (Merrotsy, 2009, p. 72).

Descriptions of negative social effects in a composite class were, however, also common. Not all parents saw exposure to older-grade students as desirable on social grounds:

Mixing with older children at this level (classroom) is not always beneficial. [372]

I believe that she is thinking and acting more like a child in 6th class rather than as a child in 5th class. [431]

[My son] has decided he would not like to be in the younger part of a composite [is in older part] as he feels those children could be bullied by older, more aggressive children. [1481]

I believe that younger children are at a disadvantage when taught with older children, particularly socially and physically. [401]

Findings related to the older grade

Similarly, not all parents saw exposure to younger-grade students as desirable on social grounds:

She's happy as an older in her composite class ... but is probably too happy to 'look after' the [lower grade] [1133]

Had Child 1 been in higher grade of composite, my answers could have been different, as excitement and motivation of older children wouldn't have been provided. [1011]

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]

Irrespective of their own views, some parents reported their children's unhappiness, on social grounds, about being in the older grade of the composite class:

Not pleased to stay with Kindergarten. Thinks he was too big. [1352]

I have seen no adverse effects of my child being placed in a composite class on her schooling. The only problem seemed to be her attitude to it (as an older, in Year 6). [1811]

The issue of friends

One specific issue for students and therefore also for their parents was 'friends'. Parents of both younger-grade and older-grade children expressed strong concerns about friendship choice in a composite class. In primary school, students most commonly choose their friends from their classmates, which in turn usually means from same-grade peers. The issue of friends and reduced friendship choice among same-age peers (because of the reduced number in the composite class) was a recurring theme in parents' comments:

Friendwise she has lost out. [1182]

I am not sure that this was a good move for my son. He is bored, and socially hasn't grown at all. His circle of friends is very small this year. [22]

We have found a composite class quite good for our daughter except for making friends. Child found great difficulties being separated from previous classmates. [1771]

He was deprived of the opportunity to learn and study with his peers, friends and mates. [1801]

The social concern of being separated from grade peers and having reduced opportunities for same-age, same-grade, same-gender friends was commonly described as problematic and as having negative effects on a child's 'self' (e.g., self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy). This concern was not related to position in the class, that is, to being in the younger or older grade, but was a concern related to composite classes in general.

The issue of identity

Parents perceived a clear relationship between age (and therefore grade) and development. They were particularly concerned about loss of grade identity when students are separated from their age peers. The link between age peers and grade identity was clearly shown through comments from parents with previous experience of composite classes:

He wanted to be in a straight class this year and his previous [composite-class] teacher ensured all her charges did go into straight classes this year. I think the number mix in the previous year had the children in that class feeling a little isolated from their peers. [1262]

Last year's composite class needed to feel like a class again rather than a group of students placed together. [931]

I feel my child ... needed exposure to a full class of Year 6 students (rather than 3 or 4) both to establish friendships and to feel an integral part of a class group, not the minority group. [81]

Similarly, a perceived link between grade identity and social development, and the necessity for same-age role models, is shown by comments such as the following:

He needed children his own age to develop social skills appropriate to his age. [1501]

The three-grade composite class

The link between age peers and grade identity was even more clearly shown through comments from parents with children in the three-grade composite class (the only composite class that was not a two-grade class). This class straddled the traditional divide between lower primary (Grades 3 and 4) and upper primary (Grades 5 and 6). As well, numbers from each grade were very uneven: there were eight Grade 3 students (boys and girls), fifteen Grade 4 students (boys and girls) and only four Grade 5 students (all girls). Issues related to Identity were accentuated in this class. Anticipating parental opposition to a three-grade composite, the school made particular arrangements for this class in order to reduce concerns about loss of grade identity. These arrangements consisted of the Grade 3 students joining a Grade 3 class for some subjects, and the same for Grade 4 and Grade 5 students. Thus students had to move from their classroom to join another class several times a day and be taught in single-grade groups.

The school believed such an arrangement would alleviate concerns about academic progress. What was not anticipated was the strong reaction on social/'liking for school' grounds. Parents with children in the three-grade composite formed the largest category of respondents, while parents of children in the class to which most of the students moved for some of their subjects had the second-largest number of responses. These response rates indicate that parents with children in these two classes were very keen to express their perceptions and concerns.

One of the school's reasons for the arrangement to move between classes was to appease parents yet these parents were not happy with the continual movement:

For our child the class has just not worked, not because it is a composite but because they spend so much time moving around the school going to different lessons like a high school situation. She wants to stay in her own classroom. [71]

My child and I feel she would have been much happier with her class teacher spending a lot more time with [them]. ... I was disturbed by the splitting of the class into straight year groups for so much of the time — this negates the concept of composites. [651]

What I considered to be the benefits of a composite class — the possibility of extension, the family atmosphere, the diverse range of experiences — were completely negated by the 'high school type' timetable. The waste of time moving, the cancelled lessons due to particular grades being away. The fact that my child only saw her 'teacher' for part of the day. [1091]

Some parents agreed that academic progress had been good but felt that social issues had not been overcome:

Progress has been sound and support across classes good but socially no — my original reservations have been vindicated [761]

Positive about achievement, still negative about friends [1182].

As mentioned above, the balance of gender and age/grade in the class was very uneven, with Grades 3 and 5 consisting of small numbers of students (8 and 4) and Grade 5 having only girls. The parents of the Grade 3 and Grade 5 students thus had particular concerns about social issues and their children's friendship choices and grade identity.

Thus for these parents, concerns about development and grade identity were not overcome by an arrangement of joining with grade peers at different times during the day. The emotional effects on their children of the continual moving outweighed any perceived academic benefits of the regrouping arrangement.

Discussion

The descriptive and qualitative analyses of parents' comments were particularly valuable in relation to the issue of concerns related to academic progress and social development in a composite class. While my major focus in this article is on Development, and in particular the social-emotional aspect, it is in practice impossible to separate completely concerns about academic progress, social development, identity and position in the class (younger or older). For example, I attempted to discover whether parents would rate 'academic progress' or 'being happy' as the more important concern they had for their children. Interestingly and perhaps not surprisingly, parents found it

difficult to make a clear choice. Not only did parents refuse to choose between the two concerns, they overwhelmingly agreed that *both* concerns were 'primary' (93% agreeing for 'happy' and 90% agreeing for 'academic achievement'). This meshing of academic and social concerns is clear in many of the parents' written responses above and in the summary points below. Similarly, issues related to identity and position in the class (younger or older) are inherent in the analysis of both academic and social issues.

Analysis of parents' comments revealed a wide range of perceptions and concerns related to social development and liking for school of students in a composite class:

- stress affects learning and development
- there is a significantly reduced choice of same-age friends in a composite class (so friendship choice can be stressful)
- self-concept of older-grade children is affected by feelings of inferiority (i.e., perceiving that they are not as bright as same-age peers in single-grade classes)
- younger-grade children adopt inappropriate behaviours from the older-grade students
- younger-grade children adopt pro-social behaviours by following the example of the older-grade students
- composite classes are not the norm and children feel like 'outsiders'
- older-grade children can resent having younger-grade children in the class
- younger-grade children can enjoy interacting with older-grade children
- older-grade children can enjoy helping the younger-grade children.

The wide and seemingly contradictory range of views expressed can be explained by several factors. Firstly, parents have different views for different children — for some children, the younger grade is better; for others, the older grade is preferable. Secondly, parents see some grades as more important in terms of grade identity and therefore less appropriate for a composite class (in particular, the first and last years of primary school). Thirdly, the interplay between academic and social concerns affects perceptions of particular issues so that, for example, peer tutoring the younger-grade students is viewed positively in terms of developing nurturing behaviours but negatively

in terms of loss of own learning time. While parents are concerned about both academic and social issues, in this study they seemed more concerned about social issues (including identity). Parents of children in the three-grade composite class, in particular, were worried about issues of friendship choice and identity.

In relation to the academic aspect of development, parents perceived an advantage to being in the younger grade because of the possibility of 'cognitive stretching' (Cornish, 2011). By contrast, in relation to the social aspect of development, parents' perceptions were more likely to be positive in relation to being in the older grade, with parents of students in the younger grade often being worried about inappropriate 'behavioural stretching' (Berry & Little, 2007). While twice as many parents displayed a preference for the younger grade rather than for the older grade, parents with children in the older grade of a composite class did soften their hostility during the year, especially in relation to social development.

In my previous article (Cornish, 2011), I listed the following positive views from the literature about the benefits of being in the older grade of a composite class:

- peer tutoring the younger students ("The split-grade classroom", 1995; Berry & Little, 2007; Doherty, 2003; Mequon-Thiensville School District, 2004)
- learning to interact with students with widely varying characteristics (Berry & Little, 2007; Fortescue, 1994b)
- learning to accept individual strengths and weaknesses and recognise that they are not always 'better than' the younger students (Freeman, 1984)
- being able to act as a role model for younger students ("The split-grade classroom", 1995; Berry & Little, 2007; Pratt & Treacy, 1986)
- the chance to consolidate learning or receive remediation within the class (Pratt & Treacy, 1986; Snyder, 2005)
- leadership opportunities (Pratt & Treacy, 1986).

As noted in that article, 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 saw social benefits arising from

leadership opportunities and opportunities to take on a nurturing role, both of which in turn resulted from being able to help the younger-grade students and provide good role models for them. However these positive views were often those of their children (who liked helping the younger students) and were not always unequivocally supported by the parents because of perceived loss of their child's learning time. Such perceived concerns were particularly strong for parents of children in the last year of primary school.

Perceptions of social development in the younger grade of a composite class were mixed. While some parents welcomed the exposure to older classmates as positive role models, others expressed disapproval of 'behavioural stretching' (Berry & Little, 2007), i.e., of their younger-grade child adopting inappropriate social behaviours from the older students. This uncertainty of the parents in relation to social development in the younger grade of a composite class reflects the interesting finding of de Lemos (1999) that relative age in grade is a more important factor affecting social behaviour than classroom organisation.

In sum, parents in this study described a range of views related to social-emotional development/issues in composite classes. They confirmed literature reportings of intense feelings related to social issues, such as developmental level and friendship groupings (Russell, Rowe, & Hill, 1998). General perceptions and concerns included the following:

- Social-emotional development is encouraged in a composite class because of having to be more responsible, confident and adaptable.
- Being in a composite class affects grade identity and therefore causes social issues related to identification with peers.
- Reduced friendship choice of same-age, same-grade, same-gender peers is problematic for both social and identity reasons. Uneven grade balance, with very few students in one of the grades, is particularly problematic.
- Students in a composite class feel like they are a minority group in the school and are therefore not 'normal'.
- Being in a composite class influences social development as students find it difficult to determine which classmates are their peers.

Specific perceptions and concerns related to being in either the younger or older grade included the following:

- Younger-grade students can be exposed to inappropriate social behaviours from the older-grade students.
- Younger-grade students' social development can be advanced by exposure to the older-grade role models.
- Older-grade students' social development can be impeded because of fewer same-age role models in the class.
- Working successfully at the higher-grade level builds confidence and motivation.
- Exposure to higher-grade curriculum can negatively affect students' confidence if they feel unable to cope with the older-grade work.
- Exposure to lower-grade curriculum can lead to feelings of inadequacy and perceived inability to cope with the 'correct' (higher) grade curriculum.

The range of views highlights the complex interplay of perceptions of academic and social issues in a composite class, as well as the individual nature of many parental concerns, based on particular children. In sum, however, parents described positive social benefits of a composite class in relation to general happiness, readiness to learn, feeling secure and confident, and being encouraged to develop pro-social behaviours. Their negative perceptions centred on exposure to inappropriate social behaviours, reduced friendship choice and loss of grade identity.

Conclusion

Parents in this study refused to choose between 'academic achievement' and 'being happy' as their main desire for their children at school. Thus concerns about academic progress and social-emotional development were closely intertwined in many parental perceptions of composite classes. Issues of identity were statistically confirmed as significant for parents when their child was in the older grade of a composite class. In terms of academic progress, parents did not like the older grade, fearing repetition of curriculum and hence reduced academic achievement. In terms of social issues, however, dislike of the older grade was much less clearcut. While some parents saw loss of

learning time as an issue when the older-grade students helped the younger-grade students, others recognised that these older students liked the nurturing role and that the chance to perform such behaviours is a positive result of being in the older grade. Many parents also favoured the older grade because of unease about younger-grade students adopting inappropriate social behaviours from their older classmates.

Social concerns about the older grade were dominant in parents' written comments, with reduced friendship choice being a common source of anxiety for both parents and students. This reduced friendship choice was perceived as an important concern both socially and academically, through the effect on grade identity. The experience of the three-grade composite showed that parents perceived affective factors such as feeling secure, belonging, having friends and being happy in their own class as more important than efforts to group students with same-age peers in other classes for part of the day. When schools have to form composite classes, a more important consideration than ability and academic achievement seems to be the necessity to have a core group of same-age students in the class so friendship choice is not seen to be too restrictive and in particular so grade identity is less compromised.

On the other hand, there is a real need to ensure that gifted and talented students are placed in the younger grade rather than the older grade. Appropriate curriculum differentiation is easier to achieve in these circumstances, even if the students need further extension than the older-grade curriculum. On social and emotional grounds, the need to be placed with older students is even more pressing, as they are likely to be more compatible with each other socially. The gifted and talented students do not necessarily need the exposure to older behaviours, some of which they might already have, but they do need to interact with classmates who are closer in intellectual age and therefore more likely to be socially congruent as well.

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