

Composite or Multi level Class Organisation

Internationally as well as in New Zealand schools, multi level or composite classes have been the traditional class level organisation. There is significant research that clearly identifies a range of benefits for the students.

Understandably parents may question how the teacher can cater for the range of abilities across two year levels. The key to understanding this model is to appreciate that “growth and learning is determined by stages not ages”.

Although a child might be chronologically older or younger—their maturity, social needs, academic and behavioural needs are all individual. Teachers group students to match these specific needs to teach. New Zealand teachers are recognised internationally for their ability to responsively teach to the needs of every pupil (also called personalised learning.)

If you reflect on students that attend kindergarten and pre school centres, there can be up to two or more years difference – same class but different stage. The key is relationship with the teacher.

Older students are not “held back” in composite classes as there is no one curriculum level per age group. The New Zealand curriculum is not designed as one level per year (as many overseas education system are) but is set up in developmental bands which can range from 1—3 years per level (see Years and Curriculum Levels table over page).

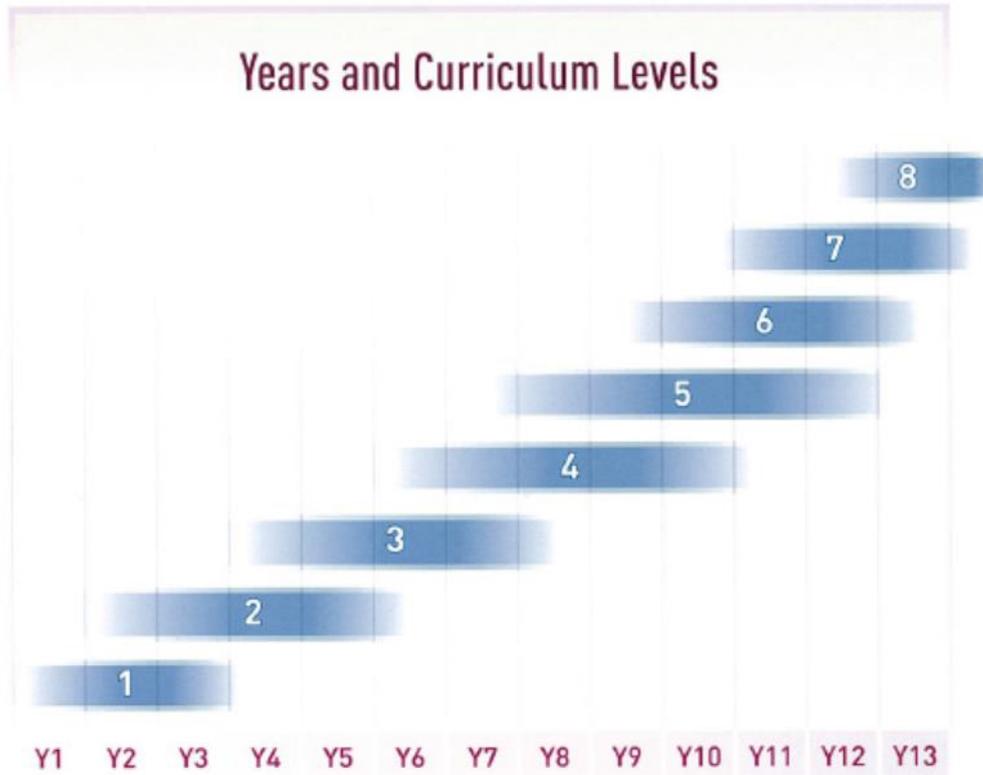
There are several other additional benefits that multi level classes support:

- Peer modelling. More socially able students set the tone (through the values and key competencies) for the class. Role models and great class citizens can come from both younger and older students irrespective of age.
- Mixed year levels provide a greater range or spread across classes. For example instead of allocating 85 children into three Year 4 classes we have up to seven Year 3 / 4 classes. This allows greater flexibility for meeting the children’s social / learning needs - as well as matching teacher styles and strengths.
- In terms of school organisation and class numbers, this increased range of classes also provides greater balancing of class numbers. You may be aware that some years we have had significant differences in class numbers as students do not enter school in exact groups of 25, plus our roll can fluctuate with unexpected enrolments during the year. A hypothetical example of this is:
 - 80 Year 6 students divided into 3 classes = approximately 26 students per class
 - In that same intake year we may have 100 Year 5 students divided into 3 classes = approximately 33 students per class.
 - However 180 Year 5/6 students divided into 6 classes will average 30 students per class.
- Reduced transition and change every year ensures greater focus on learning. Where appropriate, students may stay with the same teacher for two years, ensuring less “down time” as the current teacher already knows the student and their needs. The key to high quality teaching and learning remains with the quality of the relationship and engagement developed with the teacher.

How do teachers cater for the range of abilities across two year levels?

The New Zealand Curriculum levels range across 2 – 3 years. It is not a 1 year level for 1 age group, instead all curriculum levels are spread across 2 – 3 year levels.

This diagram shows how curriculum levels typically relate to years at school.



Questions and Answers

Why change from the current age level classes?

There is currently variances between year levels which does not allow any flexibility of staffing ratios. Multi level classes allow equitable class numbers and a greater spread of student needs throughout combined year levels.

Won't it be much harder for teachers to have a greater range of ages in their classes?

Due to staggered enrolments on a child's 5th birthday there has always been a range of at least 12 – 14 months in any classroom. New Zealand teacher's ability group for maths and literacy. They also "flexi group" for specific needs.

Are children "held back" if they are one of the older students in the multi level class?

Teachers assess individual students, groups are then based on need or ability "stage not age" e.g. Year 6 student may be at the end of Level 2 for writing but a Year 5 student may be Level 3.

Will you cross group across the multi level?

Current research (and our own staff experiences this year) show that teacher / pupil relationships and knowledge of individual learner needs are fostered by having the consistency of the same class teacher (i.e. not moving class for maths period)

Why don't you "stream" classes?

Unlike some high schools or international schools where some subjects are streamed, New Zealand Primary teachers are expected (and trained) to teach multi level classrooms. At primary level teaching and learning programmes are developed through a wide range of experiences across all the learning areas of the curriculum with a focus on literacy and numeracy along with the development of values and key competencies.

What about the difference in maturity between two year levels?

Regardless of their age students who have well developed social skills role model for others. These students are not necessarily the oldest in a class but may even be the year level younger. Some teachers specifically group students to teach or model our key competencies or to reinforce social / cooperative skills. The culture of high expectation is set by the teacher (regardless of year level). The analogy of a sports team, which may have several age levels - but huge variance in skill, resilience or player attitudes, will perform as a team depending on the coach's expectations

Will my child be with the same teacher for 2 years?

Not necessarily, as with current procedures, students need and ability are carefully matched to teacher style. Having multi level classes allows a greater range of options and spread.

Will the Year 5 / 6 multi level classes affect the Year 6's transition to their new schools?

Our Year 6 transition procedures will continue to ensure successful preparation for our students for their move to Intermediate or Junior High.