



# Multi-Age Classes

*The benefits and advantages of teaching children in classes where two adjacent Grades are combined.*

April 2007

## ***Multi-age classes***

Hiroshima International School (HIS) has a policy of multi-age classes in the Elementary (Primary) School. At most levels there are two parallel classes.

### ***What does this mean?***

It means that children whose ages place them in different Grades are taught together in one class.

At HIS classes are combined as follows:

- |                                   |                 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| • EC3 & EC4 (ages 3 – 5)          | one class (*)   |
| • Pre-1 & Grade 1 (ages 5 – 7)    | two classes (*) |
| • Grade 2 & Grade 3 (ages 7 – 9)  | two classes (*) |
| • Grade 4 & Grade 5 (ages 9 – 11) | two classes (*) |

(\*) With the exception of EC3 & EC4 we have two classes at each age level.

### ***Why does the school do this?***

Because we see educational benefits in having two adjacent Grades together.

### ***What are these benefits?***

HIS is growing but it is still a small school. If we had single-age classes we would have just one class (section) in each Grade. It would look like this.

- |             |           |
|-------------|-----------|
| • EC3 & EC4 | one class |
| • Pre-1     | one class |
| • Grade 1   | one class |
| • Grade 2   | one class |
| • Grade 3   | one class |
| • Grade 4   | one class |
| • Grade 5   | one class |

There would be several disadvantages to such an arrangement – mostly in terms of not having any flexibility. By combining Grades we can offer a better learning environment for children. Essentially, having multi-age classes means that we have *two* classes at each level rather than *one*. Here are twelve reasons why that is an advantage.

## **1. Admission**

HIS has a maximum class size of (in most cases) twenty students. Some Grades are close to this limit while others are smaller. As the school continues to grow, we would inevitably reach a situation where Grade X was full but there was space in the one above and the one below. New applicants for Grade X would therefore have to go onto a waiting list until a space became available while seats lay empty elsewhere. This is less likely with multi-age classes.



## **2. Placement**

Students are assigned to a Grade at HIS according to their age on 1<sup>st</sup> September each year. Some students will fall into a higher or lower Grade by only a matter of days or weeks. This can (and does) cause some parents frustration. Other children may have been advanced in their previous school or may come from a system where the cut-off date is different (such as 1<sup>st</sup> December). Such issues are seldom controversial within national systems but are a constant headache in international schools which admit students throughout the school year and from many different systems. Having multi-age classes makes it easier to place children in their correct Grade by age while still meeting their educational needs.

## **3. Nationality and language**

Even in a small school of about 150 students, we have children from almost twenty countries. Having two classes at each level means we can put speakers of a given language together (or separate them – each case is different), the better to meet their needs.

## **4. Gender**

It is in many ways beneficial for children to be in classes where there is a balance between girls and boys. If we had just one class in each Grade we would have no control over this balance. However, by having two classes of, for example, Grades 2 & 3, we have a choice of which one we enrol new students into and can better maintain a balance of genders.

## **5. ESL (English as a Second Language)**

Having no choice which class a new student enters increases the potential problem of having a disproportionate number of students with ESL needs in one class. This is not good for them or for those students who can speak English well and want friends to talk to. By having two parallel classes we have more control over this issue. Moreover, the time of ESL teachers can be more effectively used by teaching together students who may have similar needs but are actually in different Grades. (For example, absolute beginners in both Grades 2 and 3 can be taught together; that may not be possible – and would certainly be more complicated – if the Grades were separate.)

## **6. Student relationships**

It can happen that there are social problems between students. Sometimes two students in a small class of twelve or fifteen would be better separated from the start of the next school year. That is not possible with only one class in the next Grade up. With two classes, it is something we can do – for the benefit of everyone.

## **7. Cooperative teaching and learning**

One of the biggest advantages that having two classes at each level brings is the opportunity for two class teachers to plan and teach together. The benefits of this can hardly be exaggerated. Pairs of teachers can – and do – share responsibilities and teaching according to respective strengths. It is an effective use of time and sometimes expertise for each to take the lead in preparing and teaching particular topics or subjects. Cooperation is, of course, *possible* between teachers of different Grades but with two parallel classes at each level such cooperation is built into the system.

Parallel classes in a small school such as HIS also permit their combination to achieve critical mass where it is wanted. When students present work to their peers a larger audience (of perhaps thirty) is better than a smaller one (of maybe fifteen). Group discussions are more dynamic and



interesting when parallel classes are combined. Field trips are more successful when two classes are combined.

### **8. Teacher absences**

An additional benefit of having teachers plan and teach in parallel means that the inevitable absence of a teacher from time to time need not mean an interruption to the planned curriculum. If the only teacher of, say, Grade 4, goes home ill at lunchtime there may be no-one to step into the class and, at best, they would be coming in 'cold' and trying to do their best with necessarily brief written instructions. By having two teachers and classes 'on the same page' such a situation could much more effectively be managed by combining the two classes for the afternoon. And, the following day when a substitute is in school for the still unwell teacher, the second teacher is there to provide lesson plans, context and support.

### **9. Learning support**

It is not uncommon for individual students to have learning needs which require particular strategies or approaches. With two classes at each level, students with such learning needs can more easily be combined to learn together and make more efficient use of teacher time. And when we enrol students with particular learning needs we have more options about where to place them.

### **10. Students learning from students**

Every teacher who teaches a multi-age class notes the value of students learning not only from the teacher but from each other. Older children commonly mentor younger ones. Some parents worry that this is a waste of their time but it is actually an excellent way for children to consolidate and reinforce their learning. It can also raise their self-esteem, encourage responsible behaviour and establish a healthy class ethos.

### **11. Teacher continuity**

In some schools the class teacher moves up through the Grades with his or her class of children. In other schools teachers specialise in teaching a given Grade and have each class for one school year. There are pros and cons either way. By design, our multi-age classes at HIS allow teachers to get to know students over two years without having to teach a different syllabus each year. There is therefore less "getting to know you" time for both teachers and students.

### **12. Differentiation**

It is simply not the case that all students in a given Grade are working at the same level. As they grow older and move through the Grades, it is easier to teach students collectively. Crudely, a class of Grade 9 students are more likely to have similar educational needs than a class of Grade 2 students. Why? Because children start formal schooling (or Kindergarten or pre-school or whatever they have) at different ages in different countries. Because different countries operate on very different school years. (An immediate example is our own August to June year in contrast to the April to March year of our host country.) And because children – especially younger ones – learn in bursts. They spring forward for some weeks or months and then 'plateau' for a while before the next leap forward. Such differences have usually disappeared by the time a student is in his or her teens but are often still very obvious in younger children.

It is also the case that children are often 'ahead' in one subject while struggling in another. A 'Grade 3' student may have a real talent for Mathematics (and could rise to the challenge of doing 'Grade 4 Mathematics') but might still find reading and writing tortuous (and be functioning at a



level more associated with Grade 2). A multi-age class will better meet such a student's needs than the "one size fits all" approach.

There are, of course, times when it is right to segregate students by ability. For example, foreign students who have only recently arrived in the country cannot effectively be taught Japanese in the same class as children who speak Japanese at home. Foreign children with a year or two of learning Japanese are somewhere in the middle. A language programme offering three levels is therefore the ideal. This becomes feasible with two combined classes of thirty or more students but it would be much harder to justify with half that number of students. The same approach may be used in other subjects where the two teachers would split the two classes not by nominal Grade level but by ability: one teacher taking all the first language English students while the second did different work with second language learners would be an example.

In other words, there is no such thing as "Grade 1 work". Instead, teachers differentiate within the classroom between individuals and groups of students who are at quite different stages of development. Exercises and tasks are 'open-ended' allowing students with greater ability or confidence or experience to go further.

### ***Are multi-age classes found only in smaller schools?***

No. There are schools and educational authorities that have adopted multi-age classes in spite of being quite big enough not to 'need' them. That said, once a school is large enough to have two or three or more classes at each Grade level some of the arguments above lose their force.

### ***Are children who move from a multi-age system to a single Grade system disadvantaged?***

There is no reason why they should be. Students at HIS work according to their own ability, very much as they would in any system in any school. Arguably, students coming out of multi-age classes have had more chances to stretch themselves than those within a single Grade. (And in terms of paperwork, all students at HIS are enrolled within a given Grade. There are no complications when they come to transfer.)

### ***Is there a 'best' way to organise and order children into classes?***

No. Children are not homogenous products that can be neatly classified, labelled or categorised. They are different from each other, they are different from day to day, they are different from year to year and they perform differently when different skills are asked of them. Any system in any school is at best a compromise between the educational needs of individual children and the necessity of ordering teachers, students and classes into manageable units.

But any school must know *why* it is ordered as it is and be prepared and able to explain and justify its choices.

Multi-ages classes exist at HIS not by chance but because the teaching staff and administration firmly believe that they offer the best means available to meet the needs of our students. It works.

