



Multi-grade Classes

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

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Multi-grade classes

Hiroshima International School (HIS) has used multi-grade classes in the Primary and Secondary Schools for some time in order to create the most appropriate and dynamic learning environments possible within a small school.

What does this mean?

It means that children whose ages place them in different grade levels may be taught together in one class. In the Primary School this is usually for all learning, e.g. a combined Grades 2 & 3 class, but in Secondary the combinations can vary depending on the subject being taught.

Aren't the older students held back?

The research evidence on multi-grade classes is very consistent: students are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged in multi-grade classes¹. Put simply, it isn't the combining or not combining that makes a difference to student achievement but, rather, other factors that help students do better at school. At HIS we attend to these other factors – see below - in order to promote the most effective learning possible.

So why does the school do this?

Whilst, as noted above, combining classes has a neutral effect on student achievement, there are very distinct positive effects in creating more viable class sizes: this can be achieved by having two adjacent grades taught together. Quite simply, we organize multi-grade classes to improve learning at HIS.

What are these benefits?

Here are five distinct benefits:

1. Class size

Whilst the research on the impact of reducing class size is somewhat inconclusive, even the strongest proponents of reducing class size do not advocate for classes as small as six students! By combining classes we can create more stimulating learning environments for all our students. Ask almost any teacher what their ideal class size is and you will invariably get an answer of between 12 and 18. Such a number allows for individual, paired and group work that has variety in the interactions possible, it allows for students to be grouped according to differing levels of readiness in different areas of a subject and it creates a classroom with a 'buzz', with a positive learning atmosphere. Rather than have small classes with a preponderance of individual work, combining classes allows teachers to challenge students with the variety of collaborative work that research has shown promotes critical thinking skills and higher order learning.

2. Differentiation

We all know that even within a small single-grade classroom students can be at very different developmental and ability levels: at all grade levels classes do not consist of students who are all exactly the same and teachers already plan and deliver learning to meet the variety of individual needs of our students. It is simply not the case that all students in a given grade are working at the same level.

It is also the case that children are often 'ahead' in one subject while, perhaps, relatively struggling in another. A 'Grade 3' student may have a real talent for Mathematics (and could rise to the challenge of doing 'Grade 4 work') but might still find reading and writing tortuous (and be functioning at a level more associated with Grade 2). A multi-grade class will better meet such a student's needs than the "one size fits all" approach.

There are, of course, times when it is appropriate to segregate students by ability or readiness. 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 program with multiple levels is therefore the ideal, and this becomes feasible with combined classes. The same applies in English classes, where multi-grade grouping would allow us to group students so as to better meet their differing needs.

3. Student relationships

Students need to learn from and with other students in order to develop cognitively, socially and emotionally; Professor John Hattie has written "There seems universal agreement that cooperative learning is effective, especially when contrasted with competitive and individualistic learning."ⁱⁱ In any week students will typically work individually, in pairs and in small groups: combining classes to create teaching groups that can have flexibility of grouping has a positive effect on both academic achievement and interpersonal relationships.

4. Students learning from students

Every teacher who teaches any class, whether it be single- or multi-grade notes the value of students learning from each other. Hattie notes that the review of peer tutoring research shows "that peer tutoring has many academic and social benefits for both those tutoring and those being tutored."ⁱⁱⁱ Some parents worry that this is a waste of their child's time but this is not the case: when students become teachers of others, they learn as much as those they are teaching. In terms of social outcomes, peer tutoring can also raise self-esteem, encourage responsible behavior and establish a healthy class ethos.

5. Class balance

Appreciating, and making use of, diversity is central to HIS's philosophy: it is at the heart of considering multiple perspectives, developing open- and international-mindedness and building creative and higher order thinking skills. Allowing students to be in classes where there is a balance between genders, cultures, language backgrounds and prior educational experiences creates more positive learning environments. Small classes restrict the ability to offer this benefit, whereas combined classes promote it.

Are multi-age classes found only in smaller schools?

No. There are schools and educational authorities that have adopted multi-grade 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-grade 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-grade classes have had more chances to stretch themselves than those within a single grade level. (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 single, universally accepted, 'best' way to organise and order children into classes?

No. Children are not homogenous products that can be neatly classified, labeled 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 in different learning areas. 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: the now commonly accepted practice of organizing children into learning units by their date of birth was itself a product of the Industrial Revolution, when employers started to demand that workers with the right skills be produced in as efficient and cost effective a way as possible. Nothing in the design of modern schooling was anything to do with good learning! At HIS we are putting learning first, and multi-grade classes are part of this approach.

ⁱ Hattie, J. 2009. *Visible Learning*, pp.91-93. UK: Routledge.

ⁱⁱ Hattie, J. 2009. *Visible Learning*, p.212. UK: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hattie, J. 2009. *Visible Learning*, p.187. UK: Routledge.

Visible Learning is the culmination of a 15-year research project synthesising over 800 meta-analyses of research relating to student achievement in schools: it summarises statistically and qualitatively the findings of over 50,000 separate research studies.