

A Combination Class – Now What?

By Lisa Marie Gonzales, Ed.D.
Interim Superintendent/Lakeside Joint School District

In a few short weeks, elementary principals will post class assignments on school windows, and await the barrage of phone calls from parents who don't want their child in a "combination class." Some of the parents remember their "combo class" experiences, and some have formed negative opinions based on someone else's horror story. Unfortunately, with class size reduction and little control over how many students enroll for a given year, a school of all single-grade classrooms may not be possible.

"Combinations," "combos," "multi-age," or "split-grade" classes are formed to accommodate a group of students that do not neatly match the number of teachers at a grade level. Especially in rural areas, enrollment is likelier to be scattered over grade levels with a small overage of students that necessitates a combination class.

So what might you say to the parents with questions and concerns about combination classes? What does the research say about students in a combination classes? And what do you need to know as an administrator of a combo class?

Will my child in the older grade be challenged? All children can be challenged in a combination class, and combo teachers are responsible to provide a challenging, stimulating environment for all students. The topics covered in a combination class may be different than in a regular, single-grade class, but will enable students in each grade level to access the learning and standards of their particular grade.

Recent studies note that students in the older grade of the combo benefit from a placement with younger students. When older students teach information and skills to their younger classmates, the academic performance and IQ scores of the older students improve dramatically (Veenman 1995). Naylor notes that older-grade children benefit from actively asserting their responsibility for younger students, as well as develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of that responsibility (2000). Furthermore, older-grade students work well with younger students in a combination setting, and are able to develop leadership skills that are not always possible in single-grade classes.

Will my child in the lower grade be overwhelmed? Teachers and administrators are very careful to select children who can be successful and compatible in a combination class. In any class, there are a variety of students who are at different social, emotional, and academic levels. Lower-grade students have an opportunity to observe, emulate, and imitate a wide range of behaviors modeled by the older students that they might not have been exposed to in a single-grade classroom.

Lower-grade children are also intellectually stimulated by older children. Mattern and Yates report that lower-grade students have a “broader social experience and increased opportunities to lead and follow, and to form stable peer relationships” (1995). Younger-grade students can rely on the teacher to answer their instructional questions, but can also receive assistance from older students in the class. Students in the lower grade can also benefit from enriched learning by their exposure to curricular material designed for a higher grade (Society for Developmental Education 1993).

Will a child learn less in a combination class? The University of Louisville’s Center for Gifted Students conducted a study to compare the achievement of students in single-grade settings and in combination settings. Their study found that 20% of the students in combination classes significantly outscored the single-grade classes on standardized tests in four key areas: word identification, reading comprehension, mathematical computations, and mathematical problem solving (Viadero 1996).

Veenman’s research of multi-age classes spanned 56 classrooms in 12 countries. He argues that there is no empirical evidence for the assumption that student learning may suffer in classes with students of different grades and ages (1995). What he did find in his 1996 study were significant differences in the affective areas of learning. Student attitudes toward learning, school, self-concept, and personal and social adjustment were higher in the students who had participated in combination and multi-age classes. Students in the combination classes were able to form relationships with a wider variety of students than are possible in the traditional same-age classroom.

Since this initial study in 1996, further studies have concluded the same: “high achieving or other students who are chosen to participate based on skills that would translate well in a multi-grade classroom would not be negatively affected from being in this type of educational setting” (Hanover Research, 2012). What the Hanover Research did find is that “concerns may arise in schools with high percentages of low-income, minority, and English Language Learners, where the results have been more mixed and some studies have demonstrated slightly negative impacts of the multi-grade model.”

Children are different and can benefit from a combination class. Differences within a class of students from different grades can be a source of rich intellectual and social benefits. The lower-grade students perceive the older students as being able to contribute something, and students in the older grade see the younger ones as in need of their contributions. These mutually reinforcing perceptions create a climate of expected cooperation that is beneficial to all the children in the class, and to the teacher who often feels he is doing all the giving.

Research indicates that combining students of different grades is desirable and beneficial to all students. Gaustad argues that students benefit from the range and diversity of a combination class because it “promotes cognitive and social growth, reduces anti-social behavior, and facilitates the use of research-based developmentally appropriate instructional practices, such as active learning and integrated curriculum”

(1997). An important conceptual foundation exists in a combination class: combos reflect an emphasis on students' individual needs and progression, rather than the whole class progression through a prescribed curriculum at the same time and pace.

Students in combination classes are provided with a classroom environment that has significantly more positive outcomes. Combination arrangements can lend themselves to integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, cross-age tutoring, and learning in a more naturalistic setting. As Pratt notes, "in a class with more than one grade level, the evidence confirms that diversity enriches and uniformity impoverishes" (1986).

Behavior in a combination class. Older children spontaneously facilitate the behavior of younger children in a combination class. A study by Chase and Doan notes that when students in combination classes were asked to make decisions, they went through the process of reaching a consensus with far more organizing statements and more leadership behaviors than children in same-age groups (1994). Other pro-social behaviors, such as giving help and sharing, were also more frequent in the combination classes. Katz et al report that combination classes can also provide a therapeutic environment for children who are socially immature (1990). Younger children will allow an older child to be unsophisticated longer than his or her grade-level peers. Pavan further points out that students who experience one or more combination classes while in elementary school have significantly fewer discipline problems in junior high school (1992).

Arrangement of combination classes. The teacher who is chosen to lead a combination class should be one with experience in both grade levels, whenever possible. The teacher must be adept at differentiated instruction for multiple ability levels and multiple subjects. The greatest challenge with a combination class is coverage of subjects that are unique to grade levels, such as the topic-specific areas of science and social studies.

Teachers within a grade level will often work together to eliminate combination classes for a portion of a school day, choosing to group students with same-grade students for some subjects. By working together in grade level teams, teachers of combination classes can assure parents that all topics in a grade level can be adequately covered, even if they do not cover the topic at the same time as another class in that grade.

One caution for administrators: by placing more independent and cooperative students in combination classes, the remaining classes may have fewer independent workers. Mason and Burns noted that by selectively placing independent students in combination classes, a negative effect on achievement is likely in the other single-grade classrooms (1996, 1998). The selection of students based on high abilities and independent habits raises the ability level of the combination class, but lowers the ability levels in adjacent classes.

Teacher support. Increased workloads (more preparation, time for grouping, and teaching time) and more complex class organization (less instructional time, less individual attention, and greater management demands) are a reality of teaching assignments with a combination class. Teachers in multi-grade classes are often less satisfied with their jobs than their counterparts in single-age classrooms (Veenman 1996). Data from teacher satisfaction studies note that extra support is necessary to assist teachers of combination classes (Mason and Burns 1996, 1998). Extra and notable administrative support, coupled with fewer site responsibilities, are effective strategies to assist combination teachers.

Helpful strategies for parents. Parents can be guided to more-easily accept the combination class assignment with the following strategies:

- Provide information to show the instructional program will be tailored to meet the individual needs of each child with cooperative grouping and differentiated instruction.
- Provide strategies for the parents to be involved in the child's educational program: how to help the child at home, assist with homework, and take an interest in weekly classroom activities.
- Be supportive. If a parent is supportive of a teacher, regardless of the class arrangement, the child will perceive the situation to be perfectly acceptable. Only when the teacher or the school is criticized by the parent does the child feel anxious or worried.
- Invite the parent to assist in the classroom. By doing so, the parent can observe daily operations and different student groupings, and can even be used to help with small groups.

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Dr. Gonzales is a graduate of the University of La Verne Doctoral Program. She is currently the Interim Superintendent in the Lakeside Joint School District in San Mateo County, having served six years as a public elementary school principal. Her twins have been in combination classes twice, so she has first-hand experience from the parent perspective.