

## Introduction

Multi-age education is one strategy that schools can consider in providing quality education for students. In this educational approach, students of different age groups, spanning more than one year level, are placed together in a single class.

This resource:

- provides information about multi-age education for teaching and learning
- supports educators and school leaders in understanding the characteristics and implications of multi-age education
- raises awareness of practical instructional and organisational strategies, and opportunities and challenges of multi-age learning environments
- identifies some practical applications to effectively implement a multi-age educational approach.

## Understanding multi-age education

### Rationale for multi-age education

The decision to implement multi-age education can be driven by various factors.

Some schools intentionally organise students into multi-age classes. This pedagogical choice is based on the belief that multi-age classrooms offer benefits for student learning and development. These schools see multi-age education as an opportunity to create a more student-centred approach, where students progress at their own pace and receive personalised support.

In contrast, some schools adopt multi-age groupings out of necessity. These schools may experience fluctuating student enrolments, resulting in varying numbers of students across year levels. By grouping students from adjacent year levels together, these schools can maintain balanced class sizes and maximise the effective use of resources. This can enable schools to provide quality education that supports all students, regardless of enrolment variations.

Furthermore, some schools provide alternative pathways to mainstream schooling for students who require a different approach to education. Multi-age class groupings may be used as a strategy to tailor the educational experiences of these students, ensuring that students' specific needs are met and class sizes are balanced.

Regardless of the reasons behind implementing multi-age education, both deliberate and necessity-based multi-age groupings may provide opportunities to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments.

## Defining multi-age

For the purpose of this resource, the term *multi-age* encompasses all situations involving a class of students with a range of age groups and year levels. This terminology emphasises the range of ages present in the classroom and highlights the learning developmental continuum that students are progressing along. Consistent terminology may promote a better understanding of this approach to education.

Several other terms and definitions are also used in the research to describe a multi-age educational approach, including composite, multi-grade, multi-stage, vertical, family and heterogenous grouping. Some of the most common terms, as identified by Cornish (2010), are defined below.

### Composite

A *composite* class usually refers to a single class of students from two grades or year levels. This type of class is often formed when students cannot be divided into even-sized groups of the same year level. These classes are not a permanent class structure and are often found alongside single-grade classes.

### Multi-grade

A *multi-grade* class refers to a class of students from two or more grades. It typically refers to a class in a small rural school, rather than a composite class in a larger school. The term multi-grade usually implies permanence, which is not a feature of composite classes.

### Multi-age

A *multi-age* class often refers specifically to a class of students from several grades (usually two or three) that is formed by choice based on a philosophical commitment to the type of learning that occurs when children of different developmental stages learn together.

## Characteristics of multi-age classrooms

Based on Ronksley-Pavia, Barton and Pendergast's literature review (2019) and Stone's review of the multi-age model for education (2010), characteristics of multi-age classrooms include:

- a mixed-age student population
- continuity through the same teacher and classmates over multiple years
- flexibility in grouping based on student abilities and needs
- a developmental approach to learning with a focus on individual goals and progress
- differentiated instruction, tailored to meet the individual needs and abilities of each student
- personalised support and feedback from teachers to each student
- peer mentoring and collaboration, fostering interaction between students of different ages and abilities
- collaborative learning through small group work on tasks and projects
- a variety of assessment strategies, including teacher observations, student portfolios and real-life experiences, ensuring an ongoing, comprehensive monitoring and evaluation process.

## Strategies for multi-age teaching and learning

An understanding of the characteristics of multi-age classrooms supports educators to make decisions about effective instructional and organisational strategies for teaching and learning. In multi-age settings, educators have the opportunity to enhance student engagement, cultivate positive educational experiences and improve learning outcomes for all students.

### Teaching in a multi-age classroom

Teachers in multi-age classrooms facilitate differentiated instruction by using curriculum knowledge across year levels and adapting instructional and organisational strategies to accommodate the varying needs and interests of students. In multi-age classrooms, teachers:

- view students as inquisitive learners who construct meanings about their world in partnership with others
- support social dynamics and encourage students to work together in small groups or pairs, using cooperative learning activities, peer tutoring and cross-age interactions
- consider how students learn, and provide environments that support students' growing independence and self-identity as learners
- actively facilitate learning by investigating diverse ways of knowing, thinking and doing
- consider the sequencing of content from the Australian Curriculum across year levels or bands
- use a variety of organisational and instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of students
- scaffold learning in a range of settings and contexts using explicit and diverse techniques, e.g. questioning, prompting, modelling, demonstrating, comparing, contrasting, generating, clarifying and confirming
- work purposefully with students in flexible groupings (according to capabilities, needs and interests) or individually to differentiate learning
- use authentic assessment practices that engage with students' diverse understandings, capabilities and dispositions, and assist students to assess their own and others' learning.

### Learning in a multi-age classroom

Learning in a multi-age classroom provides students with the opportunity to engage with peers of different year levels and abilities. It fosters a collaborative learning environment where older students can mentor younger students and diverse perspectives are valued (Proehl et al. 2013). In a multi-age classroom, students:

- engage with each other's knowledge through student-initiated and teacher-initiated learning experiences
- talk about, represent, reflect on and begin to evaluate aspects of their learning with others
- work on activities independently and in a range of groupings, e.g. pairs, small groups and whole group
- build cooperative learning skills (e.g. sharing, turn-taking, listening, mentoring, negotiating, considering alternative points of view, mediating and resolving conflict in social situations) and build lifelong skills for engaging in effective interactions
- work with others who have similar or different capabilities, needs and interests to deepen and extend understandings and make links between prior and new experiences

- actively investigate topics of personal interest, using inquiry-based learning to aid meaning-making about aspects of local and global communities
- explore a range of thinking skills and strategies to assist them to investigate topics and problems of personal interest
- consider their roles as members of a 'community of learners' where taking risks, making choices, making errors and challenging thinking are seen as important to aid co-construction of learning
- take on leadership roles and act as mentors, facilitating and scaffolding each other's learning
- reflect on their sense of self as lifelong learners and build understandings about what, how and why they learn.

## Opportunities and challenges of multi-age education

Accommodating the strengths, needs and interests of diverse learners within a classroom is a challenge faced by all teachers. Similarly, teachers of multi-age classes encounter comparable opportunities and challenges in meeting these diverse needs.

Understanding the opportunities and challenges of multi-age education allows educators and stakeholders to make informed decisions and develop effective strategies. Educators and stakeholders can maximise the potential benefits of multi-age education, mitigate potential difficulties and create an optimal learning environment for students.

### Opportunities of a multi-age approach

Across the research, studies have emphasised the opportunities of multi-age education for both educators and students. It is reported that multi-age education:

- enables teachers to establish deeper relationships with their students when they work together for more than one year (Proehl et al. 2013)
- promotes continuity of learning, with positive relationships among peers and with educators (Black 2022)
- provides the opportunity to develop empathy, tolerance and understanding of different perspectives (Saqlain 2015)
- enables older students to act as role models, which reinforces their own learning through teaching and guiding their peers (Proehl et al. 2013)
- allows for personalised instruction and encourages students to take ownership of their learning (Saqlain 2015).

### Challenges of a multi-age approach

Research studies have also identified several challenges of a multi-age educational approach, including:

- difficulty in creating a balanced curriculum that meets the needs of all students, and the challenge of managing curriculum and assessment for students working at different year levels (Ronksley-Pavia, Barton & Pendergast 2019)
- the potential for social and emotional conflicts among students of different ages (Ronksley-Pavia, Barton & Pendergast 2019)

- differentiation for students in multiple year levels leading to increased teacher workload (Proehl et al. 2013)
- limited teacher training and support in multi-age education (Proehl et al. 2013)
- concerns from parents and carers about academic outcomes, grade identity or socialisation in multi-age classrooms if multi-age classes operate alongside single-grade classes in the same school (Cornish 2006).

## Addressing the challenges of a multi-age approach

Involvement of all stakeholders is important in the success of multi-age education (Saqlain 2015). Stakeholder support ensures the opportunities are maximised and the potential challenges are addressed. It also promotes collaboration, resource sharing and the implementation of effective strategies and policies for student success.

To effectively implement a multi-age educational approach, schools may consider the following practical applications:

- recognise the importance of involving parents and carers, educators and the local community
- provide clear and transparent communication to parents and carers regarding the benefits and methodology of multi-age teaching
- encourage students to set achievable goals and effectively track their progress
- establish a sense of continuity and foster relationships between students and teachers
- provide ongoing training and support for teachers to facilitate effective learning
- reflect on the outlined instructional and organisational strategies and consider their implementation in the school context.

## Conclusion

Multi-age education is one strategy that schools can consider in providing quality education. Schools implement multi-age approaches for a variety of reasons, including pedagogical choice and necessity due to low enrolment numbers. Regardless of the reasons, multi-age groupings may provide opportunities to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Multi-age education offers a range of opportunities, including positive relationships, continuity of learning, understanding of different perspectives, personalised learning, peer mentoring and opportunities for students to take ownership of their own learning. However, this approach also presents challenges around managing curriculum and assessment, student relationships and teacher workloads.

Several potential approaches have been identified that may address the challenges of multi-age education. These approaches encompass stakeholder involvement, communication with parents and carers, reflection on instructional and organisational strategies, support for teachers and support for students. Effective implementation of these strategies may support schools to maximise the potential benefits of multi-age education, mitigate potential difficulties and create an optimal learning environment for students.

# References

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