



Information for Parents

What is Multi-Age?

Multi-age classrooms

A **multi-age classroom** is a community of learners where students are intentionally grouped together across various age groups of more than one-year level. Teachers deliberately focus, establish, and activate a student-centred learning model, characterised by differentiation.

Ideally, this **multi-age classroom** structure is for all students in relevant year levels and/or across the school, e.g., 3 x Year 3/Year 4 classes. Multi-age groupings are also known by other terms which include: multi-grade (multigrade), composite classes, stage classes, mixed-grade/age classes, non-graded schooling, and multi-classes.

Multi-age classrooms are a specific philosophical, student-centred learning structure/model that BCE endorses and supports.

The difference between multi-age and composite

A “composite” class is where students in each grade study a different curriculum. The multi-age classroom is a place where all students participate in the same units at their own level. Multi-age is a deliberate structure in which children of different ages are grouped together. The teacher, as facilitator, uses a variety of instructional strategies to focus on the individual needs of the learner.

What does the literature say about multi-age classrooms?

The multi-age literature does not clearly agree on the advantages and disadvantages of multi-age schooling and there is a call for more research in this area. However, there is agreement that *students' social and emotional growth, independence, responsibility, sense of community, and wellbeing* is supported more in these settings than in single-year settings. Some research concludes there is no discernible difference between multi-age and single-year classrooms in terms of academic performance.



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Benefits

Learning achievement

While there is no current evidence correlating multi-age with higher student outcomes to that of traditional (single year) classroom structures, research suggests that multi-age instruction challenges students at many diverse levels through a strong focus on differentiation and personalised learning. Students' strengths are emphasised instead of their weaknesses and students feel less competition. Each learner is recognised as unique by focussing on the developmental stage of learners.

Personal and social capabilities

Research tells us that when working within diverse groups, students are known to achieve higher gains in the skills of communication, flexibility, leadership, collaboration, time management, and empathy. There are also social and emotional benefits, as the students learn how to collaborate, coach, mentor, and support their peers. The multi-age classroom provides children with greater opportunities for a wider range of relationships and social experiences and, therefore, promotes development of their social skills and cooperative behaviour. The varied levels of social and emotional development found among children of different ages means they can be both supported by, and supportive of, one another.

Critical and creative thinking

By restructuring student learning using a student-centred approach rich with opportunities, students develop critical and creative thinking skills. Their increased engagement with leading their learning, learning within an authentic context supported by teachers, promotes a 'thinking' classroom where critical and creative thinking skills are developed. Research highlights the benefits for both students and teachers of student-centred, multi-age approaches due to increased opportunities from engaging in rich learning experiences.

Sense of community

Multi-age classes create a community atmosphere where students feel comfortable with their teacher and where trust and communication is facilitated between parents/carers and teachers. This results in skills learned being readily transferrable beyond the classroom, with a greater sense of community and stronger interactions and relationships. These are highly desirable skills needed by today's students as they grow and learn to participate and contribute as responsible citizens in society now and into the future.



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Challenges and proactive supports that OLHC have assured

Lack of a clear and shared understanding of a multi-age philosophy

Research clearly discusses the confusion which exists between terms, definitions, and structures being used to describe and discuss multi-age schooling which confounds research in this area. This presents a complicated picture in discussions around multi-age schooling and its successful implementation. Lack of clarity may lead to negative attitudes and misconceptions from school leaders, teachers, and parents/carers. A shared and agreed system, school and classroom multi-age philosophy, structure and approach demands clarity and regular articulation and communication to all parties. School leaders who work with their teachers and communities to build a shared language, understanding and approach about multi-age learning in their school's context are more likely to experience a more seamless transition.

Proactive supports

This is supported by OLHC making an intentional choice to implement and embed a multi-age philosophy and structure through strategic planning, induction, and ongoing communication. We are engaging our teachers in professional learning, school visits, and the collegial building of a multi-age culture.

Perceived higher teacher demands and curriculum, assessment and reporting constraints

Multi-age approaches can be perceived as more challenging than single-year classrooms due to the wider range of student abilities and the necessity to address the curriculum learning demands of two year levels. As teachers learn to work in this 'new way', there is likely to be an increased need for preparation time, and for professional learning and support, in establishing approaches for individual student support and classroom management. Working with teachers to provide additional time for planning and teaching, and targeted multi-age teacher training and professional learning, will increase chances of the effective implementation of multi-age.

Federal and state educational policies, procedures, and frameworks are typically designed for single-year structures. For example, the Australian Curriculum requires that in P-10 each student receive a report against the year level curriculum studied. Equally, a teacher's experience is often with planning, teaching and assessing in a single-year structure. Teachers may require additional support to adjust their approaches to planning, teaching, and assessing in a multi-age context. There is a repertoire of options available to teachers that provide opportunities for a shared approach across year levels while individual students can access learning at their appropriate year level. In P-6, teachers can easily establish systems to track the learning to ensure that full curriculum entitlements (planned, taught, and assessed) for each year level have been met.

Proactive supports

One of the biggest factors to student success in a multi-age classroom is the skills, attitudes, values, and capabilities of the classroom teacher. Fortunately we have highly skilled professional teachers with specific expertise with pedagogical practices essential to a multi-age setting (e.g., differentiation and collaborative learning approaches); they are well-supported; able and willing to work collaboratively (such as team teaching, and group planning); flexible; have a growth mindset; have a strong and deep knowledge of the Australian and BCE Religion Curriculum; and are able to provide a safe, supportive, and nurturing classroom environment.

Professional learning time will be increased for 2023 for teachers who undertake a multi-age class to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge and pedagogical skills required to effectively teach using a multi-age approach. Classroom support will be enhanced with additional learning enhancement teacher time in class.

Classes of multiple year levels will be provided with common planning time with teachers of the same grades. *"Common planning time gives teachers the opportunity to discuss various issues with other teachers more often, and thus facilitates the professional learning and work of all teachers involved"*.

Rethinking curriculum, assessment, classroom organisation and resourcing

Research highlights how a multi-age approach challenges schools to not only re-think curriculum and assessment approaches, but also other elements of schooling structures, such as timetabling, classroom organisation, furniture, learning resources, literature, learning area texts, technology, classroom spaces, data, and time management.

A shared understanding of multi-age, effective professional learning, school community buy in, time and space for planning, and resources specifically targeted to support multi-age classrooms, will ensure implementation barriers are reduced.

Proactive supports

OLHC has invested considerable time and resourcing into creating learning spaces that benefit a range of learners. Flexible learning spaces encourage collaboration and individually designed learning opportunities. We have contemporary furniture in all classrooms that allow for flexible usage. Learning spaces are utilised to support the pedagogical practices of multi-age teaching to encourage student collaboration and learning growth.