

Multi-Level / Combined Grade Levels

Phoenix School has experienced multi-level or combined classrooms over the past few years. Multi-level and combined classrooms are actually quite common in the St. James-Assiniboia School Division as they are in many school divisions across the province.

In fact, Manitoba Education has a specific document entitled: “Independent Together: Supporting the Multilevel Learning Community”. The information highlighted in this Phoenix School article has been taken directly from Chapter 1 of this document. Their web-site is:

www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/multilevel/ind_together_full.pdf

“Multi-level classrooms are built on the premise that diversity and time are not challenges to be overcome but assets and resources to promote learning.”

The decisions “...to create multi-level classrooms are based on pedagogical and/or demographic considerations:

- Some schools/divisions/districts choose multi-level programming for philosophical reasons. These deliberately formed multi-level classrooms emphasize a continuum of learning, rather than maintaining grade differences. In such classrooms, students work with the same teacher for two or more years.
- In communities with low student populations, all Early Years students, all Middle Years students, or all students from Kindergarten to Grade 8 may be taught in the same classroom. These classes, like the deliberately formed multi-level classrooms, may also emphasize a continuum of learning.
- Other schools may have two or more grades assigned to the same teacher to manage shifting enrollment. These classrooms are often viewed as a temporary measure within a school.

Regardless of whether multilevel classrooms are created for pedagogical or demographic reasons, they can be seen as assets that promote quality learning.”

In the introduction, the document states that: “... **the Multi-level Learning Community is designed to engage students, educators, and parents in**

developing independent learners within a student-centred multi-level classroom community and to celebrate the uniqueness of each learner.

Development along a continuum of learning offers independent learners time to grow as risk-takers, leaders, researchers, and thinkers.”

For your information, Phoenix School’s instructional practices are based on a continuum of learning.

“As a result of philosophical choice or demographic necessity, many Kindergarten to Grade 8 teachers in Manitoba have two or more grades for two or more years in their classrooms. Developing independent learners is imperative to the success of these multi-level classrooms, which depend upon a supportive and informed learning community consisting of learners, educators, and parents.”

“Research shows that there are many benefits to having students learn in groups with older and younger peers.

1. Major reviews of this research into multi-age learning show several consistent trends. In reviewing 57 Canadian and American studies, Pavan found that in 91 percent of the studies, students in multi-grade classrooms performed as well as or better than students in single-grade classrooms academically.

- Their greatest gains tended to be in language and reading.

2. In affective and social indicators, students in multi-age classrooms strongly outperform students in single-grade classrooms (Miller, “Multiage Grouping”; Pratt; Connell). They score higher in study habits, social interaction, self-motivation, cooperation, and attitudes to school (Gayfer). The benefits of having older students offer assistance to younger students are supported by research. Studies show that both the student being tutored and the student doing the tutoring improve academically (Anderson and Pavan). Kasten emphasizes that “the act of translating one’s understanding into language is intellectually demanding”; this is certainly the role of the tutor.

3. “....many qualitative and quantitative studies indicate that students in multi-age classrooms perform as well as or better than students in single-grade settings in standardized tests and that they have a more positive attitude towards school, higher self-esteem, and better peer relationships. Kasten

claims, “Children with a variety of needs, strengths, abilities, and ways of knowing are thriving in these classrooms”. The benefits of multi-level classrooms explored in this resource apply to classrooms that are maintained for two or more years. There are distinct benefits for the whole learning community—learners, teachers, and parents.”

Class/Learner Benefits

“Multi-level classrooms are built on the premise that diversity is not a challenge to be overcome, but an asset and a resource that promotes learning. In reality, all classrooms are diverse. By the time students are eight years old, their academic performance in a single-grade classroom may span three or more years. In addition, students bring to the classroom a wide range of learning approaches, developmental stages, aptitudes, interests, experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personalities. Thus, there are no homogeneous classrooms. The natural varied composition of a multi-level classroom has specific advantages for learners:

- Multi-level programming recognizes that each student is at a different stage of learning and focuses on the developmental stage of the learner; of necessity, the focus moves to individual learning along a continuum. This minimizes competition because students recognize and accept that each student is at a different place in his or her learning. Students learn to set personal learning goals, assess themselves, and reflect on their own learning.
- Multi-level classrooms provide opportunities for students to gain self-knowledge as they interact with older and younger peers. Throughout life, people rarely operate in groups that are systematically separated by age. The range of social relationships students build in a multi-level classroom more closely reflects the diverse social situations individuals encounter in workplaces, communities, and families. In fact, just as the youngest child in a family typically passes developmental milestones earlier than his or her siblings did through watching and listening to older siblings, younger students learn from the wider knowledge base of older classmates and from their modelling of skills and behaviour.
- Older students likewise develop their capabilities as they assume leadership roles and articulate their understanding as they share their learning with younger students. In the multi-level classroom, though, a student’s position

relative to her or his classmates changes each year. Students with strong leadership skills in their own age group enter the classroom as the youngest students and learn valuable skills in following leadership. Students who are less assertive or who require more support or guidance have opportunities to share their learning with younger students and experience themselves as leaders.

- Multi-level classrooms allow for continuous progress. All learners can be challenged. In a multi-level environment, students do not need to spend time on concepts and skills they have already mastered. Students who have not attained specific learning outcomes by the end of a school year have the opportunity to achieve them the following year. In multi-level classrooms, all students are expected to attain the learning outcomes, and time becomes a variable that can help them do so.
- Multi-level classrooms provide students with stability and an on-going relationship with a teacher. Continuity within the same classroom over two or more years helps diminish the anxiety associated with moving to a new classroom at the beginning of a new school year, and shortens the time it takes to learn new routines, thereby increasing instructional time.”

Typically, classroom configurations are not determined until March but the existence of one combined classroom this school year predicts a greater necessity for combined classrooms in the coming school years.

If you have any questions about multi-age / combined classrooms, the Manitoba Education document is a useful resource and quick read.