Mixed up is no bad thing

They may be due to necessity but a mixed year group class can be a great teaching experience that truly benefits children. Although there are certainly challenges...

Around a million primary school children in the UK are taught in classes containing more than one year group. In fact, although our school system uses birthdays as an organisational starting point, about a third of primary pupils are taught in classes of two, three or even four year groups. Much research has been done on the impact of mixed-age classes on achievement and the consensus is generally very positive; children achieve well and sometimes better than those in single year groups. That is not to say that teaching a wider age range is without challenges.

David Perrin, head of Heptonstall Junior, Infant and Nursery School, West Yorkshire, which has four mixed year classes, puts it this way: ‘The challenge is obviously that you are working with children who, in age terms, can be nearly two years apart – and in terms of emotional development this can be even wider. But, just as in any class, the curriculum is individualised for each child to ensure they are working at their own appropriate level; therefore, the actual curriculum is relatively straightforward to manage.’

Why have mixed age classes?
Most mixed age arrangements exist through economic necessity and are often found in smaller rural schools, where pupil numbers dictate fewer classes. As schools are funded per pupil, it is not usually viable to have single age classes unless there are 25 to 30 children in the year group.

Some non-mainstream schools (such as Montessori) have mixed age classes simply because they believe it to be better for children’s development to learn alongside older and younger pupils. Maria Montessori, whose educational philosophy is still widely followed around the world, thought it vital there should be at least three years between the oldest and youngest child in a class.

‘The main thing is that the groups should contain different ages, because it has great influence on the cultural development of the child,’ she said. ‘You cannot imagine how well a young child learns from an older child; how patient the older child is with the difficulties of the younger.’

A 2006 report, Multi-Age Learning and Teaching, prepared for the government of Queensland, Australia (where many children are taught in mixed age classes) backs this up: ‘The younger children benefit from the positive models of older children, often aspiring to their levels of capability. At the same time, the older children rise to the expectations of the younger children and teacher, being very responsible and having opportunities to lend and use their expertise.’
What do parents think?

Because money usually plays a part in the decision to have mixed age classes, some parents worry that the arrangement is somehow inferior to having single year group classes – that a situation brought about by economic necessity can only have a negative impact on educational standards.

Common concerns are that their son or daughter, particularly if they are more able, will be held back by being with younger children and become bored because the work is not at a high enough level, or that their child will end up repeating work that they did in a lower year. Conversely, parents of younger children, particularly if they are summer-born, may worry that they will not be able to keep up with the older ones.

Peter Hill, whose four-year-old daughter is in the foundation stage unit at Heptonstall, says any concerns he had were unfounded: ‘Alice started pre-nursery in a class with children who were up to two years ahead but she has taken it in her stride and loves being with the older ones. She is the youngest child in our family by about six years anyway, so being with bigger kids feels completely normal and she is thriving. The teachers are very experienced and know exactly what they’re doing, and there is a very happy and supportive atmosphere.’

Providing parents with clear information about the reasons behind class organisation and the many positive aspects of mixed age groupings can help put minds at rest. Some schools provide information leaflets for parents explaining the rationale behind mixed age classes and addressing any common worries, or have a page on their website dedicated to the issue.

Others organise in-school events, such as open days for parents whose children are getting ready to join a reception/year 1 class and who may not have come across mixed-age classes before.

Get to know the children

This might seem obvious, but having an in-depth understanding of every child is more important than ever when you are teaching a wide age range. Speak to the previous class teacher, preferably before the summer holidays, to find out as much as you can about each child’s attainment, interests and personality. Use any transition days to plan activities which will help the new class ‘gel’ and give you the chance to get to know the children a little before the new school year starts.

Planning and differentiation

Planning for a single age group is time consuming and planning for a mixed-age class even more so, particularly if you are new to it. But, with time, you will build up a bank of planning and ideas which you can improve and adapt for future classes. Many schools with mixed-age classes use planning cycles of two or more years, so children do not cover the same topics more than once.

One of the benefits of mixed-age teaching is that you often involve children more in the planning of topics so that learning becomes child-led in an organic way, and pupils feel greater ownership of their work. ‘The planning can be quite complicated at first, but I think it’s something that becomes much easier with time,’ says Sue Cowley. ‘More differentiation is needed, of course, but it becomes natural after a while to think about approaching a subject in several different ways.’

Plan according to the stage a child has reached, rather than their age, and think carefully about different groupings. Sometimes it might be appropriate to have children of similar ability.

Teaching a mixed-age class

Teaching a class containing more than one year group poses certain challenges but can be very rewarding and enjoyable. Sue Cowley, teacher trainer and author of several books on primary education, says there are benefits for both adults and children: ‘It can be a chance to think about your teaching differently and to be really creative,’ she says. ‘The key is to think about how to approach a subject at two or three different levels and to find ways of making things relevant to all of the children. It also encourages you to look for links between what happens in one year and then the next and this gives a sense of continuity.’

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Advantages to a mixed age class

- Teachers usually spend more than one year with each child; this gives them time to develop a deep understanding of their abilities and needs.
- Likewise, children have longer to form a positive, trusting relationship with their teacher.
- Teachers become experts in differentiation and learn to think more creatively about how to teach different subjects.
- Teachers become skilled at planning effective group work and at helping children to develop as independent learners.
- Older children get the chance to demonstrate their skills and maturity, acting as role models for the younger pupils and demonstrating more sophisticated approaches to their work, particularly in areas such as problem solving.
- Younger children are able to succeed in tasks they would not be able to complete without the help of their older classmates.
- More able younger pupils can be stretched by working with older children in the class.
- Children have more space to develop at their own pace and take charge of their own learning.
- Having pupils of different ages together can feel more natural; after all, children with older or younger siblings are used to living and learning together.
- Children develop a sense of family within their class; there may be an atmosphere of co-operation rather than competition.
- Children’s friendship groups may become wider and more diverse.
- Children find transition between classes and key stages easier because they already know their new classmates from lower down the school.

Working together, but at others it might work better to have older children leading and teaching their younger classmates. ‘It opens up a whole different way of thinking about how we group children,’ says Sue. ‘The teacher might group by ability, so a more able younger child would get the chance to work with older pupils, or by reading age or by conceptual understanding. There are lots of options.’

Opportunities for children to work independently at their own levels are also important, as well as time to investigate topics of personal interest. An effective lesson might see some children working on independent tasks and others working in various groupings, with focused adult support where needed. This mixture of approaches helps pupils develop a range of skills, including sharing, taking turns, mentoring, listening, compromising, considering others’ points of view, critical thinking, solving problems, and evaluating and reflecting on their learning.

Targets and tracking
It goes without saying that setting challenging yet realistic targets and tracking children’s progress are of the utmost importance. The range of levels is likely to be much wider and so scrupulous tracking is crucial if you are to plan an engaging and appropriate curriculum for all. Set targets according to each child’s prior attainment rather than thinking about their age.

Resources
With time especially tight, it can pay to make good use of ready-made resources, or adapting them to the needs of your pupils. There are lots of high quality resources available in print and online and these can be a great source of inspiration even if you do not want to use them in their entirety. Sue Cowley suggests taking a look at the extensive mixed-age materials at www.hamilton-trust.org.uk.

Maintaining a year group identity
While children enjoy many benefits being with older or younger children, they will also identify strongly with the particular year group they are in. Maintaining a special year group identity is a good idea, particularly if the year is split between classes. This can be done in lots of simple ways, which might include sports events where children participate in single year groups, year group assemblies or making sure each year goes in at the same time and sits together at lunch.

Enjoy it!
Teaching a mixed age class can be certainly be hard work at times and will require you to become a master of the art of creative planning and differentiation, but the rewards are many. Watching younger children rise to the expectations of their older peers and older children blossom in their roles of mentors is a wonderful experience. And the opportunities to develop your own skills will be many; if you can successfully plan and deliver an exciting and challenging curriculum for a mixed year group, you can enjoy the satisfaction of knowing you are really meeting the children’s needs and doing an excellent job.