



# RUAHINE SCHOOL

The Best I Can Do, The Best I Can Be

Tū māia au ki te mahi, tū rangatira au ki te ao

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## COMPOSITE or MULTI LEVEL CLASSES

Ruahine School, like the majority of NZ primary schools has, and has had for many years, composite classes. Next year all of our classes will again be composite. Our two Year 7/8 classes will also have four Year 6 students in each class; this is necessary so that our Year 5/6 class remains a sensible and practical size for the most effective and equitable teaching and learning environment.

Each year the concept of composite classes still causes some concern for some families so we thought it a good idea to explain these further.

### What are composite classes?

Composite classes are classes where the children may be from two or more Ministry defined year groups (e.g. Years 1-2; Years 1-3; Years 3-4; Years 5-8, Years 7-8 etc).

All classes (including composites) are formulated considering a total balance in each classroom - considering social behaviour and learning needs, and gender etc. By combining two or more year levels in one class, schools successfully keep class sizes at a manageable level.

### Why do we have composite classes?

For a variety of reasons including:

- Meeting social needs
- Meeting academic needs
- Allowing children to learn within a more effective group to meet their needs
- Matching children to teachers
- Maximising teacher strengths
- Minimising/making equitable classroom sizes

### What are the negatives about composite classes?

**There are none** according to the research and according to children once they get into them. Research in NZ, the UK and Australia shows that children in composite classes achieve academic outcomes no different to those in straight year group classes.

### What are the benefits?

Composite classes can provide **significant benefits** to both the younger and older students in the class. Older students can benefit from helping younger students in collaborative learning situations. The younger students have the opportunity of enhanced learning experiences when they are ready for it. There are many examples where younger children can show older ones a thing or two! Role models and leaders can come from both the younger and older children; the children who excel at these traits do so irrespective of age.

Research, both in New Zealand and overseas, has shown no detrimental academic effects from composite classes but many additional benefits:

- enhanced social development
- increased confidence
- children can operate better as part of a group, are more assertive, become more independent learners and better problem-solvers
- children make friends outside of their standard age-groups
- older children get more leadership opportunities and frequently build self-esteem; they become role models to the younger class mates

A major review of international research into multi-age classes, looking at the cognitive and non-cognitive effects of multi-age and single-age classes, found that there were no differences found with respect to maths, reading, or language and that with respect to attitudes towards school, self-concept and social adjustment, students are sometimes **advantaged by being in multi-age classes** instead of single-age classes. Research from the UK has shown children in composite classes do 'no better or worse' academically than their peers in a straight grade class, but that, socially, their development is enhanced. They are more confident, can operate better as part of a group, are more assertive, become more independent learners and better problem-solvers. They also make friends outside of their standard age-groups

#### **Don't we have a curriculum for each year group?**

No, we never have. We have a curriculum separated into levels (children in Years 1-8 are expected to move through levels 1, 2, 3 and 4). The NZ curriculum was designed in the knowledge that learning is not linear and children, regardless of their age, have differing needs and learn at different paces.

The NZ curriculum is set up in developmental bands which range from 1-3 years per level.

It is an undisputed fact that in any class, whether composite or straight level, there is a range of ability - with children working above, at or below their age and expected curriculum level. All classes regardless of whether they are composite or straight year groupings are based on recognising differences and not seeing students as the same; children are taught according to individual need, not age.

New Zealand rates as one of the best educational systems in the world. New Zealand teachers **teach to stage not age**. They teach what your child needs – not a Year 4 or 5 curriculum from a text book.

#### **Won't things be too hard for my child if s/he is a Year 3 in a Year 3/4 composite?**

No - stage not age

#### **For my Year 8 child in a Year 6/7/8 class won't it be too easy?**

No - stage not age

#### **How will the Year 8 leadership programme work with composite classes?**

There will be **no change** to the Year 8 leadership programme. This programme is run by our Deputy Principal Miss Kate Dare. As you will be aware Kate did not teach Year 8s in 2014 & 2015 however she still very effectively ran the leadership programme through her regular meetings with the Year 8s as a group. This will continue in 2016 when Kate will again mentor our Year 8 leaders through regular meetings.

Composite classes are not new. They are a common form of class organisation in schools in all education systems, both in NZ and across the world. Regardless of if children are in a straight class or composite class, our focus is always on how to best meet the needs of the children at our school. By having composite classes we are more effectively able to ensure no one age group has too many or too few children, plus we have the added benefit of having more options as to where we can place children, meaning that we can match the needs of the child with the strengths of the teacher, and we are better able to ensure the best combinations of children to support effective learning.

Ultimately, whether children are in composite or straight-age classes, it is not the age combinations that matter. **What matters is the quality of teaching and learning and the relationship between the child and the teacher.**

We hope this has explained some of the reasoning and theories behind the concept of composite classes. Please feel free to contact me to discuss any further queries you may have.

Kind regards  
Leanne Angland  
Principal