

Mixing age levels builds character and boosts creativity

By Randy Ray

For parents, it's an age-old question: should children of various ages and abilities be mixed in the same classroom?

Some feel their children will be shortchanged academically and socially if educated alongside older or younger students, while others are okay with the concept. Many educators suggest that classrooms that combine age and grade levels and differing abilities develop stronger and more self-confident students who are better equipped for the road ahead.

St. Laurent Academy in Manor Park, an independent school that caters to toddlers through Grade 8, has students in four mixed grade classes: 1-2, 4-5, 6-7 and 7-8, mainly as a way to keep class sizes at a maximum of 15 students.

Administrators at the 90-student school feel mixed grades are a positive experience for most children.

"Split grade levels is not our aim," says communications director Christine Dickson, "but on the other hand we do not want classes that are too large. Our splits are based on numbers and student needs."

At St. Laurent Academy parents are always consulted before split grade classes are assembled, as was the case this year when staff and parents discussed whether the school's Grade 7 students were best placed in the Grade 6-7 class or the Grade 7-8 class. Dickson says parents needn't worry that their kids are being taught information that is too challenging or too easy.

"The overall concept in mathematics, for example, is taught to the full class, then expanded upon in a way that suits each student's ability, either while doing homework or at different work levels. Young children being taught multiplication will be given questions with fewer digits than the older children, she says.

Because class sizes are small, teachers can provide individualized attention, and as a result, quickly recognize students who are struggling and need help or those who are excelling and require more challenging lessons.

“The aim is to have students move ahead as they master concepts and skills. It is difficult to imagine 12-year-old kids doing the same thing at exactly the same time, so by having small classes, some mixed, we are able to respond to individual needs and to provide support or move quickly if a student needs a more challenging curriculum.”

Last year, for instance, a student in the Grade 6-7 class began taking math at the Grade 6 level but when it was clear she could easily handle Grade 7 work, she moved up a grade level and finished at the top of her class. “This is an opportunity she would not have had, aside from tutoring, had she been in a Grade 6 class,” says Dickson.

In the classroom as a whole, children of different ages and abilities can be a character builder, she adds.

“Kids begin to appreciate each other as individuals with different abilities, different strengths and weaknesses. They see all of the students around them in the class as individuals and they appreciate the differences ... and when a child is struggling he won’t hesitate to ask an older, and sometimes younger, classmate for help. There is no reason not to; split grades can remove the barrier of asking older students for help.”

By working alongside older children, the younger ones often improve their grades because they are challenged to keep pace.

“Teachers are sensitive to challenging without overwhelming students but it is natural that kids want to learn and be challenged. It is our experience that kids need to be challenged and stimulated to stay interested and we very much do that. It is up to the teacher to rise to the occasion to ensure the curriculum is engaging kids’ interest.”

Administrators at St. Laurent Academy have also noticed that children in split classes have the opportunity to form enriching friendships that are based on common interests versus common ages.

“Grade 6 students who find something in common with a Grade 7 student have an opportunity to broaden their social opportunities ... they have similar interests they might not find at the Grade 6 level and they might see the older child as a role model or develop a peer relationship that is beneficial both ways. The older child

could take a leadership role with the younger one, who now has someone to look up to and befriend.’’

Integrated classes require more reflection and more planning effort on the part of teachers to differentiate instruction and assignments in the classroom... to tap into the potential of each child,’’ says Lucie Lalonde, school director at Académie de la Capitale, who adds: “most parents think children, in a specific grade, all learn at same speed and depth, but they don’t.’’

Lalonde has noticed that many of her young new students arrive at the school looking for challenges because they have learned a variety of skills at preschool and daycare. “There has been some educational component, so they have to go beyond the JK or SK stuff they already know when they get to us.’’

Also many gifted learners present their teachers and parents with this challenge. “Gifted learners who are not well fed intellectually become really frustrated at school and become passive learners; and in the long run, it is society on the whole that misses out on a valuable human resource as many of our gifted learners drop out of high school. In real time, however, you often see the results of this frustration out on the playground,’’ says Lalonde.

“Feeding a child intellectually means the teacher plans activities to actually tap into the student’s higher level thinking abilities. The gifted learners should not be left to figure things out for themselves; they need to be taught too and it is the teacher’s mandate to teach them,’’ she says.

Adds Lalonde: “Where there is integration, there is more room for growth, involvement and responsibility for learning. The situation pushes students; they want to learn more. They are not bored because they are challenged suitably all of the time.’’

Social skills also benefit from integration, she says.

“There is more interaction across age levels and that is good because that is what we do in life; the older ones become more responsible by helping out the younger ones and the younger ones feel comfortable and safe by being with the older ones. A multi-age classroom is more like a workplace environment...(where) you feel like you belong and feel you can interact. And in our schoolyard, children of different ages play together. Guess what? Bullying becomes a non-issue.’’

She also feels mixing age levels in small classrooms boosts creativity.

“It promotes creativity because you are interacting. You feel comfortable and you are able to brainstorm and have new ideas. . .that builds self-confidence and students take more risks, which is what we all need to work in this world.”

This article originally appeared in the November 2009 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper