

**PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AND CONCERNS ABOUT
COMPOSITE CLASSES**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

September 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Studying for a doctorate while working full-time is never easy. Like all candidates, I suffered during the years of my candidature from unexpected and sometimes traumatic events which affected my progress. At such times, the support of my children, colleagues and friends was invaluable and I acknowledge my debt to you all. I specially thank my children, Tamsin, Kieran and Aneyrin Lloyd, for their unconditional love and understanding.

In the course of this study, I benefited from the expertise of a number of supervisors. Though frequent change of supervisor can be problematic, all contributed in some way to the final product and I thank them all for their input. Dr Rosemary Callingham and Dr Judy Miller provided early support, while (the late) Professor John Geake was unfortunately unable to continue supervision because of illness. I am particularly grateful to my Principal Supervisor, Associate Professor Lorraine Graham, and her co-supervisor, Dr Huy Phan. Lorraine has been a constant and dependable source of encouragement and advice while Huy has inspired me through his undisputed knowledge of quantitative methodology. The contributions of Lorraine and Huy were by far the greatest and they were with me till the end (submission). Their complementary and invaluable expertise led to some interesting discussions and forced me to be clear about my own views. The final product, of course, represents the decisions I made and incorporates my views, not necessarily theirs.

I am indebted to the school and parents who participated in the study. Without your goodwill the research would not have been possible. Thank you all. I am pleased that at the end of the process, I am still interested in the topic of mixed-grade schooling.

It is with sadness that I dedicate this thesis to my mother, who died before she could see its completion. In spite of being an excellent student, Mum had to curtail her hopes of completing school because a wage was essential to the family budget. Perhaps as a result of this disappointment in her life, she made sure that her five children were able to have a tertiary education. She would have been very proud to have a Doctor among them.

SYNOPSIS

In developed countries, the most common pattern of classroom organisation is the single-grade class, where students of a similar age study a syllabus specifically written for their grade. A significant minority of classes, however, have always been mixed-grade, where students from two or more different grades are taught together in the same classroom by the same teacher. In Australia's most populous state, New South Wales, in 2011, 95% of government primary schools have at least one mixed-grade class. Such mixed-grade classes exist in a number of different forms and are distinguished from each other by a variety of characteristics, such as whether the class is temporary or permanent, whether it is formed by choice or necessity, whether it is the same as or different from other classes in the school, and whether students' learning is based on their age/grade or by their stage of development and individual learning needs.

This study was carried out in relation to one type of mixed-grade class, namely, the composite class. Composite classes are temporary, usually two-grade, classes. They are most commonly found in urban or suburban schools and they exist alongside the much larger number of single-grade classes in a school. They are formed by necessity, as a result of (i) uneven grade enrolments leading to some students being "left over" when the single-grade classes are formed to capacity, and (ii) fixed funding models that preclude the hiring of more teachers and the formation of smaller classes. Students normally return to a single-grade class the following year, thus composite-class teachers need to match what they teach the different grades in their class to what the other teachers in the school are teaching their single-grade students. These constraints mean the workload of a composite-class teacher is greater because of having to prepare lessons based on at least two different syllabi. Composite classes can therefore be conceived of as a temporary arrangement of two (or more) "classes within a class".

The specific focus of the study was to investigate parents' perceptions of and concerns about composite classes. To date there have been almost no direct investigations of parents' perceptions and concerns, though attention-grabbing headlines based on comments from a small number of parents are regularly published in the media. Parental reactions to composite classes are consistently reported in the literature as negative but primarily on the basis of second-hand reporting of principals' and teachers' descriptions of parents' views. Parents' own voices are rarely heard. This study rectifies that omission.

The mixed-methods study was carried out in a large regional primary school (Kindergarten to Grade 6) in New South Wales, Australia. Five conclusions from the literature review guided the research:

1. Parents do not like composite classes.

2. Principals and teachers believe parents' concerns about composite classes result from a lack of understanding and experience of the classes.
3. Parents have a holistic concern for their child's development in composite classes, that is, they have both academic and social concerns which are at least in part related to age and grade.
4. Position in the composite class (younger or older grade) is a significant factor influencing parents' perceptions of student outcomes.
5. The teacher is a significant factor influencing parents' perceptions of student outcomes.

I identified for investigation the following issues related to these conclusions: parents' reactions to their child being placed in a composite class; differences in parents' perceptions and concerns related to their child being in the younger or older grade of a composite class; the influence on parents' perceptions and concerns of knowledge and experience of composite classes; parents' concerns for their child's development (including both academic progress and social growth) in a composite class; perceptions and concerns about loss of grade identity in a composite class; and perceptions of how their child's development and identity are affected by being in the younger or older grade of a composite class. I hypothesised a conceptual model linking these variables, namely *Knowledge-experience* of composite classes, their child's *Development*, *grade Identity*, *Younger* grade of a composite class and *Older* grade of a composite class. The model was explored quantitatively through factor analysis and structural equation modelling (path analysis). The variables in the model were also explored by descriptive means, including qualitative analysis of parents' written comments.

Using six research questions, I investigated parents' perceptions of and concerns about composite classes by means of a questionnaire with both Likert-scale and open-ended items. The Likert items enabled a quantitative analysis and the investigation of significant relationships between the identified variables, while the open-ended comments allowed me to explore and add depth to the quantitative findings. The mixed-methods approach therefore allowed me to identify supportable conclusions about parents' perceptions of and concerns about composite classes — the "what" — but also to identify in descriptive detail the nature of these perceptions and concerns — the "why".

The study supports the widespread anecdotal view that parents do not like composite classes but, significantly, a small longitudinal element in the study hints that parents do change their perceptions based on personal experience of having a child in a composite class. While a direct relationship between knowledge-experience of composite classes and the younger or older grade was not statistically confirmed, other findings indicate that the relationship might well exist and be validated by an improved instrument. For example, the study does support anecdotal reports that parents prefer their child to be in the younger grade of a composite class and that they maintain this

preference with increased knowledge-experience of composite classes. Allied to this preference is a new finding that parents' concerns about loss of grade identity are particularly strong for students in the older grade of a composite class. Thirdly, the study showed that parents' concerns for their child's development (academic progress and social growth) in a composite class are directly influenced by their knowledge and experience of these classes.

The descriptive and qualitative analysis of parents' comments was particularly fruitful in relation to this issue, that is, of concerns related to academic progress and social development in a composite class. In relation to the academic aspect of development, parents perceived an advantage to being in the younger grade because of the possibility of "cognitive stretching" and resultant advantages on their child's return to a single-grade class the following year. By contrast, parents perceived a disadvantage to being in the older grade of a composite class because of the likelihood of their child "marking time" and repeating the lower-grade curriculum rather than studying their grade-appropriate curriculum. In relation to the social aspect of development, parents' perceptions were more likely to be positive in relation to being in the older grade. They saw some social advantages of being in the older grade of the class, because of leadership opportunities resulting from being able to help the younger-grade students and provide good role models for them. This advantage was, however, tempered by concerns that such social behaviours would detract from their child's academic learning time, and such concerns were particularly strong for parents of children in the last year of primary school.

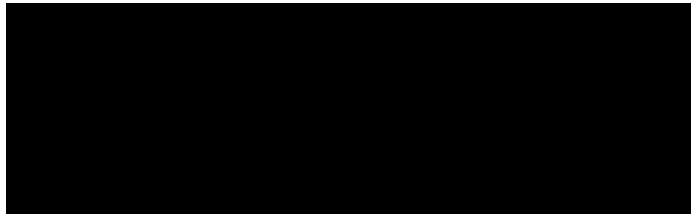
Parents of both younger-grade and older-grade children expressed strong concerns about friendship choice in a composite class. The social concern of being separated from grade peers and having reduced opportunities for same-age, same-grade, same-gender friends was commonly described as problematic and as having negative effects on a child's "self" (e.g., self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy). This concern was not related to position in the class, that is, to being in the younger or older grade, but was a concern related to composite classes in general.

Changes in educational policy have increased the relevance and significance of the study findings. The imminent introduction in Australia of a national curriculum firmly based on grades, linked to national testing of particular grades and national reporting of the results, mean that composite-class teachers will be constrained to separate the different grades in their class in order to ensure that the quite rigid grade requirements are met and that students are not disadvantaged by the national testing regime. Under such conditions, parents' perceptions of composite classes will have increased importance, requiring principals and teachers to be proactive in addressing parents' concerns. This study highlights those particular concerns, thus allowing for targeted and relevant public relations exercises, parent education programmes and inclusions in teacher education courses.

CERTIFICATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.



(Linley Cornish)

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