BERTRAM PRIMARY SCHOOL

Multi-Age Philosophy
Multi Age Group (MAG) at Bertram Primary School will allow a heterogeneous group of students to work collaboratively in a supportive learning environment. As the school grows, several MAG classes are expected in each area of the school. The whole school will be MAG and groups will be referred to as teaching areas rather than year 2/3 or year 6/7.

Complementing the MAG philosophy will be a looping structure which will enable both students and teachers to establish strong learning links. In most cases students will have the same teacher for a minimum of two years. This continuity and security enables both parties to maximize the learning taking place and provide stability and familiarity to the students. Students having the same teacher know routines, rules and have established relationships from the commencement of the school and are immediately into the learning cycle.

During term four of each year parents will be given the opportunity to have some input into the placement of their child. Whilst this process minimizes the stress associated with class allocation, the final student placement is dependent on the decisions made by the administration team.

Questions and Answers about Multi-Age Classrooms

What is a multi-age classroom?

A multi-age classroom caters for a group of students of mixed abilities and ages. The multi-age classroom structure uses a developmental learning philosophy to enhance individual learning through every stage of a student’s development. Whilst learning usually occurs in groups within a multi-age classroom, the emphasis is placed upon the abilities, needs, and interests of the individual child.

In a multi-age classroom there are no formal age groupings. In any day, a child may work on an individual basis, be part of a focus group, work in co-operative group situation and participate in activities at a whole class level. Groupings chosen may be friendship based or needs based depending on the purpose of the activity.

The teaching and learning strategies employed are directly related to the stages of each individual student’s development. The developmental framework premise is that young students do not all possess the same skills or maturity at the same chronological age.

What you as parents need to be aware of is that students learn and develop expertise in different areas of intelligence at very different rates.

What are the advantages of multi-age classrooms?

Multi-age groupings reflect the values and beliefs that are important in society including tolerance, co-operation, justice, support, assistance, individuality, differences and leadership opportunities.

The most obvious advantage of multi-age groupings is that for a child who has made enormous adjustments from home to school, life can go steadily forward, with the child growing confidence physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally without unnecessary tensions relating to moving into a different class and learning environment. The teacher comes to know the student better, and can readily identify the child’s individual needs.
Students learn by modeling others. The older students in the class can be positive role models for the younger ones. The younger students quickly adopt the work habits, skills and practices of the older students. The younger children become independent a lot more quickly. Older students stimulate the younger ones to learn and move on to the next stage. As teacher is focused on individual programs more developmentally advanced students have their individual needs met.

A secure and supportive environment is created in MAGS classes, this allows for a more family type situation to develop and foster the learning that occurs. In this environment students are more likely to take risks and experiment with their learning.

Students are less competitive towards each other. They are more ready to accept differences and take advantage of the opportunities given to them to work at their own level of development.

Students have greater chances of developing their leadership qualities, independence, mutual support and co-operative learning skills.

Students learn to help and cooperate with each other. This minimizes interruptions to individual or group focus session’s run by teacher. The purposeful learning of more mature students can be harnessed for longer and more profitable periods of time.

Multi-age groups expose students to a wider range of people, attitudes, skills, viewpoints and values than they might otherwise receive.

Older students develop positive and nurturing attitudes towards younger students.

In multi-age classroom gifted students have the facility to move at their own pace and progress faster than in a traditional age based classroom and the child who develops less quickly is able to remain with other students working at a similar pace, and be involved in learning activities appropriate to their developmental level.

Multi-age groupings allow the teacher to provide:
- Opportunities for extension of students beyond traditional year/age expectations
- Opportunities for social interaction between different age groups
- A spirit of mutual assistance and acceptance between students
- An environment where each child works at different times in different ways for different purposes

How does the teacher know my child is learning?

All teachers are trained to teach a range of age groups from early childhood to primary. They have an understanding of what and how students need to learn and expect the students with progress at their own rate and development. Each child’s learning is continuous and does not depend on what any other child may need to learn. Teachers are aware of each child’s needs and work with each child to develop and extend their learning. In this way students are encouraged to proceed with their learning as individuals. Teachers keep detailed records and collect work samples over time to record student’s development and to understand their learning.
Teachers now look at what students can do and extend them from there.

**Are any students disadvantaged in a multi-age group?**

In multi-age groups, students have more opportunities to practice and reinforce their learning when they see others learning the things they have already learnt. They learn to take leadership roles, and to appreciate and celebrate the achievements of others while working and progressing at their own levels.

Students who may be stereotyped as, for example, being always the youngest/oldest/smallest/tallest in the class have opportunities in multi-age groups to experience different roles as the age composition of the class changes.

When students enjoy their learning the teacher encourages them to proceed further and it is possible for students to progress beyond what may have been expected.

The students in a multi-age classroom become confident learners, which makes learning more effective.

**Will students make enough friends?**

Students in fact make a greater variety of friends and form more diverse friendship groups both within the classroom and in the playground. As in society, students place less importance on chronological age than they do on common interests and personalities.

**Won’t the older student be held back?**

Held back from what? Our expectations of individual students are different. The students’ expectation of each other is different. Students are encouraged to expect to seek self-improvement. So it is of little relevance to discuss the notion of the ‘oldest’ not being challenged and extended. Every child in a multi-age classroom is presented with situations, which are appropriate to his/her, development. Teachers encourage students, through careful planning, to move on to the next developmental level.

**Will the older students repeat work already covered?**

This will not occur if planning is effective and appropriate. Our teachers aim to plan together and cover a rotation of topics to ensure there is little repetition.

**What does the research say?**

The philosophy that students benefit from the range and diversity possible with multi-age groupings is reflected in the work of Gaustad (1997), who argued that:

“Research indicates that heterogeneous grouping promotes cognitive and social growth, reduces anti-social behavior, and facilitates the use of research-based developmentally appropriate instructional practices such as active learning and integrated curriculum. The wider range of ages and abilities in a multi-age classroom discourages misleading age graded expectations and helps teachers focus on students; individual learning needs.”
This reflects a deliberate and systematic mixing of students of different ages as desirable and as beneficial to students. Gaustad’s work was supported by the findings of Feldman and Gray (1999), who found four benefits for students in such classrooms:

i. Younger children actively use older children to develop skills and to acquire knowledge.

ii. Mixed-age play offers unique opportunities for creativity and practice of skills

iii. Age mixing provides opportunities for children to find others of matching abilities.

iv. Older children actively assert responsibility for younger ones and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of that responsibility.

Multi-age or non-graded classrooms tend to have ‘individualized, developmental focus, manifest in continuous progress rather than lock-step, graded curriculum for a class group of students varying in age” (Russell, Rowe and Hill, 1998). The focus identified by Gaustad and by Russell et al represents an important conceptual foundation of multi-age classrooms. It reflects an emphasis on students’ individual needs and progression, with a style of pedagogy to support such needs, rather than the whole class progression through a prescribed curriculum at the same time and pace.

http://www.bctf.bc.ca/ResearchReports/2000ei02/report.html

A multi-age classroom is loosely defined as a heterogeneous group of children from two or more grade levels that possess a range of abilities. Multi-age grouping, not to be confused with combination or split classes, are designed for the social and academic benefits. According to the developmental theories, children do not learn at the same pace. Students entering school may have up to a four-year mental age span from one another. Therefore, it makes little sense to sort the children into fixed age levels during these crucial developmental years.

It has been shown that peer tutoring is an effective technique to learning. Furthermore, in a multi-age setting, educators are compelled to organize activities and curriculum so that children of different abilities can be working on activities that meet their specific needs.

Multi-age grouping is not the end-all answer for the many problems in education, but there are several advantages in offering such a group situation to all students. Children learn valuable life skills such as cooperation, problem solving, and developing relationships with those of other ages. Multi-age grouping allows students to develop at their own pace and it is a natural mirror to the world that we live in.

http://www.gs37.lake.kl2.il.us/centralsite/multiage.htm

What does Bertram Primary School think about your child’s education?

“The great majority of students will spend fourteen years of their lives in schooling. It is important that during this time they develop the tools to deal effectively with the opportunities and challenges, which they encounter, both now, as young people, and in the future, as adults. Our society is characterized by rapid technological development, increasing
cultural diversity and changing family and institutional structures. Changes in the nature of work, the growing interdependence of world communities, global environmental issues and social, political and economic conditions will continue to pose challenges and offer opportunities throughout the twenty-first century.”

“Particular attention is given to the importance of maintaining a holistic view of curriculum, the responsibility of curriculum as a whole for such vital skills as literacy, numeracy and social cooperation, and the need to integrate knowledge, skills, and values across all learning areas. The fundamental role of curriculum in the promotion of students’ enjoyment of learning and excellence in learning is also emphasized. This statement provides a guide for whole-school planning and review.”
(Overarching Statement, p.15, 1998)